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## **Soulless and Apathetic: Machines or Studio Heads?**

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Hollywood... the land of dreams... the land of opportunity... the land of... ok, let's cut the bull. It is no real secret that Hollywood is not the golden pasture of freedom and creativity it is presented as, but a well-oiled business machine. Now this is not a catch all statement, as many institutions put creatives first, but they are unfortunately outliers. In 2023, this is no more apparent than with the multiple current and potential strikes happening within Tinseltown. Currently, the Writers Guild of America (WGA) and the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) are striking against production studios, with many sides supporting and invalidating this decision. With all the facts presented, it is clear the writers and actors are justified in their strike and demands, as the big studios do not value their hard work and contributions to media creation. With how underpaid, overworked, and mistreated Hollywood production company crew are, they should at least be given a basic livable wage and working conditions.

This is not the only time the WGA has gone on strike. In fact, it has happened 5 times, those being in 1960, 1981, 1988, 2007-2008, and 2023. In all cases, they were due to disagreements between the WGA and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) regarding pension and compensation. The AMPTP negotiates fifty-eight industry-wide contracts on behalf of around 350 producers, streamers, studios, and networks. Some of these include Disney, Warner Bros, and Paramount, with more modern inclusions being Netflix, Apple, and Amazon. Looking at these past strikes, they were, thankfully, all successful but this success never seems to last.

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This brings us to the current 2023 strike, that may be the most important in film and television history. On April 18, 2023, 97.85 of WGA members voted to go on strike if discussions between them and the AMPTP were unsuccessful. These negotiations proved to be lengthy but unfortunately unsuccessful, as the AMPTP rejected the requests. Following this, on May 1, 2023, the WGA unanimously voted to approve the strike, the first of its kind since the 2007-2008 strike. The following day at 12:01 P.M., the strike officially began, meaning no WGA members could do any writing, revising, pitching, or discussing future projects with companies that are members of the AMPTP. This bold act of resistance opened a huge can of worms, which might prove to shake and change Hollywood to its core.

Weeks following the start of the WGA strike, discussions began within the SAG in regard to a possible strike. Feeling the same regarding pay and job security, the SAG also set discussions between them and the AMPTP, as the group's three-year contract ended in July of 2023. Again, these discussions proved to be unsuccessful. In response, the SAG Negotiating Committee voted unanimously to recommend a strike to the union's national board, which was approved. This move would not only serve to further the SAG's goal of a fair new contract but to also stand and provide huge and much needed support to the WGA and their cause. Starting on the midnight of July 14<sup>th</sup>, the SAG strike would officially begin. This means Guild members on strike are barred from doing work for productions affiliated with the AMPTP, as well as taking part in promotional appearances like premieres, festivals, and award shows.

Something that cannot be looked over and what makes this strike so important to the future of production is why this is happening. This time, writers and actors are not only fighting for a livable pension but also facing new challenges due to our ever-evolving technological world. Streaming services, being relatively new in the grand scheme of show business, have

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presented unfamiliar problems. The absence of streaming residuals and royalties to production members has opened up all new discussions on production contracts and studio exploitation. This is not to even mention the big elephant in the room, emerging Artificial Intelligence (A.I.) and deepfake technology. A tool that is not only threatening jobs and creativity but the future of entertainment itself.

Looking at these points one by one, unlivable low wages are not exclusive to Hollywood productions. Millions are experiencing this problem globally but what makes this issue different is one, the job and two, the location. WGA East Director of Communications Jason Gordon (2023) recently stated, “The WGA's average minimum for a staff writer on a scripted series is about \$4,500 a week”. Looking at the average yearly work time, that being around 20 weeks, we can estimate that the average WGA writer makes around \$90,000 a year. Considering the average United States yearly salary is around \$60,00, this is actually very generous... but this is before accounting for taxes, union dues, work expenses and fees to managers, agents, and lawyers. Add on the costs for groceries, gas or transportation, bills, insurance, and daily expenses. You cannot forget L.A. and New York rent, which are some of, if not, the most expensive places to live in the U.S. Also factor in this is for a single individual and does not take into account the costs of supporting a family and it becomes clearer how underpaid these positions are.

The rise of streaming services has also affected how actors and writers receive their pay. It feels like forever ago now, but Tv shows and home movies used to be shown exclusively on cable Tv. With this practice in place, residual payments were created. These residuals made it so the crew, who worked on these projects, received long-term payment for reruns and other airings after the initial release. This means anytime a rerun of Friends or Seinfeld aired, the crew

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received an agreed upon payment. In the prime of cable's life, reruns were constant, which meant decent pay days for those that received residuals. In 2023, it is not that simple. Streaming services and the death of cable TV have majorly impacted how much the crew makes, which in some cases is nothing. Back in the day, cable residuals could at least pay the bills, whereas today, that is simply not true. Cable Tv is on a major decline in popularity, which has led to less and less income. Show creatives are now being forced to move to streaming platforms in order to secure a green light, funding, and some success.

