AI Goes to Hollywood:

Artificial Intelligence in the 2023 WGA and SAG-AFTRA Strikes

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ABSTRACT

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In 2023, the Writers Guild of America (WGA) and Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Radio and Television Artists (SAG-AFTRA) went on strike at the same time, shutting down Hollywood film and television production for seven months. The potential role of artificial intelligence (AI) in the creative labour process emerged as a key theme in negotiations for both unions. This thesis asks: How did AI become a major issue in the 2023 dual strikes and what does this reveal about Hollywood labour in the early 2020s? By taking a historical critical media industries framework, this project places the 2023 strikes in the context of a century of organized Hollywood labour struggles, including previous strikes organized in response to emerging technology, as well as the distribution shift to online video streaming in the 2010s. Using critical discourse analysis of entertainment news coverage of the strikes in *Deadline*, *The Hollywood Reporter* and *The New York Time*s, this thesis examines union members' statements about AI to theorize Hollywood labour at the micro-level of practices and the macro-level of structure. An intersectional feminist approach to production studies examines how the incorporation of AI into Hollywood film and television production practices will most strongly impact creative workers who are already marginalized in the industry.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

I remember exactly when Netflix came into my life. It was 2013 and I was 17 years old. One long weekend, my parents took a road trip to Boston, leaving me home alone. “Don’t worry,” they said. “We just subscribed to a new service. It has every movie and TV show. You can watch whatever you want!” In the three days of their vacation, I accidentally maxed out our Internet usage for the month by binge-watching the Canadian comedy series *Kenny vs. Spenny*. At the beginning of the 2010s, I was a teenage TV freak limited by broadcast schedules and physical media. Before Netflix, I grew up watching *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *The Office* on DVD with my sister over and over and over. As a budding pop culture snob, I prayed for reruns or a lucky thrift store visit to find what I wanted to watch (I could have taken my chance at torrenting, but my pirating knowledge was next to nonexistent). After Netflix came into my life, I spent the next few years catching up on the wave of prestige TV I missed, all readily available on demand with an easy click of the remote. I watched *Lost*, then *Breaking Bad*, then *Gilmore Girls*, then *Mad Men*, then *Twin Peaks*. And, of course, I watched the shows only available on Netflix that everyone talked about: *House of Cards*, *Orange is the New Black* and, my personal favourite, *Bojack Horseman*.

However, something changed in the 2020s. During the pandemic, I was underemployed and confined to a one-bedroom apartment with my movie-obsessed boyfriend, which shifted my interest from television to film. He showed me all the classics I had somehow never seen before: Hollywood blockbusters, international arthouse cinema and what felt like every single horror movie ever made. Still, desperate for some “me” time, I’d click on Netflix looking for a new series to watch, only to find the only show that even half-sparked my interest was the realtor

docu-soap *Selling Sunset* and its half-dozen spin-offs. While my list of films to watch grew longer and longer each day, mostly older works by auteur directors, every time I checked if they were available on Netflix, the only titles that popped up were "Similar To" recommendations that hardly seemed related at all. The promise of the streaming era echoed by my parents' words all those years ago—*"It has every movie and TV show. You can watch whatever you want!"*—was, in the words of Will Ferrell, a throne of lies. Now I had to request scratched-up Criterion discs from the library to find what I actually wanted to watch. I was right back to where I started before Netflix entered my life a decade ago.

The burst of the streaming bubble was felt not only by obsessive fans like myself, but also by those who create film and television. While the collision of prestige TV and the streaming shift created a boom period of Hollywood production in the 2010s, the collapse of traditional distribution models created a new level of industrial precarity for workers. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 accelerated these changes as Hollywood production shut down for months due to health and safety concerns. In 2022, just when it seemed like the industry finally went "back to normal," the generative artificial intelligence (AI) tool ChatGPT publicly launched at the end of the year. The application sparked a new host of concerns for Hollywood workers, who feared the technology might be used by the studios, networks and streamers to replace them. In May 2023, the Writers Guild of America (WGA) went on strike for the sixth time in the union's history over concerns about AI and deteriorating labour conditions caused by the streaming shift. Two months later, the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) joined the work stoppage for similar reasons. This historic moment marked the first time since 1960 that the two guilds were on strike simultaneously. Their

combined labour actions effectively shut down Hollywood film and production for seven months.

The central research questions of this thesis are: How did AI become a major issue in the 2023 dual Hollywood strikes and what does this reveal about Hollywood labour in the early 2020s? The answer to these questions develops over the chapters of this project. Chapter One outlines a literature review that places this thesis within the subfields of critical media industries and production studies, as well as in dialogue with other scholarly work about the WGA, SAG-AFTRA and the 2023 strikes. Chapter One also details this project's hybrid theoretical framework and methodology of critical discourse analysis. Next, Chapter Two takes the long view of organized labour in Hollywood, covering nearly a century of vital historical context frequently ignored in other academic and journalistic coverage of the 2023 strikes. This chapter details the history of the WGA and SAG-AFTRA, their previous labour strikes organized around emergent technology and how the streaming video shift in the 2010s accelerated precarity for writers and actors. Chapter Two ends with an outline of the 2023 strikes, including a timeline and other major issues involved in bargaining besides AI. Following this important context, Chapter Three explicitly analyzes the AI issue during the 2023 WGA and SAG-AFTRA strikes. This chapter uses critical discourse analysis of entertainment trade coverage to examine what union members' statements about AI reveal about contemporary Hollywood labour at the level of practices and structure. This thesis concludes with developments about Hollywood labour and AI following the strikes from 2024 to 2025 and ends with recommendations for further research.

This project begins by placing it in dialogue with existing research about Hollywood labour and outlines the theoretical and methodological approaches used.

CHAPTER ONE

Opening Credits: Critical Media Industries Studies and Hollywood Workers

The opening credits of a film or television show outline the key people involved in its creation. This chapter functions as the "opening credits" to this research project by situating my study within the long tradition of scholarship about media industries and Hollywood workers. This thesis contributes to this existing body of research by interrogating what the 2023 strikes reveal about technological change and creative labour in film and television production. This chapter details a literature review and outlines the theoretical and methodological approaches used to answer my research questions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This project is rooted in critical media industries research, a subfield preceded by several academic traditions. In "Media Industries, Political Economy, and Media/Cultural Studies: An Articulation," Douglas Kellner demonstrates the influences of the Frankfurt School, British cultural studies and political economy on media industries scholarship. Kellner notes the contributions of theorists such as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, whose work in the 1940s applied critical Marxist analysis to the culture industry of Hollywood to understand how entertainment media is made within the context of capitalism.[1] British cultural studies evolved Marxist understandings to examine the historical contexts of cultural products and incorporate identities such as social class, race and gender into analyses of power and hegemony.[2] Kellner also notes the influence of political economy, a tradition that takes an empirical approach to

[1] Douglas Kellner, "Media Industries, Political Economy, and Media/Cultural Studies: An Articulation," in *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method*, eds. Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell : A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2009), 97.
[2] Kellner, "Media Industries," 98-99.

examine how the production of cultural artifacts exists within "a specific economic and political system," often with a focus on media ownership and conglomeration.[3]

While these schools of thought have a long and rich influence on media studies as a discipline, media industries solidified as a distinct subfield in 2009 with the publication of three important texts seeking to define its specific purpose and aims. In their article "Critical Media Industry Studies: A Research Approach," Timothy Havens, Amanda D. Lotz and Serra Tinic argue that media studies as a field prioritized the study of texts and audiences above industry.[4] While they note the influence of political economy on the discipline, they argue that it frequently ignores the human element involved in media production.[5] In the introduction of their collection *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method*, editors Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren write that a unified articulation of media industries scholarship is necessary given the vast number of changes in media policy, trade, technology, culture and audience in the 2000s.[6] Likewise, in the introduction of their collection *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*, Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks and John T. Caldwell define production studies as a distinct subfield that examines how culture is created by workers who must balance making creative work within a capitalist and hierarchical structure.[7] In her separate article in the collection "Gender Below-the-Line: Defining Feminist Production Studies," Miranda J. Banks notes that feminist approaches are "frequently overlooked in media industry research" and are necessary to examine

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[3] Kellner, "Media Industries," 101-102.
[4] Timothy Havens, Amanda D. Lotz, and Serra Tinic, "Critical Media Industry Studies: A Research Approach," *Communication, Culture & Critique* 2, no. 2 (2009): 234.
[5] Havens, Lotz, and Tinic, "Critical Media Industry Studies," 236.
[6] Jennifer Holt and Perren, *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method*." in *Media Industries : History, Theory, and Method*, eds. Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell : A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2009), 1.
[7] Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John Thornton Caldwell, "Introduction" in *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*, eds. Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John Thornton Caldwell (New York: Routledge, 2009), 2.

the specific kinds of work that women contribute to media-making.[8] All these authors argue that media industries scholarship should be interdisciplinary and focus on the structure, power and hierarchies involved in media-making. They also argue that bottom-up case studies of media industry workers are the most beneficial way to theorize more abstractly about cultural production.

Scholars updated the aims and scope of media industries research beyond these initial articulations published over 15 years ago. In their 2019 article "Media Industries: A Decade in Review," Holt and Perren provide new insights into how the subfield changed during the 2010s. They argue that media industries scholarship developed with attention to technological changes such as the increase in the digitization and personalization of media through data and algorithms, as well as the corresponding decline of legacy media companies and physical media.[9] Holt and Perren also note how online social activism campaigns such as #blacklivesmatter and #metoo drew prominent attention to the hierarchies of power that exist within media-making which were previously ignored by the broader public.[10] In the introduction to their 2019 collection *Making Media: Production, Practices, and Professions*, Mark Deuze and Mirjam Prenger outline nine key features that emerged in scholarship about media workers in the 2010s including collapse, precarity and power. Deuze and Prenger note the collapse of traditional media-making practices occurred through the shift of power from legacy companies to technology companies, which increased precarious conditions for workers at all levels. In "Diversity and Opportunity in Media

[8] Miranda J. Banks, "Gender Below-the-Line: Defining Feminist Production Studies," in *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*, eds. Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John Thornton Caldwell (New York: Routledge, 2009), 88.
[9] Jennifer Holt and Alissa Peren, "Media Industries: A Decade in Review," in *Making Media: Production, Practices, and Professions,* eds. Mark Deuze and Mirjam Prenger (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 33.
[10] Jennifer Holt and Alissa Peren, "Media Industries: A Decade in Review," 33.

Industries," another article in the *Making Media* collection, Doris Ruth Eikhof and Stevie Marsden state the conditions of media work make it difficult for marginalized groups to succeed in the industry. Eikhof and Marsden note that several features of media work create an industrial context of inequality, such as project-based work, low/unpaid entry-level jobs, long working hours and recruitment through existing social networks. Similarly to Holt and Perren, they note the impact of #metoo in the broader public sphere, which put "cracks" into "the image of media work as desirable or glamorous."[11]

The next section of this literature review shifts from texts about critical media industries and media workers to research about Hollywood unions. In "Bringing the Social Back In: Studies of Production Cultures and Social Theory," Vicki Mayer uses the examples of research by Leo Rosten and Hortense Powdermaker about Hollywood labour in the 1930s and 1940s to show how bottom-up case studies of workers are useful to articulate abstract theories of labour. For instance, she notes that Rosten and Powdermaker's work examined how Hollywood workers proved Marx's theory of alienation.[12] Recent scholarship specifically articulates the need for union-specific approaches to studying Hollywood workers. In the introduction to their 2024 collection *Hollywood Unions*, Kate Fortmueller and Luci Marzola state that the longevity of these unions distinctly shaped the production, distribution and aesthetics of Hollywood film and television. In her 2025 article "Heroes, Villains, or Collaborators: The Place of Hollywood Unions in American Film Industry History," Fortmueller expands on this notion by explicitly arguing for a union-centric approach to examining Hollywood film history, as film studies often

[11] Doris Ruth Eikhof and Stevie Marsden, "Diversity and Opportunity in Media Industries," in *Making Media: Production, Practices, and Professions,* eds. Mark Deuze and Mirjam Prenger (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 247.
[12] Vicki Mayer, "Bringing the Social Back In: Studies of Production Cultures and Social Theory," in *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*, eds. Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John Thornton Caldwell (New York: Routledge, 2009), 16.

examines authorship and aesthetics without considering the influence of labour structures on these aspects.

Central to this thesis are historical surveys of Hollywood unions. Banks' 2015 book *The Writers: A History of American Screenwriters and their Guild*, the first comprehensive study about the WGA, traces the history of the union from its formation in the 1920s to the 2007-2008 WGA strike. The study focuses on the union's key struggles for authorship and crediting, as well as the impact of hierarchies within the guild. In her 2024 article "Writers: Scripting the Narrative of Hollywood Labor," Banks expands on her argument in *The Writers* to include how notions of diversity and technology also shaped the union and its labour struggles. Similarly, David Prindle's 1989 book *The Politics of Glamour: Ideology and Democracy in the Screen Actors Guild* examines SAG's strikes and inter-union conflicts from the 1920s to the 1980s through interviews with union members. Prindle's focus on ideology within the guild is useful for examining how SAG historically privileged its star members as a conservative union, but his work is limited for not explicitly examining other types of social differences among union members, such as gender, race, class or age. On the other hand, Fortmueller's 2019 article "Time's Up (Again?): Transforming Hollywood's Industrial Culture," takes a feminist approach to the history of SAG-AFTRA to examine why precarious working conditions persisted for women into the 21st century despite the long history of women's activism within the union. Fortmueller's 2021 book *Below the Stars: How the Labor of Working Actors and Extras Shapes Media Production* is a bottom-up case study of Hollywood background actors at four moments in Hollywood history from the 1910s to 2020. This work is significant for how it demonstrates how technology historically functioned as a disrupting force for labour, as well as how hierarchies of gender and race reinforced hegemonic power dynamics within the industry.

Other research about SAG shows how journalism frames the union's labour conflicts. For example, Fuller and Rice's 2014 article "Lights, Camera, Conflict: Newspaper Framing of the 2008 Screen Actors Guild Negotiations" analyzes news coverage of the union's negotiations with the AMPTP in trade journals and general newspapers. Their research demonstrates how journalistic coverage of the 2008-2009 negotiation predominantly reported on SAG's actions *against* the AMPTP rather than vice versa.[13] Their 2019 follow-up study "Portraying Protracted Conflict in the Entertainment Industry: The Case of the Screen Actors Guild Negotiations" showed that in news framings of extended conflicts like union negotiations, the type of coverage of the same issues *changes* as time goes on.[14] While Fuller and Rice's studies cover media framings of SAG negotiations, they are relevant to this study because they cover similar primary sources and show how news articles affect public perception of labour issues in Hollywood union negotiations.

The remainder of this literature review focuses on scholarship about AI in the 2023 dual Hollywood strikes. One type of scholarship about the 2023 strikes uses it to discuss the integration of generative AI into cultural and creative labour more broadly. For instance, Hye-Kyung Lee's 2024 article "Reflecting on Cultural Labour in the Time of AI" uses the example of the WGA and SAG-AFTRA strikes to show how cultural workers' unions are at the forefront of seeking protections against generative AI compared to policy and legal interventions. Lee puts forward three main hypotheses about how generative AI will be integrated into cultural labour: that it will replace workers, that it will not replace workers as it creates an inferior product, or that it will be used by workers as a complementary tool. Still, Lee notes two main concerns about

[13] Fuller R.P. and Rice R.E., "Lights, Camera, Conflict: Newspaper Framing of the 2008 Screen Actors Guild Negotiations," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 91, no. 2 (2014): 337.
[14] Ryan P. Fuller and Ronald E. Rice, "Portraying Protracted Conflict in the Entertainment Industry: The Case of the Screen Actors Guild Negotiations," *Journalism Studies* 20, no. 9 (2019): 1348.

generative AI from cultural workers, which are legality regarding copyright and the appropriation of artistic likeness. On the contrary, Stuart Bender's 2024 article "Generative-AI, the Media Industries, and the Disappearance of Human Creative Labour" uses the framework of meaningful work to argue that generative AI can be used to augment the creative processes of human workers today rather than replace them. Bender cites the example of *Jurassic Park* (1993), where a stop-motion puppet team worked with a CGI team to create realistic images of dinosaurs, thus unifying the labour processes of human creative technicians and digital technology. Bender's argument is limited as it does not contextualize how Hollywood film production in the early 1990s significantly contrasts with the fractured state of the industry in the early 2020s.

A few studies emerged specifically about generative AI and the 2023 Hollywood strikes. Submitted in 2024, "Hollywood Workers vs. Tech: In Theory and In the News" by Christian Cmehil-Warn is a Master of Science dual thesis in technology and policy and computer science. This work situates the strikes within the context of the erosion of working conditions caused by the streaming boom and examines both unions together, which is rare in scholarship. However, the results of his quantitative methodology of sentiment analysis and sentence embeddings to examine how news media reported on the AI issue during the strikes are inconclusive, which does little to reveal how news media framed generative AI and what this means more broadly about Hollywood creative labour.

The remaining scholarship about the AI issue and the 2023 strikes examines the consequences of the technology for SAG-AFTRA members specifically through the idea of digital replicas, which are AI-enhanced versions of actors. Alexandra Curren's 2023 article "Digital Replicas: Harm Caused by Actors' Digital Twins and Hope Provided by the Right of

Publicity" takes a legal approach to show how digital replicas pose a threat to the viability of actors' work. Curren argues that the 2023 SAG-AFTRA contract obtained a baseline of legal protections for actors, but that more needs to be done by lawmakers to update right of publicity statutes to protect the likenesses of working actors. On the other hand, Sarah Thomas' 2024 article "Somebodies and Nobodies: Generative AI and Audiovisual Labor" argues that the 2023 SAG-AFTRA contract reinforces neoliberal labour practices by forcing lesser-known actors to uniquely self-brand themselves to protect their likenesses from being exploited. Thomas' distinction of the performer hierarchy between stars, working/character actors and background actors is particularly useful to analyze how the union's AI protections affect various tiers of workers differently. Still, Thomas does not show how these hierarchies impact people differently along lines of social identity such as gender, race and age.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Following in the tradition of critical media industries research, this project is aligned with John Thornton Caldwell's tectonic approach to studying the film and television industry, outlined in his 2023 book *Specworld: Folds, Faults and Fractures in Embedded Creator Industrie*s. In this work, Caldwell writes that the film and television industry is an entangled ecosystem that should be researched as a "hierarchical, industrially systemic mess."[15] Following this, film and television production features a multiplicity of actors with a variety of aims, rather than a more linear production model. For example, a junior TV writer, a showrunner, a background actor, an independent director, a veteran Oscar-winning actor and a studio head all work in the same industry, but these workers experience it from multiple standpoints with many different, often oppositional, goals.

[15] John Thornton Caldwell, *Specworld: Folds, Faults, and Fractures in Embedded Creator Industries* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2023), 25-26.

Caldwell argues that researchers in this area should focus their work on "the industry's conflicted stressors, faults, and rifts."[16] Under his tectonic approach, conflicts within the industry arise as moments of fractures and folds. Caldwell writes that fold moments like labour strikes represent "disjointed tectonic plates askew in a rift" that "offer evidence of mutual suspicion or conflict that has been buried by industry."[17] According to this theory, studying moments of disruption like strikes represents the status quo of how the industry functions rather than an exception.[18] These "fold" moments act as gateways to industrial power imbalances, which are often invisible to outsiders.[19] In this way, these moments of conflict are not just case studies, but instead offer bountiful evidence of otherwise naturalized industrial dynamics.[20] Following this, I argue that Hollywood strikes—whether they are in 1960, 1988 or 2023—reveal as much about film and television labour in the year they occur as they do about the decades in between them, which is why they are important points for analysis.

