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for stream
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return {"du

from dataclasses
from typing import

@dataclass
class Transform:
    position: Tuple
    rotation: Tuple
    scale: Tuple

@dataclass
class Material:
    name: str
    color: Tuple
    shininess: float

@dataclass
class Object3D:
    name: str
    mesh: str
    transform: Transform
    material: Material
    children: List[Object3D]

    def add_child(self, child: Object3D):
        self.children.append(child)

@dataclass
class Scene:
    name: str
    obj: List[Object3D]
```

SYNTHETIC SINCERITY

In recent work, the filmmaker Marc Isaacs has pushed at the boundary between documentary and fiction. His new film wonders what happens to that boundary when AI can manufacture people. Dominic Lees spoke to him

MARC ISAACS, UK

Marc Isaacs is one of the most innovative British documentary filmmakers of the 21st century. From his observational short *Lift* (2001) to the reflexive *The Filmmaker's House* (2020), his oeuvre is characterised by its humane exploration of ordinary people, always from a characteristically wry and often comic perspective. With *Synthetic Sincerity*, Isaacs' interest in blurring the boundaries of nonfiction spurs a less-than-straight documentary reflecting on the possibilities and limitations of AI. His story begins with a very stern AI avatar (trained on Ilinca Manolache, star of Radu Jude's *Do Not Expect Too Much from the End of the World*, 2023) who invites Isaacs to come and see the lab where she was created. Isaacs goes to the

convincingly low-rent 'University of Southern England' where he is persuaded to lend a research team footage of documentary interviews from his past films, with the ultimate goal of training an AI to express human emotions, in some cases even better than humans can.

In *Synthetic Sincerity*, we revisit the compassionate documentary portraits of earlier Isaacs films: the close-ups are riveting, people baring their souls and anxieties to the filmmaker. Then he elides these genuine individuals with the naturalistic performances of his actors (so convincing that audiences have believed them to be documentary subjects) and with the AI avatar. Isaacs deliberately provokes confusion: what is real

in his film, what is fictitious? Which shots are registered by the camera, which AI-generated? What is performance and what is observed reality? The title makes us think about filmmaking itself – how can a documentarian create an authentic portrayal of the world in an era when AI distorts how we perceive our reality?

DOMINIC LEES: Do you think sci-fi movies have prepared your audience for the contemporary world that you're depicting in *Synthetic Sincerity*?

MARC ISAACS: Years ago when we watched a sci-fi film, it was with that consciousness of, like, "Oh, that's someone's projected, imagined future." But now... take Trump's

'Gaza Riviera' images created by AI, floating around on social media. It's out there on all our phones and it's preparing us for something that we can totally imagine.

How much did you discuss sci-fi with screenwriter Adam Ganz in the development of *Synthetic Sincerity*?

Not a massive amount. I'm not a great sci-fi fan; it's so far removed from what I usually do, making documentary work. I guess in our subconscious, we were aware of how it may have been depicted before. We were very conscious to avoid a dystopian universe. I don't consider that I've made an AI film, you know: I've made a film that's reflecting on AI.



'If it's the Wild West and everything's questionable, how does one document things? We used to believe in photography – that the image would force change and rally people. We're certainly losing that if everyone can dispute reality all of the time. But there's a power to so-called documentary images that still holds, even in 2026. That's what I wanted to play with'



OPPOSITE AND ABOVE Characters in *Synthetic Sincerity* in various stages of mediation

Could you tell us how you created the avatar?

The AI avatar began after I discovered this website called Synthesia. I signed up to it and started to create my avatar, but it got really boring because it didn't have the range we were looking for. I thought it would be really interesting to ask Ilinca [Manolache if she'd be up for me filming some data of her so I could put her through the AI and see how that gives more range to the character. So I got her to spout nonsense – "The rain in Spain stays mainly on the plain" – to get angry, you know, the range of emotions, so I could put her through the system and control what comes out. Most actors are terrified of

this, for obvious reasons. Ilinca isn't, she was really up for it.

DL: So from that point on, instead of the familiar actor-director collaboration on a character, it was between you and an AI.

MI: Whatever you would type, it would pick up on the expressions. So if I was typing, "Hello, Marc, how are you today?", because that's a friendly expression her AI face would reflect that. I like the fact the character is a hybrid of an actress playing an avatar: it's sort of her and not her. But it's frustrating: you could type in something and it's like, "Oh great, that works"; or it's "I wish she'd smile at that point." You can't control it.

DL: So through refining your prompts, you can nuance the performance of the AI avatar?

MI: Yeah, to a point, but I think it's always quite uncontrollable. If I developed my own database and system I probably could have controlled it much more, but that would be very expensive.

DL: *Synthetic Sincerity* enjoys playing with the audience's perception of what's real and unreal.

MI: Because of the power of naturalistic, documentary-like images, an audience automatically goes to this place of believing, which I find fascinating. People can't stop themselves thinking that when they see something that isn't high production value, with real people in it, that it's real. I've made a couple of films before where I'm really playing around with notions of documentary truth. In *The Filmmaker's House*, which was set in my own home, I pull the rug from under the audience's feet and they realise that everything they've been watching has been set up. In *This Blessed Plot* [2023], which I made after that, I signposted things much more clearly, so you see the characters getting ready for a performance in a film, which I call a 'documentary fiction film pageant'. And in this film, I was thinking less consciously about manipulating the audience in that way or tricking them.

DL: Today's documentary filmmakers know that the audience is 'AI aware'. For your viewers, reality itself is questionable...

MI: This is what I'm grappling with in my recent films: what does it mean to be a documentary or nonfiction filmmaker? If it's the Wild West and everything's questionable, how does one document things? We used to believe in photography, we believed that the image would have an effect, to force change and to rally people. I think we're certainly losing that if everyone can dispute reality all of the time. There's a power to so-called documentary images that still holds, even in 2026, despite everything that's going on. I think that's what I wanted to play with in this film. And maybe I've come to the conclusion now that the truth really is in the eyes of the beholder.

DL: Your films are often very funny and you use comedy in *Synthetic Sincerity*, too.

MI: I was really keen to find the humanity, and I think when you find the humanity, you find the humour. It'd be dangerous if we lost that ability to laugh at ourselves, however dark the world is.

 *Synthetic Sincerity* is in UK cinemas from 17 July, and is reviewed on page 127

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