Looking at streaming services, their residuals are no longer based on the number of times an episode or movie is viewed, instead being based on the number of subscribers the streaming service has. This now means whether a project is a flop or hit, the crew makes the same amount. This now allows studios to profit from the crew's work without compensating them fairly for the success of a show. This is even assuming, they get any. Breaking Bad actor, Aaron Paul, (2023) stated, "I don't get a piece from Netflix on 'Breaking Bad' to be totally honest and that's insane to me... Shows live forever on these streamers and it goes through waves". Paul continued with, "'Breaking Bad' was trending on Netflix, and it's just such common sense, and a lot of these streamers, they know they have been getting away with not paying people just fair wage and now it's time to pony up". This is a perfect example of how these streaming services cheat these creatives. If one of the most popular Tv actors working today on one of the most popular Tv shows today is not receiving compensation, what does that say about the little guys, the writers, the actors?

Finally, we are left with the biggest issue writers and actors are fighting against, the unrestricted use of A.I. and deepfake technology in film and Tv. This is a very recent issue, as this technology has only been in mainstream use for a couple of years, if that. For writers and

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creatives, A.I. is threatening their job opportunities, as studios seem to be completely fine using A.I. For them, it costs less, is faster, and is easier to completely control. The problems with this seem obvious, it completely sucks the soul out of art and puts countless positions out of work, but it is actually far worse and scummier. The thing with A.I. is that it cannot create anything without a pre-existing body of work or source material. This means anything A.I. creates is taken and twisted from someone else's hard work and talent. In a sense, studios using unrestricted A.I. are putting workers out of jobs, stealing their work, and profiting from it.

For actors, it might be even worse. Deepfake A.I. steals someone's face and voice instead of just their work, creating a "digital twin." What is at stake right now is who gets control over this doppelgänger, the actor or the studio. If the studio wins, they could include popular actors and celebrities in any number of projects, sequels, or spin-offs, without giving payment or receiving permission. Ryan Meyer (2023) made the point that, "An actor might find that they have lost control of their digital twin, who now gets more work than the original actor, without any compensation flowing to the original actor." It truly shows how profit focused these studio heads are, like trying to get an acting performance out of a vending machine. This is not even to mention smaller character actors or even extras. When you can just take a random person's face and use it for a million-dollar blockbuster, you not only take all the art out of a performance, but you cut any chance of small actors moving on to bigger and better projects. Ben Affleck, Matt Damon, Viola Davis, Clint Eastwood, Sylvester Stallone, Bruce Willis, and even Brad Pitt, all actors who started their careers as extras. Image a world where actors of this caliber had their careers cut short. It might not be too far off to where we are now.

Studios opposing these strikes and their goals have not been keeping their silence on these issues. They have their heels dug in deep at the moment regarding the demands of the

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writers and actors. This refusal to budge on any of these matters has led to massive backlash from writers, actors, directors, creatives, and the public. In a recent response to the controversy over the WGA strike, Disney CEO Bob Iger (2023) stated, “There’s a level of expectation that they have, that is just not realistic. And they are adding to the set of the challenges that this business is already facing that is, quite frankly, very disruptive.” This is an interesting take, coming from the CEO of Disney, a company which earns around thirty billion dollars annually. It is understandable though, the writers must be asking for what, half of that, a third, a fourth? Actually, if the studios gave into the strike’s demands, they would only be giving up less than one percent of their annual earnings. In Disney’s case, the seventy-seven million being asked for is 0.091 percent of their 2022 annual earnings. This is not exclusive for Disney either, it is 0.214 percent for Netflix, 0.148 percent for Paramount, and 0.108 for Warner Bros according to writer, Brain Welk (2023). What is even crazier is that A24, a smaller and independent studio who makes far less annually, has already agreed to the strike’s terms, so why can’t the AMPTP?

Looking into viable solutions and positive outcomes, there is a lot that can be done. As for studio heads and executives, obviously agreeing to the fair terms and conditions is the best outcome possible. Even just meeting for negotiations could go a long way in not only understanding the other side but also coming to an agreement. Regarding A.I. and deepfake technology, a solution could come from government regulation. This technology can be used as a useful brush, but not as an artist. It just comes with potential for harm, even outside of Hollywood. It is already being used to spread political and world news misinformation, so maybe restrictions would be a useful crackdown. As consumers, there is a lot we can do too. For starters, we should not support the work studios produce without writers, actors, or even humans. If you show your support with your wallets, the studios, who are doing this to make more profit,

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will notice. It is also important to stay informed on this topic. We cannot forget that these big studios have the resources to steer public consciousness. Looking back at the 2007-2008 writers' strike, the media had been used against the WGA and their fight. According to Felicia Henderson (2010), "by the time the strike ended 100 after it began, the studios had successfully painted striking writers as one of the primary reasons for California's deep decent economic recession" (p.332). Showing support is always great as well, whether it is through social media, writing letters, or even standing on the front lines. With these in mind, hopefully we can move change in a positive direction and not let entertainment as we know it die.

We should also look to the future in this changing world. If contracts are signed, that does not mean things are fixed forever. Contracts only last a couple of years, so who knows what will change by then. New tech and loopholes will always be made, so staying informed will hopefully prevent studio exploitation. We might be moving into a golden age of studio revolting. Video game voice actors and motion capture performers have voted to strike if negotiations on a new contract fail, leading to further striking. On top of this, Disney VFX workers have voted to unionize. We are also seeing unrest with animators regarding working conditions. People deserve fair work rights though. It is important to remember, as long as creatives take charge and have a say in our entertainment, cinema will stay alive, soul and all.

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