Expanding outside of Caldwell, this project is informed by an intersectional feminist Marxist perspective. This approach understands capitalism as one of the major systems "that produces and reproduces inequalities at every turn."[21] A common misunderstanding of Hollywood film and television production is that everyone who works in the industry is wealthy and famous. Yet it is important to explicitly state that although some members of the WGA and SAG-AFTRA are affluent celebrities, the vast majority are not, as income inequality persists for the majority of union members in the 21st century. For example, in 1980, 82% of SAG members

[16] Caldwell, *Specworld*, ix.
[17] Caldwell, *Specworld*, 230.
[18] Caldwell, *Specworld*, 246
[19] Caldwell, *Specworld*, 208.
[20] Caldwell, *Specworld*, 246.
[21] Ashley J. Bohrer, *Marxism and Intersectionality: Race, Gender, Class and Sexuality under Contemporary Capitalism* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2019), 15.

lived at the poverty level.[22] Nearly half a century later, 86% of SAG-AFTRA members do not make the yearly minimum required to receive healthcare coverage by the union, which is $26,470.[23] In addition to low and unstable wages, union members experience the extremely precarious working conditions of film and television work, including contract work, long hours and hostile personalities.

An intersectional feminist Marxist framework acknowledges that other forms of marginalization like sexism, racism and queerphobia work in tandem with each other to create a hegemonic order of power. It should be noted that Hollywood film and TV production has historically been an industry dominated by white men. The talent unions themselves have also been unfriendly towards women and racialized people, who had to organize and fight for improved working conditions within their own guilds. As Banks writes, "Systems of inequality have long pervaded—even defined—the rituals of production within the American entertainment industries."[24] While social media campaigns in the 2010s such as #oscarssowhite and #metoo raised public awareness of discrimination and even violence within the industry, arguably the field remains a prejudiced one. An intersectional feminist Marxist approach acknowledges that the already difficult working conditions of the industry are made much more complex to navigate for women, racialized people and LGBTQ+ people—let alone those who are a combination of marginalized identities—especially in above-the-line positions such as showrunners, directors and producers.

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[22] Howard R. Osofsky and Jan R. Schneiderman, "The New California Gold Rush: SAG's 1980 Strike Revisited," *Journal of Arts Management and Law* 12, no. 2 (1982): 17.
[23] Jeff Schuhrke, "Lights, Camera, Collective Action: Assessing the 2023 SAG-AFTRA Strike," *New Labor Forum* 33, no. 2 (2024): 58.
[24] Miranda J. Banks, "Unequal Opportunities Gender Inequities and Precarious Diversity in the 1970s US Television Industry," *Feminist Media Histories* 4, no. 4 (2018): 112.

An intersectional feminist Marxist framework views AI not as an exciting innovation of technological "progress," but as a tool of capital used to exploit already marginalized people. As such, another theoretical approach I draw from is Dyer-Witheford et al.'s concept of "actually-existing AI-capitalism" from their 2019 book *Inhuman Power: Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Capitalism*.[25] This idea showcases how AI is not a future threat to workers, but a technology already being used to increase surplus value and capital gains for owners by reducing dependence on human labour. Still, an intersectional feminist Marxist framework believes that there are opportunities for workers to push back and resist these industrial changes through collective organizing. As Dyer-Witheford et al. note, although AI is currently being introduced into many labour fields, strikes pose a significant antagonism towards "the current trajectory of AI-capital."[26]

Combining these theoretical frameworks allows this project unique opportunities to analyze the film and television industry, labour and AI. Following these approaches, the 2023 Hollywood strikes represent much more than a seven-month work stoppage. Instead, they are a way to simultaneously look back and look ahead. The 2023 strikes are yet another example in a long history of how technological changes function as an impetus for Hollywood labour strikes. This thesis showcases how the integration of technology within the film and television industry is never predetermined, but often subject to conflict and opposition. The Hollywood strikes provide an example for workers in other industries seeking to resist the so-called "inevitability" of AI in their fields. Ultimately, combining these theoretical backgrounds allows this project to

[25] Nick Dyer-Witheford, Atle Mikkola Kjøsen, and James Steinhoff, *Inhuman Power: Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Capitalism* (London: Pluto Press, 2019), 2.
[26] Dyer-Witheford, Kjøsen, and Steinhoff, *Inhuman Power*, 101.

analyze how technology functions as a tool of capital to maintain power, hegemony and inequality in Hollywood and beyond.

The primary methodology of this project is critical discourse analysis. This method focuses on analyzing how objective truth is culturally constructed through modes of talk and expression.[27] As Stokes notes, historians often employ this methodology to show how discourse is contextually situated within the time, place and culture from which it emerges.[14] Critical discourse analysis is rooted within the practices of both Foucault and Fairclough. These scholars note that discourse is a key tool for understanding how hegemony and ideology function as a form of culturally produced power.[28] Discourse is understood as a social practice because objective "truth" is a construct of subjective ideology.[29] This method allows for an analysis of how union members discussed AI during the dual strikes and what these modes of talk reveal about cultural structures and values such as capitalism, technological innovation and social progress. Crucially, this method reveals how these values change according to who is talking, as AI is spoken about very differently by studio executives than by background actors. Even if the AI bubble "bursts" in the next few years and is never adopted by Hollywood on a widespread level, critical discourse analysis shows how and why the technology spoke to specific fears regarding labour, likeness and creativity during the 2023 strikes.

The primary corpus of this project is digital entertainment journalism. My sample comes from three primary sources: two Hollywood-specific entertainment trade websites, *The Hollywood Reporter* and *Deadline*, and one traditional legacy newspaper, *The New York Times*. Using two entertainment trade websites is vital for this project, as these are the main news

[27] Jane Stokes, *How to Do Media and Cultural Studies* (SAGE (3rd Ed.), 2021), 124.
[28] Stokes, *How to Do Media and Cultural Studies*, 145-146.
[29] Rodney H. Jones, Alice Chik, and Christoph A. Hafner, *Discourse and Digital Practices: Doing Discourse Analysis in the Digital Age* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 4.

sources for industry insiders. As Douglas writes, trade journals are of key importance for media historians to analyze "how the industry talks to and about itself."[30] However, using a legacy newspaper allows me to observe how the strikes were written about for those outside of film and television production. Using sources written for both insider and outsider groups is highly beneficial to notice the similarities and differences in how the strikes were written about for multiple audiences. Coverage of these strikes in these three sources contains a variety of modes within them. For instance, many articles include official press statements made by the unions, as well as excerpts from documents from these organizations; other articles contain excerpts from public speeches made by top union negotiators and exclusive interviews with them. These sources also feature guest columns written by prominent union members and in-depth reported features that place the labour action in a wider industrial context. Moreover, there is weight given to the statements, speeches and comments made by the AMPTP in response to the two unions. These sources are the richest sites for critical discourse analysis about the strikes as they contain a multiplicity of primary texts and perspectives within them.

In summary, this thesis takes a union-centric approach to understand how AI became a prominent issue in the 2023 dual strikes. This research follows the context-specific approach of cultural studies by situating these strikes within the history of a century of film and television production in Hollywood. This work aligns with the purpose and aims of critical media industries and production studies as distinct subfields by analyzing the strikes as a bottom-up case study from the perspective of working writers and actors to theorize about the intersection between generative AI and cultural labour in Hollywood. Critical discourse analysis as a

[30] Susan Douglas, "Writing From the Archive: Creating Your Own," *The Communication Review* 13, no. 1 (2010): 8.

qualitative method allows for an examination of the micro-level of Hollywood labour practices and the macro-level of Hollywood as a labour structure. This thesis contributes to research about precarity and media workers specifically within the context of organized labour unions such as the WGA and SAG-AFTRA. This work is unique for writing about the history of these two unions in tandem with each other when they have frequently been separated in scholarship. By taking a feminist approach to media industries and production studies, this research showcases how social hierarchies of identity such as gender, race, class and age are reinforced for above-the-line Hollywood workers. This approach is essential to demonstrate how the use of generative AI in film and television production will impact marginalized workers differently if it is adopted on a wider scale.

This work begins in Chapter Two, a historical context chapter that is key to understanding the 2023 dual strikes. This chapter provides an overview of the histories of the WGA and SAG-AFTRA and their past labour actions around emergent technology in the 1950s, 1980s and early 2000s, vital context that has largely been left out of other academic and journalistic work about the 2023 strikes. Following this, I outline industrial changes caused by the streaming shift in the 2010s and the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic before providing an overview of the 2023 dual Hollywood strikes.

CHAPTER TWO

A Century of Organized Labour in Hollywood

Nearly one hundred years of organized labour history in the film and television industry precede the 2023 Hollywood strikes. Following Caldwell's tectonic approach to film and television production, the ruptures and rifts caused by these workers' collective organizing demonstrate the normalized power dynamics and hierarchies of a century of industry that are often invisible to outsiders. My aim in this chapter is to put collective labour at the forefront of understanding the history of Hollywood, which has all too often been neglected in favour of the texts these artist-workers create. This context is important to this project for demonstrating hierarchies within the unions and their relationship with the studios and networks, which greatly affected their position in various strikes. In this chapter, I examine how the talent unions initially organized, detail the historical role of new technologies in Hollywood labour strikes and provide an overview of the 2023 WGA and SAG-AFTRA strikes.

Before diving into the histories of these unions, it is necessary to outline the residual system for Hollywood writers and actors. In film and television, a residual refers to a payment made for any re-airing or re-sale of their previous work. This principle exists in many other artistic mediums. For example, every time a song is played on the radio or streamed online, the writer and performer of the song receives a small percentage of money. These payments are crucial for artists to continue making a living. The residual system in Hollywood has been a vital source of revenue for writers and actors between contracts, which allows them to continue pursuing work in the industry. This chapter demonstrates how WGA and SAG-AFTRA members fought for, re-negotiated and relied on the residual system throughout the past century.

While the WGA and SAG-AFTRA are well-known unions today, their extensive histories are frequently forgotten when compared to the work they produce. To efficiently grasp their complex histories, I detail five key moments for understanding the history of the writers and actors guilds over the past century: the union's initial formations in the 1930s, the backlash they faced in the 1940s, the introduction of television in the 1950s, the social activism of marginalized members in the 1970s and the attempts to merge of SAG and AFTRA from the 1980s to the 2000s.

While film was established as a medium in the 1890s, it took until the 1920s for the film industry to solidify as a commercial enterprise. Due to technological advances in sound recording, the 1920s also marked an industrial transition from silent films to talkies. Novelists and playwrights, who previously organized and obtained labour protections as members of the Authors League of America, gained new lucrative opportunities as screenwriters. As Banks notes, the shift towards talkies created a boom period for writers in Hollywood as the new sound films required much more detailed scripts.[31] The arrival of sound in 1927 also importantly forced the studios "to take out large loans for the purchase of new technology."[32]

The 1920s are also defined by the studios having a high degree of power in the industry. As Thomas Schatz writes, the studios had near "monopolistic control" of the business in this decade.[33] Seeking to push back against the corporate power of management, screenwriters established the Screen Writers Guild (SWG) in the early 1920s. Although they intended to form

[31] Miranda J. Banks 1972-, *The Writers: A History of American Screenwriters and Their Guild*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 32.
[32] David F. Prindle, *The Politics of Glamour: Ideology and Democracy in the Screen Actors Guild* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 16.
[33] Thomas Schatz, "The Studio System and Conglomerate Hollywood," *The Contemporary Hollywood Film Industry*, 2008, 15

this group into a union, in its early years the SWG functioned more as a social club for writers in the industry.[34] To reduce further organizing, MGM executive Louis B. Mayer formed the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Science in the late 1920s, although screenwriters quickly recognized it as "a mock company union."[35] Serious organizing efforts by screenwriters renewed in March 1933 following an infamous meeting where Mayer told MGM employees that all salaries would be temporarily halved because of the economic repercussions of the Great Depression on the studio. However, this cut did not apply to members of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE), the union for behind-the-scenes crew, as these workers went on strike prior to the meeting and refused it.[36] As Banks notes, IATSE's pay cut refusal and strike marked a turning point for above-the-line film workers, who realized that they could mobilize together to protect themselves against the studios' corporate greed.[37]

The first meeting of the new SWG occurred in April 1933. Members unanimously elected writer John Howard Lawson as the organization's first president.[38] Reflecting on the industrial practices of cinema's early years, Lawson stated, "I was willing to accept the conditions under which one worked in Hollywood, but I couldn't help recognizing that those conditions were abominable."[39] One of the biggest issues for screenwriters was establishing proper credit for screenplays. Lawson stated that this was a significant issue due to industrial corruption, where "friends of producers were put in for subordinate credits" without doing any real work.[40] Efforts by screenwriters to formally unionize were met with extreme pushback and repercussions by the

[34] Banks, *The Writers*, 33.
[35] Banks, *The Writers*, 43-44.
[36] Banks, *The Writers*, 30.
[37] Banks, *The Writers*, 31.
[38] John Howard Lawson, Dave Davis, and Neal Goldberg, "ORGANIZING THE SCREEN WRITERS GUILD: An Interview with John Howard Lawson," *Cinéaste* 8, no. 2 (1977): 5.
[39] Lawson, Davis, and Goldberg, "ORGANIZING THE SCREEN WRITERS GUILD," 5.
[40] Lawson, Davis, and Goldberg, "ORGANIZING THE SCREEN WRITERS GUILD," 6.

studios. For instance, Lawson notes that when his contract with MGM expired after the formation of the union, he was not rehired, likely due to his strong involvement with establishing the SWG.[41]

The screenwriters' organizing efforts set a template for other above-the-line talent to do the same. Just as the transition from silent films to talkies greatly impacted screenwriters, it significantly affected actors as well. Due to the increased amount of dialogue, Prindle notes that stage actors became more desirable in the film industry since they could more clearly enunciate words.[42] However, stage actors previously unionized as members of the Actors' Equity Association (AEA) during the 1910s. Given this, when actors migrated from New York to Hollywood, they found the working conditions of the film industry so inferior to the stage that "they shocked the newcomers into resistance."[43] The biggest issues for actors at this time included long hours and unsafe working conditions on location.[44] The Screen Actors Guild (SAG) formed only a few weeks after the SWG. Lawson even advised the actors on drafting their first contract, modeled after that of the screenwriters.[45] Unlike screenwriters, actors held more immediate leverage in the industry over the studios because actors could simply walk off set, causing producers to lose money for the day.[46] Prindle argues that some SAG members held privileged status as public celebrities and were a more politically conservative group than the SWG, making them more willing to negotiate with the studios.[47]

[41] Lawson, Davis, and Goldberg, "ORGANIZING THE SCREEN WRITERS GUILD," 8.
[42] Prindle, *The Politics of Glamour*, 18.
[43] Prindle, *The Politics of Glamour*, 18.
[44] Prindle, *The Politics of Glamour*, 18-19.
[45] Lawson, Davis, and Goldberg, "ORGANIZING THE SCREEN WRITERS GUILD," 9
[46] Lawson, Davis, and Goldberg, "ORGANIZING THE SCREEN WRITERS GUILD," 9.
[47] Prindle, *The Politics of Glamour*.

Despite this, it took multiple years for SAG to be recognized as a union. As Prindle writes, the studios' "apparent strategy was simply to stall until the guilds went away."[48] Throughout the 1930s, the studios continued to argue that the Academy sufficed as a labour organization for Hollywood talent workers.[49] In the spring of 1937, SAG began to organize a strike if the studios continued to refuse to recognize them as legitimate. On May 9, SAG members successfully negotiated to be recognized as a legitimate union, thus avoiding a strike. On May 15, SAG signed their first contract with the studios, which included issues relating to minimum payments and overtime pay, setting the template for nearly every talent union contract to come after it.[50]

Although SAG was founded to ensure greater protection for non-celebrity members who held less individual leverage in negotiations, background actors frequently found themselves at the bottom of the SAG hierarchy. As Fortmueller notes, the structure of SAG gave background actors limited voting power in the guild.[51] It is important to note that the hierarchy in SAG was also steeped in racism. During this time, guild leadership was exclusively white and racialized actors could usually only find work as extras due to the need for physical "types" in genre films such as Westerns.[52] By 1940, only three years after SAG gained official recognition, the guild rejected background actors from its membership and forced them to form their own union, originally called the Screen Players Union (SPU).[53] By 1944, this union transformed into the

[48] Prindle, *The Politics of Glamour*, 25.
[49] Banks, *The Writers*, 49.
[50] Prindle, *The Politics of Glamour*, 32.
[51] Kate Fortmueller, *Below the Stars: How the Labor of Working Actors and Extras Shapes Media Production* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2021), 43.
[52] Fortmueller, *Below the Stars*, 25.
[53] Kate Fortmueller, "Actors: Balancing the Needs of Extras, Actors, and Stars," in *Hollywood Unions*, eds. Kate Fortmueller and Luci Marzola (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2024), 269.

Screen Extras Guild (SEG), which existed until 1992, when SAG reabsorbed background actors into its membership.

The third talent union to form during the 1930s was the Screen Directors Guild (SDG). Following the model of the SWG and SAG, this guild formed in 1936 by thirteen directors.[54] Unlike writers and actors, directors held significantly more powerful positions in the industry and were well-respected by the studios. While the writers and actors sought to protect their working conditions through unionizing, the directors wanted to enshrine their elevated status. As Smukler writes of the Directors Guild, "Its founding fathers were many of the industry's wealthiest and most powerful employees, and they established the organization to protect their creative and financial dominance.[55]

While the studios recognized the actors and directors' unions as official organizations, the SWG struggled for legitimacy. As Banks writes, by this point, "the writers were virtually the only employees at the studios working without the protection of a contract or bargaining rights."[56] In 1937, an internal group of conservative screenwriters called the Screen Playwrights (SP) formed in hopes of being recognized as the official union for screenwriters.[57] That same year, the studios signed a five-year contract with the SP, which the SWG viewed as illegitimate.[58] In 1938, the SWG held a meeting where members voted to recognize it as the official union over the SP, but the studios refused to sign a contract with their organization.[59] Despite being the first talent union to formally organize in 1933, it took until 1941 for the SWG

[54] Maya Montanez Smukler, *Liberating Hollywood: Women Directors and the Feminist Reform of 1970s American Cinema* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2019), 223.
[55] Smukler, *Liberating Hollywood*, 234.
[56] Banks, *The Writers*, 61.
[57] Banks, *The Writers*, 54-55.
[58] Banks, *The Writers*, 57.
[59] Banks, *The Writers*, 60-61.

to sign its first official contract with the studios. The many years of struggle for recognition show how little studio management wanted to recognize the unions as legitimate.

