

Independence, Innovation, Impact: AI and the Future of Storytelling at UCLA TFT

Dean Celine Welcome and Closing Comments for AI and Storytelling Summit

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Dean Celine Parreñas Shimizu, M.F.A., Ph.D.

Good afternoon. As Dean of UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television, I welcome you to the home where dream fantasies were and are made—the films and TV that shape the globe, that touch intimately the hearts of people everywhere and that structure our psychic life.

The university has always been the site of play, experimentation, inquiry. Since the 11th century, the classroom is the vessel from which we drink knowledge to ensure the abundance of our lives. This place is where people train their minds, create relations and conditions of creativity, where we grapple deeply with ideas, come up with our own thinking, to lead as citizens and to lead useful lives.

At UCLA TFT, our historic banner: every student makes a project to craft their independent vision; to innovate so we experience art like never before and to make impact to improve the world. This is why this AI Summit takes place here. The university is where knowledge is created and the next generations learn to inquire and influence.

I come to representation from the soft power of American colonialism through Hollywood. I know its harms. Like people of color all over the world at the dawn of any technology, we hold fascination and a wish to engage. From the birth of cinema linked to white supremacy and the rebirth of the KKK in *BIRTH OF A NATION* (1910), people of color have always made counter cinemas and birthed movements grounded in cinema as technology of resistance. Diverse voices matter more than ever. In the UC, it is a value we defend because while talent is universal, opportunity is not. This informs our inquiry always, including today.

Before we begin, I acknowledge that today, January 30th, 2026, many Americans are participating in the general strike against ICE's violent actions. We hold space for civic expression. Our work as storytellers is deeply connected to the movements and moments that shape our world. Hence our decision to move forward with this Summit. UCLA TFT's mission is to empower diverse artists, scholars, and visionaries to drive meaningful change.

In the previous hour with our students' presentations, we saw how we innovate with independent voices for impact as mentored by faculty. My favorite place on earth is the classroom for that multigenerational mentorship. I recognize with admiration the extraordinary student artists here today: our animators, our hybrid fiction and documentary makers, our theater artists pushing every boundary. Please visit MFA filmmaker Bora's stunning installation in our 1470 VR/AR Lab. See for yourself why UCLA TFT is where courage, genius, and the future of art resides with thanks to the faculty—many of whom are here: Steve Anderson, Shelleen Green, Gina Kim, Lianne Helfon, George Huang, Sean Metzger, Chair of FTVDM Fabian Wagmister, and more. From across campus, welcome to leaders and thinkers Erin Sanders O'Leary, Lionel Popkin, Wendy Slusser, and Rajeev Jain.

What you'll witness today is artist-led innovation in thought-provoking, electrifying form. Luminaries on stage will be joined by audience members Bianca Nepales who will summarize the themes in the closing with me, TFT Executive Board Member Ken Hertz who is working with us on AI with the Ken Robinson Foundation, and Rick Carter, my friend and mentor who experiments with AI relentlessly, are here too so we can build something right now, in this room, all together. We are not livestreaming today. This is a time to be candid and engage with each other. Since I am a professor and this is a classroom, I am giving you homework to take notes, reflect, then write to process and produce—measure how you will catapult and catalyze your learning because of today.

We are in a classroom at the Bridges Theater today. Deep preparation from our presenters, deep listening in this theater, then homework—to process and create in new ways informed by today—that is the assignment for today.

This is why the university leads in AI, especially UC, where we are the home of its innovation. Our faculty engage students in practice, in history, in theory, in

Critical AI—shout out to our CMS program—who ask not just "how does this work?" but "why are we doing this? What does this mean for humanity? For justice? For the stories about who we are?"

This is our inheritance from the LA Rebellion at TFT: artists who seized the means of production and told stories the industry said couldn't be told. We're doing that again, right now, with AI and new technologies. The LA Rebellion, as ever, is our roadmap for independence, innovation and impact that is UCLA TFT in the face of AI.

As UC President JB Milliken said yesterday at the Commonwealth Club, UC wants to lead on how AI affects teaching, research, and the classroom experience—not just watch. We cannot shut it down. The question is how to teach, test, and ensure rich experiences that force students to grapple deeply with issues, come up with their own ideas. How to balance AI with academic integrity. How to be a citizen in the age of AI. How to lead a useful, happy life.

The arts matter here—desperately, deeply. Because AI is not just a technical question. It's a question of imagination, of ethics, of whose dreams get encoded into our future. The university is where we experiment freely, where we fail, where we ask uncomfortable questions. Where talent is universal but we work to make opportunity universal too. This is the site where we lead—where we build technology in service of human creativity, not the other way around.

Today is a distinct opportunity for you to seize. We have AI researchers in this room. Industry leaders. Artists and theorists and dreamers. I especially acknowledge our supporters who believe in this vision, including our friends at AMD and all our partners investing in the future of creative technology including Qualcomm and Amazon.

Here's my call to action: let's meet each other and explore this new technology changing the ground of our human creativity. Harness aggressive friendliness. Connect, collaborate, consult.

This is just the beginning. What's coming next: a second summit focused on live and location-based arts and entertainment, on or around May 8th. Mark your calendars.