Despite being formally recognized, the difficulties were only beginning for the talent unions in the 1940s. While the war effort enforced a period of industrial cooperation as the unions pledged to not strike at this time, the decade came to be known as the Hollywood blacklist era due to the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) hearings. After the end of WWII, Banks notes that "anti-left vitriol… returned with a vengeance," as the nation turned against all forms of "communist" sentiment, including labour unions.[60] K. Kevyne Baar writes that Hollywood became a "major target" for HUAC over fears of communist ideology being inserted into commercial films.[61] The HUAC hearings also functioned to punish the more political film workers who led the organizing efforts to create the unions. The Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), representing the studios, asked the talent unions to name suspected communists and sympathizers.[62] The HUAC hearings were particularly harsh on screenwriters, including the infamous Hollywood Ten. This group featured eight screenwriters, including original SWG president John Howard Lawson, who served jail time for contempt of Congress.[63]

While several SWG members refused to go along with the HUAC hearings, SAG took a more conservative approach. At this time, actor Ronald Reagan was the guild's president. He cooperated and testified in the 1947 HUAC hearings, taking an "anti-communist" approach and

[60] Banks, *The Writers*, 69.
[61] K. Kevyne Baar, "'What Has My Union Done For Me?' The Screen Actors Guild, the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, and Actors' Equity Association Respond to McCarthy-Era Blacklisting," *Film History* 20, no. 4 (2008): 446.
[62] Banks, *The Writers*, 101.
[63] Banks, *The Writers*, 71.

providing names of "suspected" members within the guild.[64] In 1953, SAG adopted a resolution that union members had to sign an oath stating they were not members of the Communist party, a statement not removed until 1974.[65] The impacts of the Hollywood blacklist era and the HUAC hearings were felt for decades to come for both writers and actors. Blacklisted members of both unions struggled to work in the industry, as well as those informally "graylisted" for expressing pushback and sympathy.[66] The SWG, forced to cooperate with HUAC, agreed to remove blacklisted writers' names from their work.[67] This had a significant impact on residual payments for these writers in the years to come, as they were financially punished for their ideology whether it was legitimate or suspected. By the late 1960s, the guild began to reinstate credits for blacklisted writers, but not all were done completely or correctly.[68]

In the early 1950s, a different threat faced the film industry: the new medium of television. In its early years, TV was viewed as an extension of radio because it was similarly broadcast and localized in New York.[69] In 1937, on-air radio workers unionized as members of the American Federation of Radio Artists (AFRA). Since TV came into being after both SAG and AFRA were already established, there was division over which jurisdiction it fell under.[70] At this time for actors, AFRA covered radio performances while SAG covered screen performances; actors who worked in both mediums had to join both unions.[71] TV actors had unique issues with their working conditions. For instance, TV programs were largely broadcast

[64] Baar, "What Has My Union Done For Me?," 441.
[65] Baar, "What Has My Unions Done For Me?," 443.
[66] Banks, *The Writers*, 108.
[67] Banks, *The Writers*, 106.
[68] Banks, *The Writers*, 114.
[69] Catherine McKercher and Vincent Mosco, "Divided They Stand: Hollywood Unions in the Information Age," *Work Organisation, Labour & Globalisation* 1, no. 1 (2007), 134.
[70] Kate Fortmueller, "The SAG–AFTRA Merger: Union Convergence in a Changing Media Landscape," *Television & New Media* 17, no. 3 (2016), 215.
[71] McKercher and Mosco, "Divided They Stand," 134.

live, making their production very different from a film shoot. In 1950, TV actors formed the Television Authority (TVA) to represent their specific interests. In 1952, the TVA merged with AFRA to become the American Federation of Radio and Television Artists (AFTRA). AFTRA represented a diverse group of workers beyond actors that included announcers, singers and dancers.[72] In 1954, AFTRA became the first talent union to gain health and retirement plans, a template-setting victory for performers.[73]

TV writers also had different working conditions from screenwriters in film. Writers made significantly less money working in television, although they were rehired more often.[74] This meant that TV writers specifically needed increased protections surrounding shorter contracts.[75] In August 1952, TV writers formed the Television Writers Association (TWA) to voice their specific concerns. To protect their collective interests as a larger group, the Television Writers Association, the Screen Writers Guild and the Radio Writers Guild officially merged in 1954 to become the Writers Guild of America (WGA). The WGA established two divisions, East and West, dependent on members' locations, with the East branch largely representing radio and TV workers and the West branch representing film workers.

Television created a new problem for the unions through the broadcast of past films created by guild members. In the late 1950s, several major studios sold their film catalogues to TV broadcasters to generate revenue during a period of economic decline.[76] While the studios profited from union members' work, these re-airings did not result in any additional compensation for writers or actors. In 1960, both the WGA and SAG went on strike to establish

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[72] Allen E. Koenig, "AFTRA and Contract Negotiations," *Journal of Broadcasting* 7, no. 1 (December 1, 1962), 11-12.
[73] Baar, "'What Has My Union Done For Me?," 444.
[74] Banks, *The Writers*, 126.
[75] Banks, *The Writers,* 137.
[76] Banks, *The Writers*, 140.

a new compensation system for the reuse of their work and for health and pension benefits like what AFTRA gained in 1954. While the studios were "prepared to refuse" the unions' demands, both guilds achieved additional compensation and benefits.[77] The gains won in the 1960 WGA and SAG strikes established a royalty system that became the residual model both unions continue to use today. That same year, the Screen Directors Guild merged with the Radio and Television Directors Guild to form the Directors Guild of America (DGA) as it is known today.

The social activism of the 1960s significantly impacted the three talent unions going into the 1970s, as women began to work together to improve their status in the industry. At this time, women made up only 11% of the WGA's membership.[78] Banks notes that during this period, the few women TV writers most often wrote on soap operas or as freelancers on prime-time series, two roles that paid less than other positions.[79] In 1971, Diana Gould founded the WGA Women's Committee. The main goal of this committee was to showcase how women writers were not hired as frequently in the industry as their male counterparts. The group created a statistical report as evidence of sexist hiring practices, which they released to both the networks and entertainment trade publications.[80] While the report made gains for women writers, they remained limited within the industry. Although more women were hired for jobs as the 1970s progressed, Banks argues that it became a form of tokenism to hire one woman, and never more than that, in every writer's room.[81] Additionally, the Women's Committee initial report did not highlight specific data about women of colour in the industry, who were even less represented at the time.[82] In 1983, Black WGA writers formed a committee to provide evidence of hiring

[77] Banks, *The Writers*, 143.
[78] Smukler, *Liberating Hollywood*, 64.
[79] Banks, "Unequal Opportunities,"117.
[80] Smukler, *Liberating Hollywood*, 67.
[81] Banks, "Unequal Opportunities," 120.
[82] Banks, "Unequal Opportunities," 111.

discrimination; of 100 Black writers surveyed, only eight worked full-time.[83] Today, racialized screenwriters continue to experience pay disparity compared to their white peers, even workers at the mid-career level.[84]

At the same time, the WGA Women's Committee was highly influential for women in SAG. In 1972, Kathleen Nolan founded the SAG Women's Committee; she would later be elected the first female president of the guild in 1975.[85] Alongside the Women's Committee, SAG established a Minority Committee to reflect the unique concerns of racialized members. Inspired by the WGA's statistical report, the two groups worked together to gather data about the discrimination of women and racialized people as actors. Similarly to the writers' findings, the actors' report "provided indisputable evidence that women and minority performers were excluded from leading roles and from screen time altogether."[86] As Smukler notes, this hiring discrimination not only affected marginalized actors in the short term but significantly impacted their future earnings because of the residual system established in the 1960s.[87]

In 1973, women in the DGA began to organize as well, although their progress was much slower. Arguably, of the three talent unions, the DGA was the most hostile to women with only 3.9% female membership at the time.[88] After formally establishing a Women's Committee in 1979, members created a research report that tracked women directors from 1949-1979, proving that women in the DGA were excluded from directing films and network television.[89] Following the report, the Women's Committee wanted to establish hiring quotas for women, a controversial

[83] Banks, "Unequal Opportunities," 124.
[84] Banks, *The Writers*, 236.
[85] Smukler, *Liberating Hollywood*, 64.
[86] Smukler, *Liberating Hollywood*, 72.
[87] Smukler, *Liberating Hollywood*, 72.
[88] Smukler, *Liberating Hollywood*, 236.
[89] Smukler, *Liberating Hollywood*, 244-245.

policy within the largely male union. While affirmative action policies were set up, they were not taken seriously. In 1981, members filed legal complaints about the hiring practices against twenty major studios and production companies.[90] In 1983, members also filed class action suits against Warner Bros. and Columbia Pictures for employment discrimination; in 1985, the court ruled in favour of the studios.[91] The failure to create legal repercussions for discriminatory hiring practices maintained the industrial hierarchy of film and television production, thus impacting all three talent unions for decades to come.

Early in the 1980s, SAG and AFTRA developed a plan to implement a merger between the two groups to protect the two unions' collective interests as a larger group and create more bargaining power over the studios and networks. Catherine McKercher and Vincent Mosco argue that the merger plan quickly failed because it "became a victim of an internal struggle at SAG" between members with opposing ideologies.[92] A major point of contention resulted from guild hierarchies, as some members viewed film actors as superior to TV actors. Attempts to merge SAG and AFTRA failed again in 1998 and 2003. In both instances, AFTRA members supported the merger more strongly than SAG. McKercher and Mosco state the mergers continued to fail because of SAG's "notion that actors are artists who shouldn't be co-mingled in a union with broadcast journalists or musicians."[93]

The tide began to turn as the 2000s progressed. Fortmueller argues that AFTRA became more powerful in the new millennium due to an increase in television being made with AFTRA covering the majority of TV contracts.[94] Due to the rise of prestige TV at this time, AFTRA was

[90] Smukler, *Liberating Hollywood*, 260.
[91] Smukler, *Liberating Hollywood*, 262.
[92] McKercher and Mosco, "Divided They Stand," 135.
[93] McKercher and Mosco, "Divided They Stand," 139.
[94] Fortmueller, "The SAG–AFTRA Merger," 219.

no longer viewed as a lesser union for actors like it was in the past.[95] Moreover, corporate conglomeration created "an increasingly concentrated media industry" which threatened the unions' negotiating power.[96] By the 2010s, SAG "needed AFTRA as a bargaining partner" to fight the combined corporate power of the studios and networks.[97] After nearly three decades of failed attempts, the two unions merged as SAG-AFTRA in 2012.

THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN HOLLYWOOD LABOUR STRIKES

Technological changes historically act as "disruptors" to the labour practices of film and television production.[98] At the same time, learning to respond to this "upheaval" is the norm in the entertainment business for workers at all levels.[99] In Hollywood, there is a 20-year cycle of a technological change that requires a "new way of looking at the business."[100] In the majority of WGA and SAG-AFTRA strikes, new technology is a central issue due to the way it may affect compensation, particularly the residual system, as well as working conditions. As Jan Wilson writes, "Technology and the resulting markets develop so quickly… that often parties do not anticipate a new market to be negotiated until it is too late to include it in the contract."[101] In this section, I detail the role of emergent technology in three decades of strikes for union members as historical precedents for the AI issue in the 2023 strikes.

As detailed previously, the introduction of television caused a significant shift in the film industry in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Even before the technology was available to a widespread commercial audience, studios included clauses relating to television in workers'

[95] Fortmueller, "The SAG–AFTRA Merger," 220.
[96] McKercher and Mosco, "Divided They Stand," 133.
[97] Fortmueller, "The SAG–AFTRA Merger," 220.
[98] Fortmueller, *Below the Stars*, 14.
[99] Prindle, *The Politics of Glamour*, 90.
[100] Cynthia Littleton, *TV on Strike: Why Hollywood Went to War over the Internet*, (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2013), 20.
[101] Jan Wilson, "When Hollywood Strikes," *Labor Law Journal* 42, no. 10 (1991): 699.

contracts dating back to the late 1920s.[102] In 1948, SAG members realized the potential for their previous films to be newly broadcast on TV. In their contract negotiations for that year, they made "a request that residuals be paid to actors for all films from that point forward, if they ever appeared on television."[103] Seeking to avoid a strike, the guild made a compromise with the studios in good faith to deal with the residual issue later.[104]

Throughout the 1950s, SAG wanted to negotiate regarding residuals, but the studios stalled or refused them. Meanwhile, films began to be broadcast on TV without actors receiving any additional compensation for these re-airings.[105] Prindle writes that the studios privately "warned the guild's leadership… that they would never give in on this issue."[106] In late 1959, SAG started negotiating a new contract. This time, the union firmly wanted to put a residual system in place. SAG also demanded back pay for all film re-airings since 1948 when the residuals compromise was first made in a good faith agreement.[107] As negotiations for a new contract dissolved, SAG officially went on strike for the first time on March 7, 1960. The WGA had already been on strike since January of that year over similar issues, amplifying this historic moment. 1960 marked the first time the two unions were on strike simultaneously, which would not be repeated again until 2023.

Still, the 1960 actors' strike ended only five weeks after it began. SAG quickly lost momentum in their efforts due to internal divisions within the union. The more politically progressive members of SAG believed that guild president Ronald Reagan gave into producer

[102] Banks, *The Writers*, 40.
[103] Prindle, *The Politics of Glamour*, 82.
[104] Prindle, *The Politics of Glamour*, 83.
[105] Prindle, *The Politics of Glamour*, 83.
[106] Prindle, *The Politics of Glamour*, 83.
[107] Prindle, *The Politics of Glamour*, 84.

demands too easily.[108] While the union established a compensation system for re-airings of their work, the union dropped its request for back pay and the new system would only be paid out for airings from 1960 onwards.[109] While gaining additional compensation resulted in an enormous victory, particularly when the studios stated it would never happen, several actors were upset by the loss of back pay. In 1982, Mickey Rooney, an actor famous in the silent film and classical studio eras, filed a class action lawsuit on behalf of SAG members featured in films prior to 1960 to obtain additional compensation for the re-use of their work.[110] The court ruled against it, stating the actors' contracts at the time included a clause that ruled out "future method or means" of exhibition or distribution, meaning that "unforeseen technological advances were not a basis for recovery" for compensation.[111]

As Howard R. Osofsky and Jan R. Schneiderman write, the 1960 residual compromise "left the Guild dog-paddling after a speedboat that had a ten-year head start."[112] SAG was quick to learn their lesson. When home video technology began to develop in the 1970s through formats such as pay TV and VHS, guild president Charlton Heston recognized early on that residuals on these formats could be economically lucrative for SAG members. As Emilie Raymond notes, "Heston promised that when the still-developing VCR came into being, the guild would fight for residuals on the movies played on the new machines."[113] Although Heston was no longer guild president by 1980, members fulfilled his promise when SAG went on strike that year over residuals on "home recording devices."[114] Even though VCRs were not yet widely

[108] Prindle, *The Politics of Glamour*, 87.
[109] Prindle, *The Politics of Glamour*, 86.
[110] Wilson, "When Hollywood Strikes," 700.
[111] Wilson, "When Hollywood Strikes," 700.
[112] Osofsky and Schneiderman, "The New California Gold Rush: SAG's 1980 Strike Revisited," 24.
[113] Emilie Raymond, "The Agony and the Ecstasy: Charlton Heston and the Screen Actors Guild*," *Journal of Policy History* 17, no. 2 (n.d.), 221.
[114] Banks, *The Writers*, 185.

adopted by a commercial audience, the union wanted more than a good faith agreement to protect themselves if and when the technology became more popular. In their initial demands for the 1980 strike, SAG sought 12% of the distributor's gross profits for new home video formats such as pay TV and VHS.[115] SAG wanted to guarantee they received residuals on films made exclusively for cable, a new format at the time.[116] As SAG member and officer Daryl Anderson stated, "A lot of what motivated 1980 was the Phantom of 1960."[117]

Negotiations were tense throughout the two-month strike. The main point of contention between SAG and management was the percentage amount for residuals. As Prindle writes, the initial number of 12% created confusion for the studios and networks, as "nobody knew if the guild's demand… was too high, or too low, or perhaps wrongly stated."[118] During bargaining, SAG reduced the percentage to 6%, which studios then responded with 3.6%.[119] The studios also countered that residual payments would only be paid after a free play window of exhibition where residuals would not count, which greatly angered the actors.[120] In the end, SAG gained residuals of 4.5% of the distributor's gross profits for made-for-cable films on pay TV, but only after it played ten times.[121] Likewise, the guild gained residuals of 4.5% of the producer's gross profits on physical home videos formats after 100,000 units sold.[122] SAG members were largely upset with these rates and many viewed the strike as "botched."[123] The different percentage

[115] Osofsky and Schneiderman, "The New California Gold Rush: SAG's 1980 Strike Revisited," 5.
[116] Prindle, *The Politics of Glamour*, 126.
[117] Prindle, *The Politics of Glamour*, 157.
[118] Prindle, *The Politics of Glamour*, 126.
[119] Osofsky and Schneiderman, "The New California Gold Rush: SAG's 1980 Strike Revisited," 9.
[120] Osofsky and Schneiderman, "The New California Gold Rush: SAG's 1980 Strike Revisited," 9.
[121] Osofsky and Schneiderman, "The New California Gold Rush: SAG's 1980 Strike Revisited," 14.
[122] Osofsky and Schneiderman, "The New California Gold Rush: SAG's 1980 Strike Revisited," 14.
[123] Prindle, *The Politics of Glamour*, 132.

agreements regarding gross profits came back to haunt all three of the talent unions for the rest of the decade.

The 1980s were not only marked by the technological changes of home video, but by a new US president and an increase in entertainment consolidation. In 1981, Ronald Reagan was inaugurated as the president of the United States, a position he held until 1989. Reagan's past as an actor informed his policies of economic deregulation and contributed to the increased media conglomeration of this period. As Holt writes, "in his first term, President Reagan intervened on behalf of the Hollywood studios… to keep the government's hands out of marketplace affairs in order to help his former colleagues."[124] In 1982, the heads of studios and networks merged to create the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP), which became "the single bargaining agent" with the Hollywood unions.[125] As Banks notes, this merger brought the studios' and networks' "disparate interests together as one voice."[126] This consolidation of corporate power proved to be a formidable opponent against the talent unions in the 1980s and into the decades to come.

For example, when the WGA went on strike in 1985 over residuals on VHS sales, they faced unbelievable resistance to their demands from the newly concentrated AMPTP. One of the main issues in this strike was that writers realized their residuals were calculated off a fraction of the producer's gross profits. The WGA demanded that VHS residuals be based on the distributor's gross, which would generate higher amounts of compensation for writers.[127] The AMPTP argued that 80% of a VHS tape sale represented manufacturing costs, so writers'

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[124] Jennifer Holt, *Empires of Entertainment: Media Industries and the Politics of Deregulation, 1980-1996*, Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2011, 4.
[125] Banks, *The Writers*, 187.
[126] Banks, *The Writers*, 187.
[127] Wilson, "When Hollywood Strikes," 700.

residuals only came from the remaining 20% of the total sale.[128] Since both SAG and the DGA previously accepted the 80/20 split for VHS residuals, the AMPTP refused to give the WGA more than what they already gave the actors and directors.[129] This practice, known as pattern bargaining, is not commonly used in other unionized industries outside of Hollywood.[130] During the 1980s, pattern bargaining became a primary tactic of the AMPTP when negotiating with all three of the talent unions to maintain their power as management even though these unions have specific concerns related to their unique working conditions.

Failure to reach a sufficient agreement for the WGA in 1985 led to another strike when the guild's contract expired three years later. The 1988 WGA strike was "long and bitter"; at 155 days, it remains the longest in the guild's history.[131] One of the main causes for the strike was the AMPTP's proposition to change the residual calculations from a percentage-based model to a sliding scale, which the WGA argued severely reduced their compensation rates, which had already been clawed back in the 1985 negotiations.[132] While the WGA sought increased residuals on syndicated series and VHS tapes, the AMPTP pushed instead for residual reductions, like what the DGA previously accepted.[133] As Banks writes, "The AMPTP flatly refused to discuss percentages for residuals on VHS, much less overhaul them."[134] The repercussions from this refusal were immense on the future earnings of guild members. Schatz notes that by 1989, home

[128] Banks, *The Writers*, 187.
[129] Banks, *The Writers*, 187.
[130] Wilson, "When Hollywood Strikes," 705.
[131] David Dietz, "Comparison between the 1985 and 1988 Writers Guild of America Theatrical and Television Basic Agreements--What Did the Guild Obtain from the 1988 Strike," *Federal Communications Law Journal* 43, no. 2 (April 1991): 188.
[132] Jillian N. Morphis, "Negotiations Between the WGA and AMPTP: How to Avoid Strikes and Still Promote Members' Needs," *Pepperdine Dispute Resolution Law Journal* 12 (2012): 527-528.
[133] Dietz, "Comparison Between the 1985 and 1988 Writers Guild of America Theatrical and Television Basic Agreements," 189.
[134] Banks, *The Writers*, 189.

video became a larger source of revenue for studios than theatres, "a trend that would accelerate" into the 1990s and 2000s.[135] Moreover, the paltry residual split stayed the same; as Jillian N. Morphis writes, "when VHS, and later DVD, profits grew, the studios never modified the formula used to calculate writers' residuals."[136] Likewise, Banks argues that TV writers did not foresee the sale of TV seasons on home video formats, so it was not until the DVD boom of the early 2000s that "writers realized precisely how much they lost in 1988."[137]

Technological changes in the 2000s created both new opportunities and new challenges for WGA members. New genres and forms of media such as reality TV and online video streaming solidified as commercial industrial enterprises, with each medium requiring writers to script story outlines and dialogue.[138] While reality TV provided networks with a new source of content, the WGA contract did not cover writers working on these "unscripted" shows.[139] The launch of YouTube in 2005 also meant that studios desired short TV scenes written exclusively for the Internet, known as webisodes or minisodes, but TV writers were unclear how they would be compensated for this extra work, as these short scenes were not broadcast on television.[140] Residuals on TV show downloads from the newly created iTunes Store were calculated as DVD sales rather than TV re-airings, which resulted in lower rates of compensation for writers.[141]

In 2007, the WGA's contract expired in October. Initially, the union decided to wait and collectively strike with SAG and the DGA when their contracts expired in June 2008. However, the union heard that "the studios were planning to stockpile scripts all winter" to circumvent a

[135] Schatz, "The Studio System and Conglomerate Hollywood," 21.
[136] Morphis, "Negotiations Between the WGA and AMPTP," 533.
[137] Banks, *The Writers*, 21-22.
[138] Banks, *The Writers*, 198.
[139] Banks, *The Writers*, 205.
[140] Banks, *The Writers*, 212.
[141] Banks, *The Writers*, 212.

loss of new content because of the strikes.[142] After a strike authorization vote of 93%, WGA members decided to immediately begin their strike on November 5 to catch the studios by surprise and leverage their bargaining power.[143] The message from guild leaders going into the strike was, "Don't let them screw us on the Internet like they did on home video."[144] The WGA initially demanded increased residuals for DVD sales and new media, as well as protection for members working in reality TV and animation. Members previously lost a large share of earnings on home video formats during the 1980s strikes and feared the same would happen for streaming video. These fears were not misplaced. As Banks writes, during this period, "film and television series that were streaming online were never included in residual payments."[145] Moreover, networks viewed webisodes and minisodes as "promotional" activity for and were contractually defined "as generally being free of obligation for additional compensation."[146]

During the strike, the union enlisted high-profile showrunners to be part of the bargaining team, which increased public visibility of the strike to those outside of the entertainment industry. After 100 days, the strike ended on February 12, 2008. While the union's actions were a public success in terms of raising their profile, the same is not true for the battle for online video streaming residuals. During negotiations, the AMPTP "claimed the writers' new media market demands were premature, as the structure of the industry and size of the pie [was] unknown."[147] Even though the WGA established a compensation rate for the technology, in the

[142] Banks, *The Writers*, 220.
[143] Banks, *The Writers*, 220.
[144] Littleton, *TV on Strike*, 6.
[145] Miranda J. Banks, "The Picket Line Online: Creative Labor, Digital Activism, and the 2007–2008 Writers Guild of America Strike," *Popular Communication* 8, no. 1 (February 4, 2010): 23.
[146] Littleton, *TV on Strike*, 14.
[147] Morphis, "Negotiations Between the WGA and AMPTP," 529.

end they only gained "meager residuals from streaming media," which had a devastating impact on earnings for writers in the next decade.[148]

These historical precedents reveal what it means for creative workers in Hollywood to negotiate around emergent technologies in advance of their full impact on industry practices in several fashions. When new technologies emerge, workers experience them as a threat to their livelihoods and feel the need to protect themselves against their own possible exploitation. At the same time, the industry always continues even when practices are modified by technological changes. For example, when television emerged in the 1950s, workers feared that no one would ever go to a movie theatre again, and yet theatres endure to this day. Additionally, workers never bargain solely around the issue of emergent technology. In negotiations, the unions also bargain for better wages, pensions and health insurance plans, among many other issues. Occasionally, concessions are made surrounding an unknown such as technology to make gains in other areas that are more immediately tangible for workers. These historical examples also demonstrate how pattern bargaining plays an enormous role in Hollywood labour negotiations, particularly for the above-the-line unions of the WGA, the DGA and SAG-AFTRA. When one of these unions accepts a sub-par deal, they risk potential gains for the other two unions, but if one group can make gains, this greatly benefits them all. As such, union solidarity is a significant factor in the success of negotiations.

These historical examples point to a long-standing feeling of distrust between the unions and AMPTP members, which makes workers hesitant about issues that will be dealt with in the future. Going back to the unions' initial formations in the 1920s and 1930s, the studios did not even want to recognize them as legitimate groups in the first place. For instance, the "good faith"

[148] Banks, "The Picket Line Online," 30.

television agreement did not come to fruition for twelve years despite the studios promising that workers would be compensated for the broadcast of films on TV when it first emerged. As new technologies develop faster, it becomes even more important for union members to deal with potential threats ahead of time, which is evidenced in how the two unions approached AI during the 2023 strikes.

INDUSTRIAL CHANGES IN THE 2010s AND THE 2023 DUAL STRIKES

The shift towards the streaming model of film and television in the 2010s was as significant an industrial change as the transition from silent films to talkies in the 1920s. Both these periods functioned as boom times of creation, with more work created than ever before because of industrial technological changes. These periods are historically followed by a crash, as increased production eventually becomes unprofitable and unsustainable, thus leading to cutbacks. In this section, I argue that it is impossible to fully understand the 2023 WGA and SAG-AFTRA strikes without acknowledging the context of rapid industrial change in the decade that preceded it.

While platforms like YouTube laid the groundwork for online streaming video, there is one that changed the nature of the film and television industry completely: Netflix. While the company operated as a home video rental service via mail since the late 1990s, Netflix began to shift to a streaming model in 2007. As one of the first home streaming platforms, Netflix set the norm for how all services functioned after it, thus creating a template for industry practices, aesthetics and affordances.[149] Most significant to Netflix's affordances is its trademark algorithm, a machine learning tool employed by the company to "guarantee" the success of its

[149] Mareike Jenner 1983-, *Netflix and the Re-Invention of Television*, Second edition, 1 online resource (xi, 308 pages) : illustrations vols. (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 1-2.

programs.[150] Netflix's algorithm provides a massive amount of data to the company not only about what is watched, but when content is paused, abandoned or rewatched. However, this data collection is somewhat paradoxical, as the company does not publicly release information about viewership numbers. As Benjamin Burroughs writes, this intentionally creates a sense "that no Netflix show can fail."[151]

The shift into algorithmic logic greatly impacted Hollywood film and television. While networks used audience data to make programming decisions for decades, Netflix used this information to obtain and greenlight productions they thought would perform well, including *House of Cards*. In his 2015 article of the same name, Ted Striphas popularized the term "algorithmic culture" to show how the decision-making data of these processes was stated to simply be evidence of "crowd wisdom" but was actually a "black box approach" from large technology companies.[152] For instance, if a TV show was stated to be the most watched or most popular, there was no actual evidence from the company to prove that. Netflix's lack of data transparency had a significant impact on writers and actors who were unable to leverage their visible successes into better opportunities and increased wages as they were during the broadcast era when audience ratings were more publicly transparent.

The rise of streaming coincides with the era of prestige TV, which elevated television as an artistic and cultural object. In the late 1990s, original HBO series like *Oz* and *The Sopranos* marked a significant shift in not only the kinds of stories that could be told on television, but how they could be told. Seth Friedman and Amanda Keeler argue that cultural elevation of television in the 2000s through prestige series such as *Lost*, *Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad* resembles the

[150] Benjamin Burroughs, "House of Netflix: Streaming Media and Digital Lore," *Popular Communication* 17, no. 1 (January 2, 2019), 9.
[151] Burroughs, "House of Netflix," 11.
[152] Ted Striphas, "Algorithmic culture," *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol.18 (4-5), (2015), 406-407.

elevation of film in the 1960s, where a once "low-brow" medium became viewed as an artistic tool of the auteur.[153] Still, it is important to underscore that the elevation of television culturally helped business. Even if shows were not widely viewed, prestige series were seen as beneficial for "a channel's brand value."[154] For streamers, prestige original programming became a commonsense economic decision, as they owned the content and did not have to fear that studios would remove these titles from their services. In this way, original Netflix series became a way for the company to both attract subscribers and "keep profits in house."[155]

The early 2010s marked a shift in the mainstream conversation surrounding diversity in media as pop feminist ideas surrounding representation of marginalized people gained traction as a cultural sentiment. The early Netflix original *Orange Is the New Black* featured a diverse group of female actors, including a Black transgender woman in a supporting role. Still, diversity at this time became another way for Netflix to position itself as unique from broadcast television while simultaneously eroding long-standing labour structures. As Stenfania Marghitu and Sarah Louise Smyth write, Netflix "used marginalized groups' desire for greater representation as a way to conceal their active role in making working within the industry more precarious."[156] Mareike Jenner notes that while Netflix touted its diverse content early on, by the late 2010s the service cancelled shows by and about racialized peoples after one to two seasons and platformed specials by anti-transgender comedians.[157]

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[153] Seth Friedman and Amanda R. Keeler, *Prestige Television: Cultural and Artistic Value in Twenty-First-Century America,* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2023, 6.
[154] Friedman and Keeler, *Prestige Television*, 9.
[155] Friedman and Keeler, *Prestige Television*, 10.
[156] Stefania Marghitu and Sarah Louise Smyth, "Roundtable on Women's Authorship and Adaptation in Contemporary Television," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 22, no. 1 (January 2, 2024): 425.
[157] Jenner, *Netflix and the Re-Invention of Television*, 14-15.

Netflix significantly influenced both other technology companies and legacy film studios and television networks. Other technology companies soon followed the Netflix template, not necessarily because they were truly invested in film and television production, but because they wanted to add value to other services and products provided. For example, Amazon Prime Video largely functions as an add-on service for its digital retail operation; Apple TV+ is similarly an add-on for Mac, iPad and iPhone users. Additionally, Netflix was a significant disrupter for traditional film studios and television networks. Later in the 2010s, a second wave of streaming services such as Disney+ and Paramount+ emerged from these legacy companies looking to catch up with Netflix's impact.

The industrial changes of the streaming era significantly impacted working conditions and compensation for WGA and SAG-AFTRA members. One of the biggest changes was the loss of the standard number of episodes for a TV series. For both writers and actors, the shortening of television seasons from the usual 21-26 episodes to 13, 10, 8 or even just 6, halves or even quarters earnings from that contract. For example, Jordan Harper, a writer on *The Mentalist*, stated in 2024 that he "estimated that his income was less than half what it was seven years ago."[158] While there were more series created because of the streaming boom, their shortened length forced writers and actors to find new work more frequently.[159] Writers and actors lost a significant amount of income since streaming residuals were calculated at a flat rate, rather than by how much revenue they made.[160] In the past, popular series were syndicated, thus bringing in more money for both networks and the writers and actors credited for them. However, shows that performed well on streaming did not provide any extra compensation to

[158] Noam Scheiber, "How TV Writing Became a Dead-End Job," *The New York Times*, July 20, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/20/business/economy/writers-strike-hollywood-gig-work.html.
[159] Scheiber, "How TV Writing Became a Dead-End Job."
[160] Schuhrke, "Lights, Camera, Collective Action," 60.

workers because of their success. Moreover, the streamers' practice of removing underperforming series and films from their libraries altogether resulted in "the double loss of residuals and one's own work" for talent workers.[161]

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic substantially impacted film and television production, distribution and exhibition. As Hunter Hargraves writes, the pandemic "exacerbated many of the rapid changes to the media industries in the preceding years," including an increased use of streaming for the first exhibition of new films.[162] Streamers believed they greatly benefited from films going directly to their services instead of having an initial theatrical run. For example, in September 2020, Disney+ released the live-action remake of *Mulan* directly on its service at a premium cost to subscribers.[163] The shortening and occasional breaking of release windows became a "volatile issue between studios and exhibitors."[164] At the same time, Netflix's business model of continuous content flow gave the company "a competitive edge" as they had already banked new series and films when Hollywood production shut down from March to October 2020.[165] Amazon similarly benefited as more people subscribed for Prime when retail stores closed and people remained at home due to public health restrictions during this time.[166]

The shutdown of Hollywood created a precarious situation for film and television workers. The majority of WGA and SAG-AFTRA members are freelance workers with additional jobs, which are often in the service industry. The pandemic closures hit these workers

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[161] Abbey White and Caitlin Huston, "At New York Actors Strike Picket Lines, Artificial Intelligence and Residuals Are Top of Mind," *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 14, 2023, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/actors-strike-new-york-sag-aftra-ai-residuals-1235536773/.
[162] Hunter Hargraves, "Introduction: Pandemic TV, Then and Now," *Television & New Media*, 2024, 2.
[163] Kate Fortmueller, *Hollywood Shutdown : Production, Distribution, and Exhibition in the Time of COVID*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2021), 41.
[164] Fortmueller, *Hollywood Shutdown*, 55.
[165] Fortmueller, *Hollywood Shutdown*, 43.
[166] Karen Petruska, "Amazon Prime Video," in *From Networks to Netflix : A Guide to Changing Channels*, Second edition, edited by Derek Johnson (New York, NY: Routledge, 2023), 238.

even harder, as both their labour fields were either completely shut down or operating in an extremely limited capacity.[167] Unfortunately for union members, these closures eliminated any form of leverage when both the WGA and SAG-AFTRA re-negotiated their contracts in June 2020. As Fortmueller notes, "The immediate focus for all of the unions was to find a way for the industry to get back to work," which undercut their ability to negotiate about other industrial problems, such as streaming residuals.[168] Given this context, it should not be surprising that both unions decided to strike when their contracts expired three years later in 2023.

Before providing an overview of the 2023 Hollywood strikes, I want to emphasize how much these issues affected film and television workers on an everyday human level. The majority of WGA and SAG-AFTRA members were not in good economic positions going into the 2023 strikes, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the WGA strike, writers shared discussion of dire working conditions on social media, including a person who stole "food from the Netflix cafeteria to feed his family."[169] Others noted that they could not even vote in the WGA strike authorization because they had not achieved the required amount of earnings to do so.[170]

The economic position of writers and actors worsened throughout the strike. The two major industrial hubs of the industry, New York City and Los Angeles, are two of the most expensive cities in the United States to live in. While those on strike in New York were eligible for unemployment insurance, those in California were not.[171] Trade articles reported on workers'

[167] Fortmueller, *Hollywood Shutdown*, 15.
[168] Fortmueller, *Hollywood Shutdown*, 47.
[169] Lynette Rice, "WGA Members Rally On Social Media; Share War Stories About Mini-Rooms, Low Pay And No Work," *Deadline*, April 15, 2023, https://deadline.com/2023/04/wga-members-social-media-strike-authorization-mini-rooms-low-pay-1235325814/.
[170] Rice, "WGA Members Rally On Social Media."
[171] David Robb, "WGA Answers Frequently Asked Questions About Potential Strike," *Deadline*, April 26, 2023, https://deadline.com/2023/04/hollywood-strike-faq-writers-guild-1235337733/.