Let us make visible the great people who made today happen. When we participated in the AI summit at Anderson in the Fall, I let Chris Mattman know TFT is going to touch AI as only we can: via storytelling. My deep gratitude to Jeff Burke, our Associate Dean for Research and Creative Technology and Chair and Professor of the Theater Department, who enacted that promise in his vision to actualize this summit with his thorough and visionary leadership. We are today in the genius of Jeff Burke! I warmly thank Ben Relles and Chris Mattman for their partnership in concocting our program and bringing great people in conversation together, and heartily acknowledge Devon Baur, our TFT AI Fellow and recent TAPS PhD graduate, for her brilliant curatorial work. She will emcee today and keep us oriented, on time.

And now, it is my great pleasure to introduce Ben Relles.

Conclusion

What an amazing panel to close our day! Fred and David in this last panel asked us how AI helps us answer pressing questions of the present: the future of human creativity in this historic age of AI in questions like: What is an unmakeable film? What is the consent of the audience when using AI to know inserts and changed faces? The context of blood-cleansing targeting LGBTQ+ people in Chechnya where a genocide of chasing LGBTQ+ peoples certainly makes clear how an unmakeable film now has to be one where films must be made. This calls up the work of Saidiya Hartman whose "critical fabulation" addresses how the enslaved did not have the freedom to record their own experiences and narrate their own stories.

I am facing this too, as a refugee, where I have no pictures of my childhood and the places I remember are all gone and changed. How does one show a gone place that exists only in memory? It reminds me of the theme of agency, authorship and autonomy that Paris McCoy discusses in her presentation today.

If I use AI, do I lose audience trust? How about the training of AI on a colonial perspective about places I remember from my subject position? How does AI not have the ability to express the grief of the loss of images, the fear of the loss of memory?

How does AI make our representation better under these conditions? How can AI help us tell our stories?

Students' works inspired so much and drew admiration for their play, experimentation in ways that beg: what else do they need for their artistry? For their impact, for the precision of their authorship?

How can industries help our students find their way in the shifting landscape?

Their work reminds us that platforms are motivated by creative need and aspirations of the next generations

And as a porn scholar, I am also asking where is the porn if the studies show that technology is and has been motivated by advancing the sight and experience of porn?

Today, we are also being asked to see how new creative forms require new economic models

Love how Sean Metzger asked why now, and why we need innovation?

Some highlight quotes that will stay with me:

Verena from Luma AI reminded us how we know each other through our stories, and how it is important to remember it as a tool of influence

Jagger, our very own alum, described the race to create the first Oscar-winning and commercially successful AI feature---and at the same time, AI is evolving where audiences want more human authorship, and not just the magic of button-pressing. There has to be proof of human authorship, and show how human effort was involved.

Don from Asteria describes how we are trained or live in a way where we gain pleasure from learning; to keep learning. We have to generate new pleasures if the thing we are learning can now be done. What are those new pleasures? He also said there are now no excuses not to create work; creativity can happen with lesser or no budget; imagination in this context can get too big now.

Higher ed recommendations from industry came to us: are we training filmmakers or content creators: creative economy education is needed so our students can help find our way.

Theater matters the most if they recommend that the next generation needs to learn improv. This is "most important" in leading in these new technologies.

Women in tech need to be lifted up! What are we concretely doing?

What comes next is conversation and connection---at the reception, afterwards, and when we convene on May 8, 2026. Remember to mark your calendars!

This is all structured from the mind and genius of Jeff Burke, and the support of our great team—Crystal Santana, Libby Jourdan and more!

Bianca Nepales, our special advisor on industries and impact, will now close us with 120 seconds of reflection for us to take home...she'll show us how it's done!

Bianca Nepales – AI + Storytelling Summit Closing Summary

And outside of this room, people are taking action. So it's no coincidence that we're doing the same thing here. So remember this, Jeff and I were just chatting hybrid workflows, right?

AI isn't coming, it's here.

It's not just push a button anymore, it's know when you're going to use your hands and when you're going to use a machine. So I appreciate what Asteria is doing, it's paying the artists what they are owed. And then it's also students, y'all are not choosing a side, you're integrating it.

From Maria to say, more violent, more violent, or more tender, more tender. You're actually emotionally expanding all of us. And then Bora, letting climate actually dictate the storyline.

Now to do this, I won't be so subtle, because we're not about asking for permission. But we're in the top research institution here, in one of the largest university systems. So we're already studying critical AI, what does XR research look like? What does the legacy of the LA Rebellion mean today? So we have the talent, we have the mission, now we need the partners.

And AMD is stepping up, thank you. And now who's next? So May 8th is the next summit, right? So bring the players, bring the checkbook, and bring your resources, because that's what's next.

And then now picture this, a year from now, we have the grid that is going to, what CAA told us: have the consent, control, and compensation.

And if we are the gatekeepers, we're leaving the f*cking gate open, right? So I think the biggest surprise for me is that Imogen Heap wants to meet us in the streets. She just said, next time I won't be on Zoom. She wants you to say, hey, validate my work, because I see yours.

And lastly, just thank you, Dean Celine, for the vision, the invitation, for reminding us that the birth of cinema is in counterculture, and this is our movement, so thank you. Just a round of applause. Thank you for the speakers, for getting real, for showing us your work, for giving us real frameworks we can use.

For the students, you're not waiting for the future, you're making it, so I'm so excited to keep going. And then most importantly, for all of you, you had so many reasons to not be here today, so I appreciate you, so let's make this moment matter. Thank you.