"side hustles" to sustain themselves during the work stoppages, such as teaching courses, offering editorial services and even selling TV-related merch on Etsy.[172] Another article noted how many in the industry "turned to side gigs like Uber driving to cobble together an annual income."[173] An additional anonymous guest column by a below-the-line worker in *Deadline* detailed the impact of economic instability on their family during the strikes:

> "The loss of income has been extremely stressful as we live in one of the most expensive cities in the country. We have eliminated everything that is not an absolute necessity from our budget. We let go of our childcare provider and halted all extracurricular activities and entertainment. We stopped making contributions to our retirement and stopped paying down our debts. We are foregoing eating out, travel, entertainment, media subscriptions, personal care services, etc., anything that is not mandatory."[174]

While the strikes strongly impacted union members economically, they affected marginalized members differently. As Marghitu and Smyth write, "The strikes are profoundly gendered and racialized but also draw attention to the huge gap between high-profile, above-the-line workers and lower-level and/or emerging [workers]."[175] As they note, the industrial changes caused by streaming, such as the erosion of the writers' room, specifically hurt women and racialized union members more, as they lost the mentorship opportunities necessary to be promoted to showrunner positions.[176] Still, union subcommittees for marginalized members organized around their unique concerns during the strikes. For example, a "Trans Takeover" picket at Netflix, organized by the WGA Trans/Gender Non-Conforming Writers Subcommittee,

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[172] Cori Murray, "Etsy Crafts, Teaching and Live Events: The Side Hustles of Striking Writers," *The Hollywood Reporter*, August 10, 2023, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/lifestyle/lifestyle-news/striking-writers-etsy-crafts-teaching-1235558938/.
[173] Mahyad Tousi, "Culture Shift: I'm a Writer Facing Eviction. Do I Regret the Strike? (Guest Column)," *The Hollywood Reporter*, September 28, 2023, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/writers-strike-eviction-regret-1235602699/.
[174] Anonymous, "Hollywood Below-The-Line Worker Talks About Strike Impact: 'We Have Eliminated Everything Not An Absolute Necessity From Our Budget,'" *Deadline*, June 29, 2023, https://deadline.com/2023/06/below-the-line-worker-talks-about-devastating-impact-of-strike-we-have-eliminated-everything-not-an-absolute-necessity-from-our-budget-1235427554/.
[175] Marghitu and Smyth, "Roundtable on Women's Authorship and Adaptation in Contemporary Television," 425.
[176] Marghitu and Smyth, "Roundtable on Women's Authorship and Adaptation in Contemporary Television," 425.

highlighted issues specific to transgender writers, such as not being included when writing transgender characters or only being hired as "sensitivity consultants."[177] WGAW's Writers with Disabilities Committee and SAG-AFTRA's National Performers With Disabilities Committee also organized together to increase accessibility for disabled union members on the picket lines.[178]

The WGA was the first Hollywood talent union to officially strike in 2023. Contract negotiations for this union began on March 20. One of the main issues for the WGA going into bargaining was increased wages through minimum compensation rates and streaming residual rates. Another issue for WGA members was to create minimum staffing rates to push back against the increased practice of "mini rooms," where a small number of writers were expected to write a full season of a show in only a few weeks, with their contracts ending before filming began.[179] Additionally, the union sought to add regulations surrounding the use of AI in film and TV writing. The main bargaining issues for the WGA during initial negotiations show how the union wanted to fight against the fact that "the studios and the streamers [had] tried to turn writing from a career into a gig job."[180]

By mid-April, an agreement had yet to be reached between the union and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP). A strike vote occurred with nearly 98% of

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[177] Katie Kilkenny, "At 'Trans Takeover' Picket at Netflix, Writers Push for Representation: 'Let Us Make You Money,'" *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 19, 2023, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/trans-takeover-picket-netflix-writers-1235494634/.
[178] Abbey White, "'We're Not Invisible': Disabled SAG-AFTRA and WGA Members on Accessibility Challenges — and Solutions — at the Picket Lines," *The Hollywood Reporter*, September 5, 2023, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/sag-aftra-wga-strike-picket-line-accessibility-1235578409/.
[179] David Robb, "WGA Members Vote Overwhelmingly To Authorize A Strike If No Deal By May 1," *Deadline*, April 17, 2023, https://deadline.com/2023/04/hollywood-strike-writer-vote-overwhelmingly-to-authorize-strike-1235328438/.
[180] Dominic Patten and Nellie Andreeva, "Negotiating Committee Member Adam Conover On Battle Over AI & Preservation Of The Writers Room, AMPTP Using DGA To 'Undercut' WGA," *Deadline*, May 3, 2023, https://deadline.com/2023/05/wga-strike-negotiating-committee-member-adam-conover-ai-writers-room-amptp-dga-1235354520/.

eligible members voting in favour, a record amount for the guild.[181] The 2023 WGA strike officially began on May 2. The strike was unsurprising for both the guild and the AMPTP. According to *Deadline*, the studios had been aware since the previous fall that the WGA was likely to strike.[182] The AMPTP immediately began to apply pressure tactics on union members. For example, both Disney and Warner Bros. Discovery sent letters threatening suspensions and termination for showrunners who did not continue their producing duties despite being on strike with the WGA.[183] In early June, the DGA settled on a new contract with the AMPTP, which included regulations surrounding the use of AI. Due to the history of pattern bargaining among the Hollywood talent unions, there was an expectation that the WGA would take the same deal. However, the union had unique concerns related to the use of AI and screenwriting that were not addressed by the DGA contract. On social media, there was an outcry of frustration from WGA members, who claimed that the DGA leveraged their negotiations and secured a new contract because of the WGA's actions without showing solidarity for the writers.[184]

On June 7, the AMPTP began to negotiate with the final talent union, SAG-AFTRA. In an unprecedented move, nearly 98% of eligible guild members voted to authorize a strike before negotiations even began.[185] The AMPTP did not expect SAG-AFTRA to strike and were caught off guard by their demands, which "totaled 48 pages, nearly triple the size of the list during their

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[181] Robb, "WGA Members Vote Overwhelmingly To Authorize A Strike If No Deal By May 1."
[182] Justin Kroll and Anthony D'Alessandro, "How WGA Strike Could Impact Movies Gearing Up For Production," *Deadline*, May 2, 2023, https://deadline.com/2023/05/writers-strike-movie-production-impact-delays-gladiator-2-bad-boys-4-1235341085/.
[183] Katie Kilkenny and Lesley Goldberg, "Studios Demand Showrunners Work During Writers Strike," *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 5, 2023, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/disney-demands-showrunners-work-during-writers-strike-wga-1235480879/.
[184] Nellie Andreeva, Dominic Patten, and Erik Pedersen, "Writers React To Directors Guild-AMPTP Contract Deal: 'WGA Takes A Stand, DGA Reaps The Rewards,'" *Deadline*, June 4, 2023, https://deadline.com/2023/06/dga-deal-reaction-striking-writers-angry-1235408169/.
[185] Brooks Barnes, John Koblin, and Nicole Sperling, "Actors Join Writers on Strike, Bringing Hollywood to a Standstill," *The New York Times*, July 13, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/13/business/media/sag-aftra-writers-strike.html.

last negotiations in 2020."[186] The main issues for SAG-AFTRA resembled those of the WGA, including increased compensation and streaming residual rates, as well as regulations surrounding the use of AI. While SAG-AFTRA's contract officially expired on June 30, the union gained an unprecedented two-week extension to continue negotiations, proof that the AMPTP deliberately sought to avoid a dual strike.[187]

On July 12, only a few days before the end of SAG-AFTRA's negotiation extension, *Deadline* published an explosive article that detailed how studio CEOs anonymously stated they intended to let the WGA strike "bleed out" until the end of October.[188] This article included a quote from an unnamed studio executive who said, "The endgame is to allow things to drag on until union members start losing their apartments and losing their homes."[189] On July 13, SAG-AFTRA officially went on strike. After the announcement, the AMPTP released a statement that said, "The Union has regrettably chosen a path that will lead to financial hardship for countless thousands of people who depend on the industry."[190] In a public speech, guild president Fran Drescher countered, stating, "We had no choice. We are the victims here. We are being victimized by a very greedy entity."[191]

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[186] Barnes, Koblin, and Sperling, "Actors Join Writers on Strike, Bringing Hollywood to a Standstill."
[187] Dominic Patten, "SAG-AFTRA & Studio CEOs Start Talks Today With Revenue Sharing Still Divisive Issue; 'Be Cautious' Expecting A Quick Deal, Town Warned," *Deadline*, October 2, 2023, https://deadline.com/2023/10/actors-strike-talks-hollywood-studios-issues-remain-1235561315/.
[188] Dominic Patten, "Hollywood Studios' WGA Strike Endgame Is To Let Writers Go Broke Before Resuming Talks In Fall," *Deadline*, July 12, 2023, https://deadline.com/2023/07/writers-strike-hollywood-studios-deal-fight-wga-actors-1235434335/.
[189] Patten, "Hollywood Studios' WGA Strike Endgame."
[190] Erik Pedersen, "AMPTP Responds To SAG-AFTRA Strike: 'Union Has Regrettably Chosen A Path That Will Lead To Financial Hardship For Countless Thousands,'" *Deadline*, July 13, 2023, https://deadline.com/2023/07/actors-strike-studios-respond-sag-aftra-1235437389/.
[191] David Robb and Peter White, "SAG-AFTRA President Fran Drescher Says 'We Are Being Victimized By A Very Greedy Entity' As Actors Strike Officially Begins Tomorrow," *Deadline*, July 13, 2023, https://deadline.com/2023/07/sag-aftra-fran-drescher-were-being-victimized-by-a-greedy-entity-1235437292/.

By early August, the WGA strike approached its 100th day, the total length of their previous strike. Since the AMPTP focused on resolving negotiations with the DGA and SAG-AFTRA throughout June and July, no discussions occurred with the WGA since their talks broke down at the beginning of May. In early August, negotiations between the WGA and the AMPTP resumed for the first time in three months. While writers were cautiously optimistic, talks quickly ended after the AMPTP stated the only deal they could offer the union was the same deal the DGA previously accepted.[192] Later that month, the AMPTP publicly released their proposed contract to the WGA, going against the norms of negotiations. In response, the WGA stated, "This was the companies' plan from the beginning – not to bargain, but to jam us. It is their only strategy – to bet that we will turn on each other."[193]

Talks between the WGA and AMPTP did not resume until mid-September. At this point, momentum shifted between the two groups. A deal was quickly reached on September 24, with the contract later ratified by 99% of eligible voting WGA members on October 9. Guild leaders stated that their final deal was "exceptional," and included increased residual rates, a new bonus for successful streaming shows and minimum staffing rates.[194] Additionally, the union achieved protections surrounding the use of AI, which will be detailed in depth in the next chapter. In an interview with *Deadline*, WGA Chief Negotiator Ellen Stutzman stated the strike took so long because the AMPTP did not take the union's initial demands seriously and deliberately

[192] David Robb and Peter White, "WGA & AMPTP Can't Agree To Resume Negotiations; Strike To Go On Indefinitely," *Deadline*, August 5, 2023, https://deadline.com/2023/08/writers-strike-meeting-union-studios-no-new-talks-1235455349/.
[193] Dominic Patten, "WGA Slams Studios' Latest Offer & Meeting As Attempt To Make Guild 'Cave'; 'Not To Bargain, But To Jam Us,'" *Deadline*, August 23, 2023, https://deadline.com/2023/08/wga-strike-guild-regjects-latest-studio-offers-rips-ceos-1235525784/.
[194] Brooks Barnes, "TV and Movie Writers to Begin Returning to Work on Wednesday," *The New York Times*, September 27, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/26/business/hollywood-writers-return.html.

prolonged negotiations; however, SAG-AFTRA's strike provided a "big boost" to the WGA's bargaining power.[195]

Following the resolution of the WGA strike, there was industry-wide hope that the momentum would allow SAG-AFTRA to quickly make a successful deal as well. Negotiations between SAG-AFTRA and the AMPTP resumed in early October for the first time since the union went on strike in July. By mid-month, talks ended because of the AMPTP's refusal to budge on SAG-AFTRA's proposals regarding AI and a streaming revenue-sharing residual, the latter of which became a particularly difficult sticking point.[196] The AMPTP argued that the streaming residual would cost the studios $800 million per year, but SAG-AFTRA countered that the AMPTP's numbers misrepresented their proposal and that the streaming residual "would cost the companies less than 57¢ per subscriber each year."[197] Negotiations resumed at the end of October. Now, the AMPTP offered increased minimum compensation rates, as well as a "performance-based measure of revenue share" for streaming content as a counter to the revenue-sharing model proposed by the union.[198]

In early November, the AMPTP stated they offered SAG-AFTRA their "Last, Best, and Final Offer," a tactic they employed during the final stages of negotiations with the WGA.[199] The

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[195] Dominic Patten, "WGA Chiefs Ellen Stutzman & Meredith Stiehm Q&A: 'Transformative' Deal For Hollywood, Solidarity With SAG-AFTRA & The AMPTP's 'Failed Process,'" *Deadline*, September 27, 2023, https://deadline.com/2023/09/writers-guild-leaders-interview-end-of-strike-1235557011/.

[196] Dominic Patten, "SAG-AFTRA Accuses Studios Of 'Bully Tactics' & Misrepresentation Over Revenue-Sharing Proposal Costs As Negotiations Crater," *Deadline*, October 12, 2023, https://deadline.com/2023/10/actors-strike-response-bully-tactics-1235571104/.

[197] Patten, "SAG-AFTRA Accuses Studios Of 'Bully Tactics' & Misrepresentation Over Revenue-Sharing Proposal Costs As Negotiations Crater."

[198] Anthony D'Alessandro and Dominic Patten, "SAG-AFTRA & Studios End Talks For Today; Guild Awaits AMPTP Response To Latest Proposal," *Deadline*, October 29, 2023, https://deadline.com/2023/10/actors-strike-talks-extend-sunday-latest-proposal-1235586058/.

[199] Anthony D'Alessandro and Dominic Patten, "SAG-AFTRA 'Reviewing' Studios' 'Last, Best, And Final Offer' After Expanded CEO Meeting Today – Update," *Deadline*, November 4, 2023, https://deadline.com/2023/11/actors-strike-studio-proposal-ceo-meeting-1235593291/.

union conceded to the deal and the 2023 SAG-AFTRA officially ended on November 9; at 118 days, it is the longest in the guild's history. Significant gains made include protections surrounding the use of AI, compensation increases on minimums for background actors and a doubling of the flat rate residual for high-performing content on streaming.[200] It took until December 5 for the new contract to be ratified, a period described as "tense" within the union.[201] Nine board members voted against the initial agreement and vocalized their fears specifically related to the AI "protections" gained. As Shann Sharma, a SAG-AFTRA board member stated, "We left all these doors open and all these people vulnerable."[202]

While emergent technologies sparked multiple strikes in Hollywood, the historical precedents of television, home video and early online streaming largely caused changes in distribution rather than production practices. Still, shifts in distribution play a role in what is produced; for example, television became its own industry with different work practices and home media created direct-to-video and cable-exclusive films. However, the issue of generative AI differs from these earlier strikes for how strongly it could affect production practice by being able to digitally create entirely "new" material. The early 2020s also represent a moment in film and television history where the industry is competing with a significant amount of other audiovisual entertainment such as video games, podcasts, live streaming and social media. Given this, the 2023 strikes occurred in a moment where narrative film and television held a lesser influence on the wider popular culture than in the 1960s or 1980s due to the decline of monoculture. As well, it is vital to remember that the 2023 strikes negotiated around several issues in addition to AI, such as wages, pensions, health plans, minimum staffing and streaming

[200] Schuhrke, "Lights, Camera, Collective Action," 59-60.
[201] Katie Kilkenny, "Actors Push Past AI Concerns to Get Back to Work," *The Hollywood Reporter*, December 6, 2023, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/sagaftra-vote-ratification-1235715155/.
[202] Kilkenny, "Actors Push Past AI Concerns to Get Back to Work."

residuals. The AI issue as it applies to the 2023 WGA and SAG-AFTRA strikes will be explored in great depth in the next section.

CHAPTER THREE

Hollywood Techno-Logic: AI Discourse in the 2023 WGA and SAG-AFTRA Strikes

The *New York Times* characterized July and August 2023 as "hot labor summer" in California, with strikes by hotel staff, dockworkers and teachers.[203] During a time with numerous work stoppages in the United States, the WGA and SAG-AFTRA strikes were the most publicly visible organized labour actions. Arguably, these strikes received an elevated amount of coverage in entertainment news press because the unions took public positions against the incorporation of generative AI in their industry, an issue affecting a variety of labour fields. In this chapter, I analyze union members' statements about AI during the 2023 Hollywood strikes and what they reveal about the underlying structure of power in Hollywood. First, I outline the primary sources used and the public positions taken toward AI by the three major groups involved in the strikes. Then, I examine the five main themes that emerged in union members' statements about AI and use critical discourse analysis to show what these statements reveal about Hollywood labour in the early 2020s.

ENTERTAINMENT NEWS COVERAGE OF THE 2023 HOLLYWOOD STRIKES

Before analyzing AI discourses in entertainment news coverage of the 2023 Hollywood strikes, it is necessary to characterize the primary sources used. Overall, I read 152 primary sources from three different publications: *Deadline*, *The Hollywood Reporter* and *The New York Times,* two industry trade magazines and one daily newspaper for a general audience. I found relevant articles by using keyword searches for articles published from March to December 2023 about the WGA and SAG-AFTRA strikes. *Deadline* published 78 articles from mid-April to

[203] Soumya Karlamangla, "Hollywood Actors Join in California's 'Hot Labor Summer,'" *The New York Times*, July 14, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/14/us/california-actors-strike.html.

December 2023 with equal attention paid to both unions. Articles in *Deadline* typically provided daily news coverage and updates about the unions' negotiations with the AMPTP. On the other hand, *The Hollywood Reporter* published 32 articles about the two strikes from May to December 2023. Many of these articles were longer reported features about how the work stoppages affected union members and the industry. By contrast, *The New York Times* published 42 articles about the strikes from late April to November 2023, mostly daily news coverage. Articles from this source focused more heavily on SAG-AFTRA, likely because it was perceived as more interesting for a general audience due to the union's celebrity membership.

It is worthwhile to note how entertainment news coverage framed the strikes. As Fuller and Rice note in their 2014 study of media framings of SAG negotiations, news coverage of unions usually occurs through the frame of conflict.[204] This makes sense, as most publications do not write about the everyday activities of unions. Rather, what becomes newsworthy is when there is a conflict, such as bargaining or a strike. In their 2014 study, Fuller and Rice note that news coverage of strikes and unions generally frames them negatively.[205] However, in the decade following their article, public support of unions greatly increased. For example, a Gallup poll from 2023 found that 70% of Americans approved of unions, the highest percentage since 1965.[206] In entertainment coverage of the dual Hollywood strikes, many reporters connected the financial precarity of industry workers to a broader public economic struggle following the COVID-19 pandemic. Still, Fuller and Rice note that news coverage of strikes is frequently framed through the lens of "economic consequences."[207] This was certainly true in coverage of

[204] Fuller and Rice, "Lights, Camera, Conflict."
[205] Fuller and Rice, "Lights, Camera, Conflict," 328.
[206] David Leonhardt, "A New Interest in Unions," *The New York Times*, July 18, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/18/briefing/hollywood-strikes.html.
[207] Fuller and Rice, "Lights, Camera, Conflict," 329.

the 2023 Hollywood strikes, which included reporting about the impact of the strike on the California economy, as well as production and release delays for studios and networks.

Generally, news articles about the strikes quoted three types of union members. First, articles prominently featured top union members on the inside of negotiations, such as the guild president, chief negotiator and members of the bargaining team. As well, articles featured union members with a significant degree of industrial power such as hyphenate director-producers, a public image as a celebrity or both. These workers have a higher degree of power within the union and outside of it. As such, they were less likely to face retaliation in the industry for speaking publicly in the press. Moreover, entertainment coverage likely deemed these members more relevant to the audience. The last type of union member frequently quoted were those who felt they had little to lose by vocalizing their opinions about the industry in the press, such as members from marginalized identities or background actors. This group already existed at the lower end of the Hollywood hierarchy and faced industrial challenges before the strikes began.

The inclusion of certain union members in entertainment trade coverage leaves others out. These articles omit the middle level of workers who hold a small amount of industry power but may not want to speak publicly due to fear of career retaliation. These articles frequently presented the union's positions on AI as monolithic, but it is important to note that both the WGA and SAG-AFTRA have thousands of members with contrary opinions. As such, these articles largely omit those who go against the union's official position on AI, with a notable exception that will be discussed later in this chapter. For example, there must be union members, most likely in the WGA, who have already experimented with AI in their screenwriting or incorporated it into their creative process. These voices are largely omitted from entertainment news coverage, as they contradict the union's official stance. These articles do not include

writers and actors who left the film and television industry before the strikes began, a missing perspective that contains valuable insight into the precarious state of creative work in Hollywood in the 2020s.

POSITIONS TOWARDS AI: THE WGA, SAG-AFTRA AND THE AMPTP

As outlined in Caldwell's tectonic framework, the film and television industry is deeply hierarchical with various members with oppositional goals. Different groups approached the AI issue from different standpoints. This section outlines the general positions the three major groups involved in the strikes took toward AI: the WGA, SAG-AFTRA and the AMPTP. Generally, the unions approached AI looking to preserve their professions while the AMPTP approached AI with an interest in generating profits.

The WGA took a hardline stance against AI during strike negotiations. The union took an aggressive position to preserve screenwriting as its members' distinctive and irreplaceable skill. During initial negotiations, WGA members wanted to make sure that generative AI could not be used to write or rewrite original material and receive title credit for that work. They demanded that AI-generated text could not be used as source material to later be rewritten by a union member. They asked that work previously created by union members under contract for the studios and networks would not be used to train generative AI models. These demands reflect the WGA's decades-long battle over proper crediting for their work, the central issue that prompted the guild's formation in the 1930s. In their final contract agreement, the WGA achieved most of what they asked for: AI cannot be credited as a writer on a project and union members cannot be forced to use AI in their work. Still, studios and networks reserved the right to "experiment" with generative AI models on "film and TV scripts that they already own[ed]."[208]

[208] Brooks Barnes, "TV and Movie Writers to Begin Returning to Work on Wednesday," *The New York Times*, September 27, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/26/business/hollywood-writers-return.html.

On the other hand, SAG-AFTRA took a more malleable approach to AI to regulate its use. Unlike screenwriters, where the inclusion of generative AI in their work was more hypothetical, AI tools were already in use for actors but not yet regulated by the union's contract. For example, background actor Adam Faison told *Deadline* about an "unnerving encounter" he had before the strike began that involved digitally scanning his body for a gaming project, which he ultimately walked away from due to a lack of protections over his likeness.[209] Just as the WGA historically sought to preserve screenwriting as a distinct skill, SAG-AFTRA historically fought for how an actor's likeness, which includes their face, body and voice, is uniquely theirs. Since copyright law does not apply to an actor's likeness, the union developed a strategy for generative AI that gave actors agency over how and when their face, body and voice could be used by these tools. Similarly to how CGI is used with motion capture, SAG-AFTRA took the position that AI could be "implemented in a human-centric way" to benefit actors.[210]

The union created new terms to protect union members and their work. One of the main provisions included defining the differences between digital replicas and synthetic performers. Digital replicas are "enhanced" versions of an actor's performance using generative AI tools while synthetic performers are entirely digitally created objects. SAG-AFTRA took the stance that digital replicas would need to be done with "informed consent and fair compensation" for actors.[211] Interestingly, the union took this position not only to protect the likenesses of major

[209] Rosy Cordero and Matt Grobar, "Dispatches From The Picket Lines: One Actor's Tale Of A Recent AI Encounter, A Mandalorian Sighting & More," *Deadline*, July 26, 2023, https://deadline.com/2023/07/actors-strike-adam-faison-ai-los-angeles-picket-line-1235448961/.
[210] Anthony D'Alessandro, "SAG-AFTRA's Duncan Crabtree-Ireland Emphasizes Need For 'Informed Consent' To Protect Actors From AI Abuse – Comic-Con," *Deadline*, July 21, 2023, https://deadline.com/2023/07/comic-con-actors-strike-duncan-crabtree-ireland-1235444992/.
[211] David Robb, "AMPTP Disputes SAG-AFTRA's 'Misleading' Claims About Last Contract Offer Before Strike Began; Union Responds – Update," *Deadline*, July 21, 2023, https://deadline.com/2023/07/actors-strike-studios-dispute-sag-aftra-contract-offer-claims-1235445314/.

celebrities and deceased members in the union, but also to protect the likenesses of background actors in crowd scenes, whose digital replicas could be easily reused over and over.[212] As chief negotiator Duncan Crabtree-Ireland stated in an interview with *Deadline*, the union took this regulatory stance first and foremost to protect members who make "a middle class living."[213]

By taking a regulatory approach toward the integration of generative AI in screen acting, SAG-AFTRA established an important baseline that was missing before the strike began. In their final contract negotiations, SAG-AFTRA achieved their demands to establish "an enforceable set of protections" for union members regarding AI regulation, including consent and compensation for any use of their likeness.[214] The union successfully negotiated that digital replicas could not be used to replace background actors.[215] SAG-AFTRA gained the right to meet with the studios every six months to discuss their experimentation with generative AI, which Crabtree-Ireland noted was a vital source of information for future negotiation strategies.[216] However, SAG-AFTRA's AI advisor and actor Justine Bateman criticized the union's inclusion of synthetic performers in their final contract, which will be detailed later in this chapter.

On the other hand, the AMPTP did not initially take the unions' AI concerns seriously. For example, the AMPTP's sole offer relating to AI for screenwriters was an annual meeting to discuss it. As WGA negotiating committee member Adam Conover told *Deadline*, "That's

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[212] Josh Ocampo, "In Focus, an Actors' Strike and Hollywood's Future," *The New York Times*, August 2, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/02/insider/hollywood-actors-strike.html.
[213] Dominic Patten, "'This Was A Negotiation For The Future': Fran Drescher & Duncan Crabtree-Ireland On SAG-AFTRA Deal, AI & Informed Consent + Importance Of CEOs," *Deadline*, November 9, 2023, https://deadline.com/2023/11/sag-aftra-fran-drescher-actors-strike-ending-ai-interview-1235598296/.
[214] Peter White, "SAG-AFTRA's Duncan Crabtree-Ireland Lauds Ratified Contract, Talks AI, Healthcare, Turnout & When He Starts Thinking About 2026 Deal – Q&A," *Deadline*, December 6, 2023, https://deadline.com/2023/12/duncan-crabtree-ireland-interview-sag-aftra-ratified-contract-1235654288/.
[215] Carly Thomas, "Justine Bateman Slams SAG-AFTRA Tentative Deal's AI Provisions," *The Hollywood Reporter*, November 12, 2023, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/justine-bateman-slams-sag-aftra-tentative-deal-ai-provisions-1235644976/.
[216] White, "SAG-AFTRA's Duncan Crabtree-Ireland Lauds Ratified Contract."

ludicrous. What's going to happen at that meeting. Oh hey, technology's advancing, AI is getting good. See you next year."[217] Additionally, according to SAG-AFTRA, the AMPTP's AI "proposal" for background actors was to scan their likeness and pay them for one day's work while the studios owned their image "for the rest of eternity."[218] From the perspective of "actually-existing AI-capitalism," these examples speak to how the studios, networks and streamers were clearly interested in the potential capital gains afforded by the technology at the expense of workers. In August 2023, halfway through both strikes, studio heads admitted "they made a mistake" by not offering more AI regulations during initial negotiations with both unions.[219]

AMPTP members revealed their obvious interest in the use of generative AI in film and television production in statements made by prominent executives during the strikes. In early May, Disney CEO Bob Iger acknowledged in a conference call that the technology would be "difficult to manage" in terms of intellectual property, but that the company was "already starting to use AI" and had their legal department working around copyright challenges.[220] Later at a Disney town hall in July, Iger stated that the technology would be a tool "in the future the

[217] Dominic Patten and Nellie Andreeva, "Negotiating Committee Member Adam Conover On Battle Over AI & Preservation Of The Writers Room, AMPTP Using DGA To 'Undercut' WGA," *Deadline*, May 3, 2023, https://deadline.com/2023/05/wga-strike-negotiating-committee-member-adam-conover-ai-writers-room-amptp-dga-1235354520/.
[218] Anthony D'Alessandro, "SAG-AFTRA Chief Negotiator Duncan Crabtree-Ireland Says Union & AMPTP 'Pretty Far Apart On AI'; Studios 'Concerned About The Immediate Impact' Of Strike," *Deadline*, July 14, 2023, https://deadline.com/2023/07/sag-aftra-strike-duncan-crabtree-ireland-amptp-ai-talks-1235438631/.
[219] Brooks Barnes and John Koblin, "Striking Writers and Studios Agree to Restart Negotiations," *The New York Times*, August 10, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/10/business/media/writers-strike-movies-television.html.
[220] Jill Goldsmith, "Disney CEO Bob Iger Calls AI 'Disruptive,' Difficult To Manage From An 'IP Perspective,'" *Deadline*, May 10, 2023, https://deadline.com/2023/05/disney-ceo-bob-iger-ai-difficult-from-ip-perspective-1235362571/.

company [would] embrace."[221] In September, Sony Pictures Entertainment CEO Tony Vinciquerra stated at an investor conference that generative AI would be invaluable for making the production process "more efficient."[222] Vinciquerra's rhetoric showed how the AMPTP viewed the integration of generative AI in Hollywood as inevitable. As he stated, "People who get in the way of technology don't last long in business."[223]

UNION MEMBERS' STATEMENTS ABOUT AI DURING THE 2023 HOLLYWOOD STRIKES

The consistency of issues and themes regarding AI is one of the most interesting aspects of entertainment trade coverage of the 2023 Hollywood strikes. Most arguments made by the WGA and SAG-AFTRA about the technology were the same before, during and even after the work stoppages. In this section, I provide evidence of the five most prominent ways union members discussed AI during the strikes. First, I demonstrate how AI sparked concern for union members regarding labour and creativity. Then, I demonstrate how writers and actors connected the AI debate to the past, present and future of the industry.

One of the most prominent debates about AI in multiple industries is its impact on labour. During the strikes, union members characterized AI as a threat to their jobs by taking their work away or replacing them. For the most part, television writers made the most vocal endorsement of this argument. This is likely due to the historically collaborative nature of TV writing, which often uses more writers than film scripts. For instance, television writers told *The New York Times* they feared AI tools would be used to generate small components of a television script to

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[221] Alex Weprin, "Studios Quietly Go on Hiring Spree for AI Specialist Jobs Amid Picket Line Anxiety," *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 27, 2023, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/ai-jobs-studios-hire-1235545491/.
[222] Dade Hayes, "Sony Pictures Entertainment Chief Tony Vinciquerra Urges Guilds To Embrace 'Common-Ground' Solution On AI: 'You Can't Get In The Way Of Technology,'" *Deadline*, September 13, 2023, https://deadline.com/2023/09/sony-pictures-entertainment-chief-tony-vinciquerra-urges-guilds-to-embrace-common-ground-solution-on-ai-you-cant-get-in-the-way-of-technology-1235545799/.
[223] Hayes, "Sony Pictures Entertainment Chief Tony Vinciquerra."

later be assembled by a sole showrunner.[224] In this way, union members feared that generative AI would be used to automate and replace the collaborative process of the TV writers' room.

Marginalized union members saw AI tools as a threat to their labour, as they already face numerous challenges in the industry. For example, at a "Trans Takeover" picket outside of Netflix, non-binary screenwriter and journalist Leo Aquino told *The Hollywood Reporter*, "I'm really out here putting my heart on the page… it's really disheartening to feel like they think they can replace us."[225] Sagan Chen, a non-binary Chinese-American actor and filmmaker, stated outside a different Netflix picket, "The fact that they think they can take my face and manipulate it for their own goals — it's motivated by capitalism and getting back to their vacation home."[226] Due to intimate first-hand experience of how the hierarchies of power operate in Hollywood film and television production, marginalized union members were not surprised that AI tools could be used to replace their labour.

Union members argued that generative AI tools steal the labour of artist-workers. In many fields, critics have argued that it is unethical for large technology companies to train AI models on copyrighted works. For instance, during initial negotiations, the WGA tried to ban their work from being used in this way. As *Dear White People* writer-director Justin Simien stated at Comic-Con in July 2023, "AI doesn't work without other human people making art."[227] Not only does this practice deny compensation to artists for using their work in this way, but AI companies then profit from this stolen use by selling access to generative tools. Union members

[224] Scheiber, "How TV Writing Became a Dead-End Job."
[225] Kilkenny, "At 'Trans Takeover' Picket at Netflix, Writers Push for Representation."
[226] White and Huston, "At New York Actors Strike Picket Lines, Artificial Intelligence and Residuals Are Top of Mind."
[227] Winston Cho, "Tech Giants Agree to Self-Police AI In Framework That Has No Teeth," *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 21, 2023, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/ai-self-police-meta-microsoft-google-1235541616/.

argued that generative AI tools reduce the value of art created by human workers. *Bohemian Rhapsody* writer Anthony McCarten echoed this point in an op-ed for *Deadline*, writing that the "logical end-point" of AI "is a world where humans matter less than the things it creates."[228] WGA members were disturbed by the potential re-use of their work without receiving credit or compensation, an argument that echoes the union's historic struggles over authorship and residuals.

These arguments are connected to the second major theme that emerged about AI during the strikes: the role of creativity in film and television production. The biggest argument made against the use of generative AI was that it would result in unoriginal work since it is trained on already-existing materials. While film and television are self-referential mediums that frequently pay homage to past works, union members viewed the use of AI to generate new scripts as antithetical to the creativity involved in their production. For example, *Succession* creator Jesse Armstrong stated that AI could not create some of the most exciting moments from the series as those ideas largely came from the collaborative creative process of the TV writers' room.[229]

Screenwriters argued that the use of AI in a creative application was a contradiction to the very nature of the artistic process. For WGA members, even though Hollywood scriptwriting follows a standard set of conventions, the value of human artist-workers is the unique perspective they bring within the constraints of an established commercial medium. As *Lost* writer-producer Javier Grillo-Marxuach told *The New York Times*, "Artists look at everything

[228] Anthony McCarten, "'Bohemian Rhapsody' Screenwriter Anthony McCarten On AI: 'A Tireless Unoriginal Plagiarist Who Will Work For Free, A Tutored Parrot' – Guest Column," *Deadline*, May 15, 2023, https://deadline.com/2023/05/anthony-mccarten-writers-strike-guest-column-ai-danger-1235363973/.
[229] Georg Szalai, "'Succession' Creator Jesse Armstrong: Writers Must 'Make a Living,'" *The Hollywood Reporter*, June 14, 2023, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/succession-creator-writers-strike-wga-ai-1235515205/.

ever created and find a flash of newness… What a machine is doing is recombining."[230] Statements on this theme reflected how union members viewed generative AI tools as oppositional to the creative process itself. For instance, writer-director Tonje Hessen Schei stated at a Hamptons International Film Festival panel in October 2023 that "there are processes in the creative work of the filmmaking industry that really shouldn't be efficient."[231]

Interestingly, these arguments often framed creativity as a distinctly human characteristic. For example, Charlie Kaufman, one of Hollywood's most inventive writer-directors, stated that AI-generated work would always be inferior as it "can't create a moment of humanity."[232] It is worthwhile to note that one of the few dissenters of the AMPTP's position towards AI was HBO CEO Casey Bloys, who stated at a conference that it would never be used to create television series at the company due to "the need for soul and human stories."[233] Still, this is perhaps a deliberate oppositional stance considering that HBO brands itself as an elevated artistic alternative to network television. Union members even linked the homogenization of human creativity through AI tools to negative social outcomes. For instance, *Sorry to Bother You* writer-director Boots Riley stated in an op-ed for *Deadline* that the use of generative AI in Hollywood would enable "its wielders unscrupulous control over culture and even thought processes in ways

[230] Noam Scheiber and John Koblin, "Will a Chatbot Write the Next 'Succession'?," *The New York Times*, April 29, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/29/business/media/writers-guild-hollywood-ai-chatgpt.html.
[231] Dade Hayes, "Filmmakers At Hamptons Film Festival See More Labor Angst Ahead Despite WGA Gains, With Uncertainty Surrounding SAG-AFTRA Talks And 'Really Scary' AI Risks," *Deadline*, October 11, 2023, https://deadline.com/2023/10/wga-strike-actors-sag-aftra-filmmakers-artificial-intelligence-hamptons-film-festival-1235569085/.
[232] Zac Ntim, "Charlie Kaufman Talks AI, WGA Strike & Slams Hollywood System: 'The Only Thing That Makes Money Is Garbage' — Sarajevo," *Deadline*, August 14, 2023, https://deadline.com/2023/08/charlie-kaufman-ai-wga-strike-hollywood-sarajevo-1235498089/.
[233] Caitlin Huston, "HBO Chief Casey Bloys Says His Shows Won't Be Created by AI," *The Hollywood Reporter*, September 27, 2023, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/hbo-chief-ai-1235602540/.

more thorough than before."[234] This homogenization would result in the replication of past and present social divides. As actor-director Elizabeth Banks stated, replacing human artist-workers with AI would create a "culture based on all the biases of the cultures that have come before."[235]

The next major theme that emerged about AI during the Hollywood strikes was how the new technology connected to the unions' past struggles of navigating major industrial changes. This theme relates to the WGA and SAG-AFTRA's past bargaining with the AMPTP, which union members historically characterized as antagonistic. As detailed in Chapter Two, union members vocalized fears about the consequences of emerging technology on their professions time and time again, from television to home video to streaming, only for the AMPTP to use the technology to make capital gains while deteriorating labour conditions for workers. As negotiating committee member Adam Conover told *Deadline* about AI, "It sure sounds like in 2007 when we were saying, we need coverage for the Internet, and they were like, 'We don't know if we're gonna do anything on the Internet'. We knew obviously they were."[236] Drawing from Caldwell's tectonic approach to industry, the animosity between the guilds and the AMPTP during the 2023 strikes demonstrates a "fold" moment that made the naturalized hierarchies of film and television production visible to the outside public. As an anonymous SAG-AFTRA member told *Deadline* before the union went on strike, "We want a solid pathway. The studios countered with 'trust us' — we don't."[237]

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[234] Boots Riley, "'Sorry To Bother You' Director Boots Riley On WGA Strike, Struggle, Solidarity, Sacrifice & AI – Guest Column," *Deadline*, May 17, 2023, https://deadline.com/2023/05/wga-strike-boots-riley-guest-column-1235367232/.

[235] Zac Ntim, "Elizabeth Banks On Dangers Of AI Amid Writers Strike: 'We Have To Hold The Line As A Community' – Cannes," *Deadline*, May 16, 2023, https://deadline.com/2023/05/elizabeth-banks-ai-amid-writers-strike-dreamquil-cannes-market-1235367932/.

[236] Patten and Andreeva, "Negotiating Committee Member Adam Conover On Battle Over."

[237] Dominic Patten, "SAG-AFTRA Strike Could Hinge On AI; Deep Divisions Remain Between Actors & Studios In Final Hours Of Talks," *Deadline*, July 11, 2023, https://deadline.com/2023/07/actors-strike-ai-kim-kardashian-fran-drescher-contract-deadline-1235432142/.

The unions connected their past struggles with changing technology to the deterioration of labour practices in Hollywood film and television production caused by the 2010s streaming shift. In these statements, the unions blamed large technology companies rather than the studios and networks. For example, an official WGA statement said that companies like Netflix, Amazon and Apple used the streaming shift to create "a gig economy inside a union workforce."[238] The union stated that all companies, including traditional film studios and television networks, had to adapt to the changes caused by this technological disruption, including cutting wages and eliminating writers from production roles.[239] In this way, the unions saw AI as another unwanted disruption from technology companies that would worsen working conditions for writers and actors, which were already severely degraded in the decade prior. The "unwanted disruption" of AI echoed previous technological changes such as television, home media and online video streaming, which forced union members to strike to renegotiate payment and practices.

These points speak to the next major theme in the unions' discussion about AI during the strikes: the importance of dealing with it in the present. Following the idea of "actually-existing AI-capitalism," the unions viewed AI as dangerous in the present because of how it could be used to further exploit writers and actors while creating significant profits for executives. It is important to remember that the majority of WGA and SAG-AFTRA members make low to middle-class earnings from their work in the industry compared to the elevated salaries of the CEOs who make up the AMPTP. As Conover stated in *Deadline*, David Zaslov, the CEO of

[238] Peter White, Dominic Patten, and David Robb, "Hollywood Hit With Writers Strike After Talks With AMPTP Fail; Guild Slams Studios For 'Gig Economy' Mentality," *Deadline*, May 2, 2023, https://deadline.com/2023/05/writers-guild-strike-begins-1235340176/.
[239] Tom Tapp, "WGA Strike Explained: The Issues, The Stakes, Movies & TV Shows Affected — And How Long The 2023 Work Stoppage Might Last," *Deadline*, May 3, 2023, https://deadline.com/feature/hollywood-writers-strike-wga-explained-1235341146/.

Warner Bros. Discovery, "was paid $250m last year… That's about the same level as what 10,000 writers are asking him to pay us collectively."[240] All the protections the two unions historically gained regarding emerging technology, including in the 2023 strikes, occurred because union members fought for them, not because the AMPTP wanted to provide them.

Statements about the danger of AI in the present often invoked the word "now," which underscored the pressing need felt by union members to regulate the technology even though it was not yet fully developed or used on a wide scale. For example, David Simon, showrunner of *The Wire* and WGA negotiating committee member, told *Deadline*, "We either deal with AI right now or in three years," when the unions negotiate their next contract in 2026.[241] The unions were concerned about giving the studios, networks and streamers a three-year head start on developing generative AI tools and incorporating them into production processes without any regulation. As SAG-AFTRA president Fran Drescher stated, "With AI, things move very fast, and three months is equivalent to a year in how things change."[242] Not only is there a sense of urgency in this statement, but also a nod to the unions' history of playing catch-up for how they are compensated for technological changes to industrial practices.

Discussions about the present danger of AI were more noticeable for SAG-AFTRA than for the WGA. As the unions' chief negotiator Crabtree-Ireland said in an interview with *Deadline*, "Our proposals are more specific than the ones that you've seen in other contracts because our members are experiencing the use of AI right now… This is something that is currently happening."[243] This statement speaks to the priority felt by SAG-AFTRA to establish a

[240] Patten and Andreeva, "Negotiating Committee Member Adam Conover On Battle Over AI."
[241] Nellie Andreeva and Sean Piccoli, "WGA Negotiating Committee Member David Simon On Urgency To Tackle AI Now & Fight To Keep Term Employment," *Deadline*, May 15, 2023, https://deadline.com/2023/05/writers-strike-david-simon-ai-term-employment-gigbeconomy-wga-negotiations-1235367500/.
[242] Patten, "'This Was A Negotiation For The Future.'"
[243] Patten, "'This Was A Negotiation For The Future.'"

framework related to the use of AI tools, as it was already being used to digitally modify performances for actors at all levels. As noted previously, this issue most strongly affected background actors, the lowest level of performers in the union, who already encountered the use of digital body scans of their likenesses before the strike began. As actress and social activist Susan Sarandon stated at a Netflix picket, "If we don't deal with AI now, there's not going to be any turning back."[244]

Marginalized SAG-AFTRA members linked the present danger of AI to ideas of consent, agency and exploitation. Specifically, losing control over one's likeness served as a prescient reason for why AI could be harmful to actors in the present. For instance, background actor Jonathon Kaine told *The Hollywood Reporter* at a picket outside of the New York Amazon and HBO offices, "Our likeness is our lifeblood… to give it away, not knowing what it will be used for down the line is folly."[245] *How To Blow Up a Pipeline* writer and actor Ariela Barer stated at the same picket, "I want our likenesses to be protected, for us to have agency over our image, our body."[246] These statements are unsurprising given that major legacy franchise films such as 2016's *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* already re-used the likenesses of deceased actors who could not consent, thus prompting questions about who profited from their image and voice.

The unions framed AI as an even larger present danger to members working in other media industries such as video games and journalism. For example, regarding SAG-AFTRA's Interactive Media Agreement, an official union statement read, "A great deal of our members' work in this space is voiceover, and the capacity to cheaply and easily create convincing digital

[244] White and Huston, "At New York Actors Strike Picket Lines, Artificial Intelligence and Residuals Are Top of Mind."
[245] White and Huston, "At New York Actors Strike Picket Lines, Artificial Intelligence and Residuals Are Top of Mind."
[246] White and Huston, "At New York Actors Strike Picket Lines, Artificial Intelligence and Residuals Are Top of Mind."

replicas of performer voices is already here and widely available."[247] This statement acknowledged the present capacity of generative AI tools that could replicate the likenesses of stunt performers who provide the basis for the movement of video game characters.[248] The WGA spoke out during the Hollywood strikes against the use of AI tools in other areas of members' work, such as journalism. As the union said in an official press release, "This is the same fight our film, television, and streaming colleagues are waging against the [AMPTP]."[249]

Statements about the present threat of AI heightened during the strikes as reports emerged that many studios and streamers were hiring positions related to the technology. As noted in a July 2023 article in *The Hollywood Reporter*, major studios like Disney, Paramount and Warner Bros. Discovery laid off workers in droves earlier in the year but actively recruited for AI roles during the strikes.[250] Notable open job listings at this time included a Sony AI Ethics Engineer with a salary of $160,000, a Disney Generative AI R&D Imagineer with a salary of $180,000, a Prime Video Generative AI Senior Project Manager with a salary of $300,000 and a Netflix AI Product Manager with a whopping salary of $900,000.[251] Union members publicly criticized the latter job listing; as actor Rob Delaney told *Deadline*, "That amount of earnings could qualify thirty-five actors and their families for SAG-AFTRA health insurance."[252] This example clearly demonstrates the hypocrisy of AMPTP members who stated they did not have

[247] David Robb, "SAG-AFTRA Says Dual Strikes Against Video Games & Film/TV Industry 'Makes Sense' As Key Issues Of Wages & AI 'Mirror' Each Other," *Deadline*, September 6, 2023, https://deadline.com/2023/09/sag-aftra-says-dual-strikes-against-video-games-film-tv-industry-makes-sense-as-key-issues-of-wages-ai-mirror-each-other-1235538222/.
[248] Robb, "SAG-AFTRA Says Dual Strikes Against Video Games & Film/TV Industry 'Makes Sense'.
[249] Erik Pedersen, "WGA East 'Demands Immediate End' To AI-Generated Articles On G/O Media Sites," *Deadline*, July 12, 2023, https://deadline.com/2023/07/writers-guild-demands-no-ai-stories-g-o-media-sites-1235435700/.
[250] Weprin, "Studios Quietly Go on Hiring Spree for AI Specialist Jobs Amid Picket Line Anxiety."
[251] Weprin, "Studios Quietly Go on Hiring Spree for AI Specialist Jobs Amid Picket Line Anxiety."
[252] Armando Tinoco, "Netflix Backlash Over AI Product Manager Job Post That Offers Up To $900K Amid Actors & Writers Strikes Seeking AI Protections," *Deadline*, July 26, 2023, https://deadline.com/2023/07/netflix-backlash-ai-product-manager-job-post-1235448590/.

money to comply with the unions' demands while simultaneously paying six-figure salaries for AI-related jobs. The obvious interest in incorporating AI into Hollywood film and television production from the studios, networks and streamers underscores why the WGA and SAG-AFTRA saw it as an imperative issue to regulate in the present.

The final theme in union members' statements about AI during the 2023 strikes was its potential impact on the future of the industry. The most extreme rhetoric that emerged stated that AI would destroy Hollywood film and television production completely. The most vocal critic was Justine Bateman, an actor and filmmaker with a degree in computer science who served as SAG-AFTRA's AI advisor during the strikes. Bateman stated throughout the strikes that the inclusion of generative AI into production processes would "collapse the structure of [the] business."[253] During the tense ratification period of SAG-AFTRA's contract in November, Bateman criticized the union's inclusion of synthetic performers in the agreement, as she argued they would be used to replace human actors. In fact, she stated that SAG-AFTRA members should only vote to approve the contract "if they don't want to work anymore."[254] Bateman even went as far as to create an independent film certification program titled Credo 23, a stamp to be used to signify that no AI was used on a project.[255]

SAG-AFTRA's position countered Bateman's extremist rhetoric by taking a regulatory approach to AI to establish baseline protections for challenges members already experienced before the strike. In an interview with *Deadline*, the union's chief negotiator Crabtree-Ireland stated, "I recognize there are people there are people who just want AI to be banned… But that's not realistic. That's not something we can accomplish."[256] Crabtree-Ireland perceptively noted

[253] Thomas, "Justine Bateman Slams SAG-AFTRA Tentative Deal's AI Provisions."
[254] Thomas, "Justine Bateman Slams SAG-AFTRA Tentative Deal's AI Provisions."
[255] CREDO23, "About," *CREDO23* (blog), n.d., https://credo23.com/ABOUT.
[256] White, "SAG-AFTRA's Duncan Crabtree-Ireland Lauds Ratified Contract."

the SAG-AFTRA contract alone would not be enough to fully address the AI issue in Hollywood but would need to be complimented by both "legislative and public policy action."[257] Rather than try to outlaw the use of AI in film and television completely, SAG-AFTRA took a regulatory approach to it during the 2023 strike with hopes of building off the groundwork they established in future contract negotiations.

DISCOURSES OF HOLLYWOOD LABOUR

Union members' statements about AI during the 2023 strikes reveal many underlying discourses about Hollywood film and television production and the hierarchical power dynamics contained within it. Union members' statements about AI during the strikes reveal micro-level discourses about Hollywood labour practices and macro-level discourses about Hollywood as a labour structure. In this section, I analyze the underlying discourses made visible by union members' statements about AI during the strikes as they pertain to ideas of creativity, efficiency, ownership, hierarchy, power and culture.

To begin, statements about AI during the strikes reveal how creative labour is characterized by WGA and SAG-AFTRA members. Key to this characterization is the human element involved in creative work. Union members show how creativity is not necessarily an intrinsic talent, but a process. For writers and actors, the value of creative work does not reside solely in the finished product of a film or TV show, but rather in the unique human element involved in its production. Union members view creativity as a distinct labour skill that requires training and practice. Generative AI circumvents the human creative process to produce an immediate result, which is why the unions framed it as an imitation of their practiced labour skills. WGA and SAG-AFTRA members argue their creative labour is as much of an authorial

[257] White, "SAG-AFTRA's Duncan Crabtree-Ireland Lauds Ratified Contract."

voice in a film or TV show as a director, which is why their distinct human labour skill should be respected and not "replaced" by generative AI tools.

Union members' articulation of creativity as a uniquely human labour skill is tied to notions of efficiency. During the strikes, the AMPTP framed certain elements of the film and television production processes as inefficient. However, union members' statements reveal that certain elements of the creative process that seem inefficient to the AMPTP are, in fact, essential for workers. For example, both writers and actors often research elements of either the story they will write or the type of character they will portray. While this research may not even be used in the final product of a film or TV show, it is essential for union members to fully engage with their creative work. Once again, the labour process of Hollywood film and television production matters more to workers than the finished product. This is why union members viewed generative AI as a threat: because these tools could either diminish or remove these "inefficient" yet essential tasks.

At the same time, it is worth interrogating how the AMPTP characterized AI as an "efficient" tool. Implicit in the AMPTP's position on AI is the idea that technology will always produce a faster result, especially for WGA members. Still, perhaps it would take an experienced writer less time to create an original script than to rewrite source material generated by AI. Moreover, a TV writers' room of six human workers might truly be more efficient timewise than one worker plus AI. However, union members did little during the strikes to show how human creative workers might be more efficient in the production process than generative AI, which has many technical flaws as an emerging form of technology.

Related to notions of creative labour and efficiency at the micro-level of Hollywood labour practices is the idea of ownership. Writers and actors are work-for-hire and contract

workers whose labour products fall under the ownership of the studios and networks. Although writers and actors never fully "owned" the results of their labour, they used union negotiations throughout the decades to fight for proper crediting and compensation for their unique creative contributions in textual authorship and visual likeness. In this way, WGA and SAG-AFTRA members appear to claim an extent of ownership over their labour products even if they do not contractually own them. Hollywood writers and actors view themselves as part of both their labour processes and products. For instance, in TV writing, script ideas normally originate from personal experiences of members of the writers' room. Moreover, acting as a profession is rooted in the manipulation of the human body. In this way, the characters of films and TV shows become surrogates for workers themselves, which is why union members appear to claim ownership over these products even though they are contract workers. For actors especially, who might be known publicly for their portrayal of a certain character, this experience of labour via embodiment results in a feeling of ownership. This experience of embodiment/ownership demonstrates why union members had such a passionate and emotional response to the potential use of generative AI in the production process.

Building on these points, statements about AI made by union members during the strikes reveal underlying hierarchies about social identity in Hollywood. During the strike, marginalized WGA members argued that the use of generative AI to produce scripts would result in homogenous and biased works since these models are trained on stories that already exist. Over the past century of its existence as a profession, Hollywood screenwriting has been dominated by white, cisgender and heterosexual men. Since studios retained the right to experiment with generative AI tools on scripts they already owned, these models will be trained on work largely written by one type of person. For marginalized WGA members, this will reinforce the

hegemony of Hollywood film and television production by producing works with the same types of characters and stories that are viewed as "successful" in the industry. This hegemony will reinforce social biases in these scripts towards those who have historically been underrepresented in screenwriting as a profession, such as women, racialized people and LGBTQ+ people. This hegemony demonstrates how the valued audience for Hollywood film and television is currently framed around the baseline of a white cisgender heterosexual male viewer rather than the "diverse" audience it sought to court at the dawn of the streaming era. Statements about AI during the strikes made by marginalized WGA members reveal how inequality persists in Hollywood, as it appears that the studios, networks and streamers would rather use AI tools before hiring marginalized writers.

Statements from marginalized SAG-AFTRA members about AI complicate how acting in Hollywood is commonly characterized as a profession. Due to its connection to celebrity, acting is viewed by the public as an easy job rather than a technical craft or serious labour. The AMPTP has similarly devalued the contributions of actors as authorial voices in Hollywood film and television production. From a feminist perspective, Hollywood acting has historically been characterized as a form of "women's work" that is rooted in the body rather than the mind. After all, SAG-AFTRA is the only above-the-line Hollywood union where women make up a near equal portion of its membership. Acting as a labour process and technical skill is diminished by limited notions of Hollywood authorship, which characterizes directing and writing as more influential on the text of a film or television show. In this way, perhaps it should not be so surprising that the AMPTP already started to incorporate generative AI tools with production processes for SAG-AFTRA members, as their labour is viewed as less important and skilled; in other words, easier to augment or replace than work performed by WGA or DGA members.

Statements about AI made by marginalized SAG-AFTRA members during the strike demonstrate the continuing inequalities in acting. For instance, SAG-AFTRA's inclusion of digital replicas and synthetic performers in their final contract will likely have a greater impact on women and racialized actors. Hollywood has a long history of ageism towards women, with actresses specifically losing roles and opportunities for work as they get older. The union's inclusion of digital replicas might reinforce these inequalities by using younger digital replicas of actresses rather than hiring them as they age. Additionally, SAG-AFTRA's inclusion of synthetic performers may have devastating impacts on racialized actors. Hollywood film and television production has historically been a racist industry; it is not difficult to imagine that the AMPTP would first experiment with creating digital racialized actors before hiring human ones.

Finally, statements from WGA and SAG-AFTRA members about AI demonstrate existing hierarchies between and within the Hollywood unions. During the 2023 strikes, the struggles of both guilds were frequently linked together and the collective power of their dual work stoppages increased individual gains made. At the same time, these unions did little to speak out about how AI might impact below-the-line workers, who are viewed as "lesser" than the creative guilds. Writers and actors frequently played into arguments about the "worst-case" use of generative AI into their creative professions, such as replacing them as workers altogether. Perhaps this outsized approach during a moment of AI panic concealed how the technology may be integrated in much more mundane ways for below-the-line union members. While Hollywood writers and actors have tremendous labour struggles, at the end of the day they hold more cultural capital and organized labour leverage than the technical unions, who do not have the same type of elevated status or history of striking that the WGA and SAG-AFTRA do.

Additionally, it is worth interrogating why SAG-AFTRA prioritized creating regulations for background actors against generative AI during the 2023 strike when the union has historically done very little to protect these members. As Thomas notes, CGI has been used to create large crowds and replace stunt people since the 1990s, but this did not spark the same type of "industrial action" that generative AI did for background actors.[258] Therefore, perhaps SAG-AFTRA's position toward prioritizing the lowest class of its membership was not as noble as it might seem. It is worth considering if the union took a regulatory stance to establish a baseline to later protect higher-valued celebrity members. After all, as Bateman pointed out, the inclusion of digital replicas and synthetic performers in the final SAG-AFTRA contract might end up being used to harm background performers rather than protect them. Even if the union truly sought to protect its lowest class of members, it is worth questioning if the regulations they fought for may be used to further exploit SAG-AFTRA's most vulnerable members in the long run.

Shifting from micro-level discourses about labour practices, union members' statements about AI reveal macro-level discourses about Hollywood as labour structure as they relate to ideas of capital, technology, power and culture. I am naming this macro-level labour structure a "Hollywood techno-logic," which I argue is the dominant mode of rationale under which film and television production now occurs. This concept helps to understand union members' statements about AI during the 2023 strikes on a deeper level than micro-level labour practices. Union members' statements about AI during the strikes cannot be removed from the context of their near century-long distrust of the studios and networks. Clearly, WGA and SAG-AFTRA members were concerned about AI as it related to labour, but their larger fears speak to the

[258] Sarah Thomas, "'Somebodies' and 'Nobodies': Generative AI and Audiovisual Performer Labor," *The Velvet Light Trap* 94 (2024): 66.

deeply uneven hierarchies within the Hollywood film and television industry. The over 350 companies that make up the AMPTP wield tremendous power over the unions and impact nearly every aspect of how they do their jobs. Without situating the 2023 strikes in the historical context of the unions, they appear to be another example of the contemporary AI labour panic affecting several industries. Still, technology is central to Hollywood film and television; after all, it is what enabled the mediums to begin with. The WGA and SAG-AFTRA navigated technological changes to industry practices for decades and fought for tremendous gains to protect workers. Within this context, union members were not scared of AI per se, but rather of what the AMPTP would do with it.

There has been a significant shift in AMPTP membership in the last decade, as the rise of streaming led to the inclusion of large technology companies such as Netflix, Amazon and Apple within the organization. This shift represents a turn towards what I am calling Hollywood techno-logic: the displacement of traditional film studios and television networks by large technology companies. While Netflix is primarily oriented towards the distribution of films and TV shows, Amazon and Apple use film and television as additional value to other products and services to obtain and keep customers. I want to put forward that these technology companies have a fundamentally different view towards the production of Hollywood film and television than the legacy studios and networks do, which affected how WGA and SAG-AFTRA saw the AI issue during the 2023 strikes.

The main difference is that these companies do not have the same history of negotiating with unionized workers to produce films and television. While studios and networks were forced to negotiate with organized unions for labour gains and protections in the last century, technology companies do not share this same history. While capitalist logic is responsible for

most decisions in Hollywood, the logic of big technology companies is perhaps rooted even more deeply in the rationale of the exploitation of labour in the pursuit of profit, namely in a focus on efficiency. This did not impact Hollywood production until the streaming shift in the 2010s, when large technology companies began to produce the same product as the legacy studios and networks for the first time and became major industry competitors. While corporate conglomeration in the 1980s created a major shift in media ownership and production, I argue the rise of technology companies as major players in the 2010s created an even more dramatic change on Hollywood as a labour structure, which is evidenced by the 2023 dual strikes.

For the past century of Hollywood film and television production, guild members in the WGA and SAG-AFTRA felt like their labour could not be automated, as their unique contribution as workers was their human creativity, which they trained and practiced as a distinct labour skill. Under Hollywood techno-logic, where technology companies have set the terms for film and television production instead of the legacy studios and networks, union members *do* believe that they could be replaced by generative AI, as efficiency of production is more important than the quality of the work produced. In this way, large technology companies do not value the creative contributions of artist-workers in the same way the legacy studios and networks did. While Louis B. Mayer was not a particularly kind person to writers or actors, he at least seemed to truly care about film as an art form. The same cannot be said for Jeff Bezos or Tim Cook, which represents a dramatic shift in the mindset of those who are producing films and television. As a result of the streaming shift, Hollywood above-the-line workers are no longer treated like writers and actors. Rather, they are treated with the same logic as Amazon warehouse workers, with an emphasis on efficiency over everything else.

The idea of Hollywood techno-logic can be extended to the cultural devaluation of traditional film and television in the 2020s, a cultural change created by technology companies. By changing the distribution model from physical products to streaming subscriptions, Netflix created a culture where films and TV shows are no longer as valuable as they were previously due to their constant and inexpensive access. The shrinking of the theatrical window by streamers like Amazon and Apple trained audiences to wait until films became "free" via their subscriptions rather than going to the movie theatre. This entire removal of theatrical releases for certain films altogether removed an important source of income for writers and actors from residuals created by box office sales. Moreover, the logic of technology companies shifted the notion of film and TV shows as artistic mediums to just another form of "content." Due to the vast amount of audiovisual content available, from social media to podcasts to livestreams, these companies do not view writing and acting as creative skills or even as entertainment; rather, they are just another type of content used to hold on to subscribers.

The boom and bust of 2010s prestige streaming television shows how these companies devalued their own products. This is why union members were so scared about the integration of generative AI into Hollywood film and television during the 2023 strikes: because technology companies like Netflix and Amazon no longer seem to care uniformly about the quality of the films and TV shows they produce or the sustainability of Hollywood as an industry. As such, if AI-generated content is worse than what human workers can create, it may not actually matter to these companies. Audiences also now consume multiple forms of content at the same time, such as looking at their smartphones while watching a TV show at home or even in a movie theatre, a practice that streamers like Netflix tailor their entertainment towards. The characterization of films and television as "second screen" entertainment is a new evolution in cinema history and

showcases the declining cultural value of Hollywood art forms, which is rooted in the rise of the macro-level techno-logic caused by the streaming shift. Given this, it becomes clearer as to why writers and actors legitimately felt that they could be replaced by generative AI during the 2023 Hollywood strikes.

CONCLUSION

Union members' statements about AI during the strikes reveal many underlying discourses about the relationship between labour, creativity and power in contemporary Hollywood film and television production. In particular, the 2023 strikes highlight debates about progress. While progress in Hollywood is often framed in technological and material terms, the WGA and SAG-AFTRA strikes show how unions continue to be an important tool for ensuring the progress of material conditions for workers by improving labour conditions. I conclude this chapter with ideas about how WGA and SAG-AFTRA should approach the AI issue in future negotiations to better serve their members and continue labour progress in Hollywood film and television production.

Overall, union members need to be strategic about how they frame AI in public forums. Rather than speaking about AI in panicked terms, WGA and SAG-AFTRA members should take more specific positions about how it might be used by the AMPTP. These positions could be improved with a greater technical understanding of how machine learning systems work and how they have already been incorporated into film and television production. With a better understanding of what AI is, arguments against its use in production practices will be more specific than an overblown fear of the end of Hollywood. After all, union members historically framed every technology that shifted labour practices, from television to home video to streaming, as an end to the industry altogether, even though time proved this to be untrue. In this

way, the unions need to shift their arguments from a generalized AI panic to how it might specifically be used by the studios, networks and streamers to undercut labour practices. While certain union members articulated these examples in the press during the 2023 strikes, I believe these statements need to be even clearer in future negotiations and labour actions to place the blame where it belongs: on the greed of the AMPTP members corporations and large technology companies, rather than on AI itself.

The WGA and SAG-AFTRA should strengthen their arguments about AI in and outside of future contract negotiations to protect the most vulnerable members of Hollywood film and television production. For example, in future bargaining, the WGA would be well served to demonstrate how human writers might truly be more efficient than generative AI in terms of time and quality. Both the WGA and SAG-AFTRA need to pursue paths guaranteeing further protections for union members at both the legal and policy levels, as the unions' contracts can only do so much without other avenues of AI regulation. Union members need to publicly articulate how the incorporation of AI in Hollywood will impact marginalized writers and actors the most, particularly those whose words carry more weight in the industry and with the public, such as those with hyphenate producer-director roles or celebrity status. Finally, the WGA and SAG-AFTRA should engage in increased inter-union solidarity and use their unique position as creative cultural workers to show how Hollywood's below-the-line unions face the threat of AI, which has not received the same amount of public attention but will have a strong impact on production practices for all workers in the industry.

CONCLUSION

Hollywood After the 2023 Strikes

Unionized labour in Hollywood endured for the last century despite numerous struggles and setbacks. Writers and actors consistently organized together to protect their careers and creative practices within a hierarchical capitalist structure. WGA and SAG-AFTRA strikes, whether in the 1960s, the 1980s, the 2000s or the 2020s, reveal the enduring importance of unions to protect workers and allow members to negotiate together for what they want and need. This thesis uniquely contributes to research about Hollywood unions in several ways. By taking the long view of nearly a century of organized labour, this project details the evolution of the WGA and SAG-AFTRA in conversation with each other when they have largely been separated. A historical approach demonstrates how the two unions previously approached emergent technology during past strikes to make gains for their membership. A hybrid theoretical approach focusing on feminist production studies shows how marginalized union members continue to face precarity into the 2020s. The combination of these frameworks and methodology reveals how technological shifts in the very recent past dramatically changed the industry, as Hollywood techno-logic emerged as the dominant rationale under which film and television now occurs.

At the same time, it is crucial to note that the Hollywood unions are an outlier in North American labour. Most industries, including other media workers, do not have the same elevated cultural status or history of unionized protections as writers and actors do. While the WGA and SAG-AFTRA created enforceable regulations for the use of AI in Hollywood film and television production, it may be a temporary stopgap. Since 2023, the mainstreaming of AI tools has had a significant impact on a variety of labour fields, but there are uneven adoptions, expectations and

emotions surrounding use of the technology. A 2025 study by Gözde Dilara Can and Ebru Tolay found that workers who regularly use AI at their jobs most often felt astonishment, acceptance and happiness, but also anxiety, tension and fear while using it. As one study participant stated, "Although the first feeling is scary, over time, you get away from that feeling and see it as a necessity."[259] Even though workers described the benefits of using AI to save time, increase efficiency and reduce mundane tasks, they described negatives such as reduced employment, increased laziness and replication of social biases. While study participants stated that using AI at work "allow[ed] people to utilize their creativity by taking over routine tasks," what might this mean for industries such as film and television production where creativity *is* the routine labour task?[260] The remainder of this conclusion details developments in labour and AI in Hollywood after the WGA and SAG-AFTRA strikes and ends with recommendations for future research in this area.

Although the 2023 Hollywood strikes ended, union members' concerns about their work did not. While the strikes undoubtedly made valuable gains for writers and actors, in 2024 some union members argued that certain gains made during the strikes did not work as they anticipated. For instance, while the WGA fought for minimum staffing requirements to fight the use of mini rooms, certain companies pulled the use of writers' rooms altogether and instead asked showrunners to write all episodes by themselves.[261] Lower-level SAG-AFTRA members

[259] Gözde Dilara Can and Ebru Tolay, "Examining employees' emotions towards artificial intelligence (AI): A qualitative research," *Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi* 27, no. 1 (2025), 258.
[260] Can and Tolay, "Examining employees' emotions towards artificial intelligence," 267.
[261] Katie Kilkenny, "Would You Do It Again? A Year After Strikes, Hollywood Reckons With the Aftermath," *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 19, 2024, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/actors-writers-strikes-one-year-later-1235950418/.

stated the streaming residual bonus did not provide significant compensation and they still faced struggles for consenting to digital replicas of their likeness.[262]

Overall, union members state the strikes accelerated an already-existing moment of "contraction" in Hollywood.[263] While production increased after the pandemic shutdowns, there was not the same boom in production after the 2023 strikes ended.[264] Instead, fewer jobs were available industry-wide, as studios, networks and streamers chose to reduce the number of films and television shows they greenlit. WGA members felt this downsizing in particular, especially writers at the beginning and middle stages of their careers. As non-binary writer Taylor Orci told *NPR* in 2024, "It's tough right now to find work, especially if you didn't have a job before."[265] Even veteran screenwriters noticed this change. For example, Jon Sherman, a TV writer and producer for over three decades who worked on *Frasier*, told *NPR* in 2024 that he had not held a writing job in three years, the first time in his career he "had a real long layoff."[266] While the WGA made significant gains with increased wages, many writers did not find jobs at all after the strike ended. As TV writer John Dale told *The Guardian* in 2025, "[The new WGA] contract is great for whoever can get it but those people are so few."[267]

Other Hollywood unions felt the impact of AI on their labour and bargained with the AMPTP for greater protections. In July 2024, IATSE negotiated a new contract for below-the-line workers without going on strike. The union's updated contract included wage increases,

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[262] Kilkenny, "Would You Do It Again?"
[263] Kilkenny, "Would You Do It Again?"
[264] K. J. Yossman, "How Hollywood's Double Strike Is Still Reverberating Across the Pond: Scheduling Chaos, Less Content and More Willingness to Strike," *Variety*, February 7, 2024, https://variety.com/2024/film/global/hollywood-strikes-affecting-uk-scheduling-funding-1235894298/.
[265] Mandalit del Barco, "This Time Last Year, Hollywood Writers Were on Strike. Now, Many Can't Find Work," *NPR*, June 25, 2024, https://www.npr.org/2024/06/25/nx-s1-5017892/hollywood-writers-strike-anniversary-jobs-layoffs.
[266] del Barco, "This Time Last Year."
[267] David Smith, "'It's a Gut Punch': How the California Wildfires Affected Film and TV Workers," *The Guardian*, February 8, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2025/feb/08/california-wildfires-tv-and-film-workers.

streaming residuals and overtime protections. Additionally, the new contract guaranteed severance pay and retraining for workers made redundant by AI and regular meetings with the AMPTP about their use of the technology.[268] Still, many IATSE workers felt these gains were not enough to protect their labour. For example, the Animation Guild separately bargained with the AMPTP from August to November 2024, as they felt the new IATSE contract was insufficient to protect their creative labour from the threat of generative AI. While the guild gained pay increases and limited minimum staffing requirements, they did not achieve any protections against AI. For instance, their updated contract states that it is up to individual workers if they want to work on projects that utilize the technology or not.[269] As well, in July 2024, SAG-AFTRA members went on strike against video game companies, with negotiations hinging on the use of generative AI for voiceover and motion capture performances, a work stoppage which lasted until June 2025.[270]

Industry turmoil continued into 2025. The Hollywood wildfires in January had a devastating impact on workers; IATSE stated that approximately 8000 union members lived in evacuation zones and more than 300 lost their homes.[271] Following the strikes, filming productions increasingly moved away from Hollywood to locations in Hungary, the Czech Republic and Germany due to tax incentives and cheaper labour. While these "runaway productions" have existed for decades, Hollywood workers felt the change more significantly

[268] Carolyn Giardina and Maddaus Gene, "IATSE Ratifies New Three-Year Deal, Despite AI Worries," *Variety*, July 18, 2024, https://variety.com/2024/film/news/iatse-ratifies-contract-amptp-1236068940/.
[269] Gene Maddaus, "Animation Guild Faces Discontent on Artificial Intelligence Terms in New Contract," *Variety*, December 4, 2024, https://variety.com/2024/biz/news/animation-guild-artificial-intelligence-amptp-contract-1236193937/.
[270] Jennifer Maas, "Video Game Companies Release Final Offer to SAG-AFTRA Addressing AI Demands Amid 9-Month Strike (EXCLUSIVE)," *Variety*, May 5, 2025, https://variety.com/2025/gaming/news/video-game-actors-strike-saga-aftra-final-offer-1236387081/.
[271] Smith, "'It's a Gut Punch.'"

post-strikes. As Aaron Ryder, producer of *Memento*, *Donnie Darko* and *Arrival*, told The New York Times in 2025, "You can walk into the bar in the lobby in the Four Seasons [in Hungary] and probably see more colleagues… than you can at the Four Seasons in L.A."[272] In February 2025, Netflix, which previously shifted filming productions from Hollywood to New Jersey and New Mexico, announced they would create a new filming hub in Mexico.[273] As Michael F. Miller Jr., the vice president of IATSE, stated, "We are allowing California to become to the entertainment industry what Detroit has become to the auto industry."[274] Hollywood workers, who faced five years of industry turmoil from the pandemic to the strikes to the wildfires, felt like they made enormous sacrifices for their careers, only to continue experiencing precarious labour conditions.

From 2024 to 2025, generative AI integrated into Hollywood film and television production more frequently, but a greater audience awareness of the technology often led to public outcry. One of the first major controversies about the use of generative AI occurred in March 2024, when the directors of the horror film *Late Night With the Devil* confirmed they "experimented with AI for three still images" used as interstitials in the film.[275] This confirmation created a backlash with audiences on social film cataloging website Letterboxd, who gave the film low star ratings and poor reviews due to the use of generative AI. Controversy continued in April, when A24 used AI-generated posters to market the release of Alex Garland's dystopian film *Civil War*. As one commentator wrote on A24's Instagram in response to the

[272] Matt Stevens and Nicole Sperling, "There's a Feeling We're Not in Hollywood Anymore," *The New York Times*, April 19, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/19/movies/hollywood-filming-overseas.html.
[273] Stevens and Angeles, "There's a Feeling."
[274] Stevens and Angeles, "There's a Feeling."
[275] William Earl, "'Late Night With the Devil' Directors Explain Using AI Art in the Film, Say They 'Experimented' With Three Images Only (EXCLUSIVE)," *Variety*, March 21, 2024, https://variety.com/2024/film/news/late-night-with-the-devil-ai-images-clarification-1235947599/.

posters, "You know DAMN well how the film community feels about the use of AI Generated content… Late Night With the Devil was more than enough to make that transparently clear to everyone: WE DO NOT WANT THIS."[276] By the end of 2024, certain directors even included statements about the technology in the credits of their films, seemingly to either make a political statement or to avoid potential audience controversy. For example, in November, co-directors Bryan Woods and Scott Beck included the phrase "No generative AI was used in the making of this film" in the end credits of their horror movie *Heretic*.[277]

The biggest AI controversy occurred during the lead-up to the 2025 Academy Awards in relation to one film: Brady Corbet's *The Brutalist*, a 215-minute epic about a fictional Hungarian architect named László Tóth. In January, the film's editor Dávid Jancsó revealed he used the AI tool Respeecher to clean up a small amount of Hungarian dialogue by leads Felicity Jones and Adrien Brody, who later won the Best Actor Oscar for his performance. As Jancsó stated, "You can do this in ProTools yourself, but we had so much dialogue in Hungarian that we really needed to speed up the process otherwise we'd still be in post."[278] Further controversy emerged about generative AI being used for images at the end of the film, although director Corbet confirmed that these were "intentionally designed to look like poor digital renderings circa 1980."[279] Arguably, *The Brutalist* attracted significant public outcry for several reasons. First, the film was a significant awards contender with ten Oscar nominations; arguably, the blowback

[276] James Hibberd, "A24's New AI-Generated 'Civil War' Ads Generate Controversy," *The Hollywood Reporter*, April 17, 2024, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/a24-civil-war-posters-controversy-1235876340/.
[277] "'Heretic' Directors Slam AI: 'It Might Kill Us All,'" accessed May 9, 2025, https://variety.com/2024/film/news/heretic-directors-slam-ai-end-credits-1236198415/.
[278] Scott Roxborough, "'The Brutalist' Director Brady Corbet Responds to AI Backlash," *The Hollywood Reporter*, January 20, 2025, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/the-brutalist-ai-backlash-adrien-brody-1236113015/.
[279] Roxborough, "'The Brutalist' Director Brady Corbet Responds."

about AI doubled as a smear campaign against it in the race. Additionally, the film was shot in VistaVision, a format from the 1950s, and told the story of an artist's life, two features which felt contradictory to the incorporation of generative AI for many viewers.

Following this controversy, in February 2025 the Academy Awards announced that all films submitted to the awards in the future must have a "mandatory" disclosure about AI use.[280] It is worthwhile to consider why films such as *Late Night With the Devil* and *The Brutalist* were subjected to such intense public scrutiny for their incorporation of generative AI while other films released in 2024 were not. For example, the AI tool Revize, used for facial and body replacement and augmentation, was used in small segments for *Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga*, *Deadpool & Wolverine* and *Sonic the Hedgehog 3*. Notably, it was used in the Bob Dylan biopic and Best Picture nominee *A Complete Unknown* to make a stunt motorcycle driver resemble lead actor Timothée Chalamet in three shots, although this created virtually no public backlash.[281] As well, CopyCat, a machine-learning model, created the blue eyes of hundreds of Fremen actors in *Dune: Part Two*, another Best Picture nominee.[282] Still, there was no public discussion of this, and these films were largely praised by critics and audiences alike.

It seems as though the uneven audience response to the incorporation of generative AI into Hollywood film and television would make the studios, networks and streamers weary of potential backlash and controversy. Still, Netflix, which made its name on the company's signature machine-learning algorithm for personalized recommendations, is fully embracing the technology. During a first-quarter earnings call in April 2025, Netflix CEO Ted Sarandos stated

[280] Carolyn Giardina, "Oscars Consider Requiring Films to Disclose AI Use After 'The Brutalist' and 'Emilia Pérez' Controversies," *Variety*, February 7, 2025, https://variety.com/2025/artisans/news/oscars-consider-requiring-films-disclose-ai-use-brutalist-1236299063/.
[281] Giardina, "Oscars Consider Requiring Films."
[282] Giardina, "Oscars Consider Requiring Films."

that the company would use AI not only to make productions "50% cheaper" but "10% better."[283] Sarandos spoke about how the technology is primarily incorporated into current Netflix productions in pre-production and post-production processes, notably for visual effects. In May 2025, the company partnered with OpenAI on their search function to enable users to ask "for specific recommendations using conversational language."[284] Netflix's embrace of AI at the levels of production and distribution demonstrates an even further shift towards a Hollywood techno-logic that has so far only worsened industry conditions for workers.

Given this, there are many avenues for further research about the 2023 Hollywood strikes and the industrial progressions that followed them. First, I recommend more research about how the 2023 strikes specifically impacted below-the-line union members in IATSE and the union's contract renegotiations in 2024. I also recommend interviews with Hollywood workers in both above and below-the-line unions who left the business due to the instability of the last five years to provide vital insight into the contemporary precarity of the industry. As well, further studies are needed about the 2024-2025 SAG-AFTRA video game strike and why it did not receive as much public attention as the union's 2023 film and television strike. More attention is required towards how generative AI is being incorporated most heavily into pre-production and post-production practices in Hollywood. Finally, I invite studies about audience response to the incorporation of generative AI in Hollywood film and television, which will likely significantly impact the industry's use and disclosure of the technology.

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[283] Dade Hayes, "Ted Sarandos Responds To James Cameron's Vision Of AI Making Movies Cheaper: 'There's An Even Bigger Opportunity To Make Movies 10% Better,'" *Deadline*, April 17, 2025, https://deadline.com/2025/04/ted-sarandos-netflix-james-cameron-ai-movies-better-cheaper-1236371326/.
[284] Alex Weprin, "Netflix Plans Major Overhaul of Homepage Design, OpenAI-Powered Search and TikTok-Style Vertical Feeds," *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 7, 2025, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/new-netflix-homescreen-coming-soon-vertical-video-openai-1236208893/.

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