

AI-Generated Screenplays and the Shifting Authorship Paradigm in Indian Cinema

¹Mr. Prashraya Khare, ²Mr. Rahul Tiwari

¹Student, ²Assistant Professor

¹²MFA School of Performing Arts

¹²Sanjeev Agrawal Global Educational University, Bhopal

Abstract—The entry of generative artificial intelligence into the screenwriting process has unsettled a foundational assumption of cinema: that a film's story originates from a human author. Large language models capable of producing dialogue, structuring plot beats, and generating full screenplay drafts are now deployed across writer rooms in Hollywood and, increasingly, in Mumbai. This paper examines how AI screenwriting tools—ranging from general-purpose models like ChatGPT to specialized platforms like Sudowrite—are reconfiguring the concept of authorship in Indian cinema, a industry where the "writer" has historically occupied an ambiguous position between creative labour and commercial invisibility. Drawing on Roland Barthes' theory of the death of the author, posthumanist frameworks of distributed agency, and comparative legal analysis of the Indian Copyright Act of 1957 alongside the Writers Guild of America's 2023 AI protections, the study argues that AI does not erase authorship but disperses it across a networked assemblage of prompt-engineers, training datasets, proprietary algorithms, and human rewriters. Case studies include the AI-assisted feature film experiment *Maharaja in Denims* (2025), the landmark AI-written short *Sunspring* (2016), and the ongoing adoption of AI tools by Indian independent screenwriters. The paper further addresses the regulatory vacuum in Indian copyright law—which offers no explicit provision for non-human authorship—and the labour implications of AI for junior writers in Bollywood's hierarchical writer-room structure. In theorizing AI as a collaborative agent rather than a replacement for human creativity, the study contributes to urgent conversations at the intersection of film production, intellectual property law, and the ethics of creative technologies in non-Western screen industries.

Index Terms—AI screenwriting, authorship, Indian cinema, copyright, Bollywood, generative AI, screenwriters, posthumanism

I. Introduction

In 2016, a recurrent neural network named Benjamin—trained on a corpus of science fiction screenplays uploaded by its creators—wrote a nine-minute short film called *Sunspring*. The result was linguistically fractured and narratively incoherent by any conventional standard. Characters delivered lines like "I don't know anything about any of this" and "He looks at me and he throws me out of his eyes" with a conviction that the script itself could not justify. And yet the film, starring the actor Thomas Middleditch and directed by Oscar Sharp, became a viral sensation, not in spite of its strangeness but because of it (The Guardian, 2016). Audiences and critics did not ask whether Benjamin's script was "good." They asked what it meant for a machine to write at all.

Nearly a decade later, that question has moved from speculative experiment to industrial reality. Generative AI tools—ChatGPT, Claude, Sudowrite, and a growing ecosystem of screenplay-specific platforms—are being used by working screenwriters to generate loglines, polish dialogue, structure acts, and draft scenes. In Hollywood, the issue became sufficiently urgent that the Writers Guild of America (WGA) made AI regulation a central demand of its 2023 strike, ultimately securing contractual language that prohibits AI

from being credited as a writer and bars studios from forcing writers to use AI-generated material as the basis for their work (WGA, 2023). In India, where the Screenwriters Association of India (SWA) has only recently begun to formulate its position on AI, the conversation is just beginning—and the legal and industrial infrastructure to address it is almost entirely absent.

This paper takes that absence as its starting point. It argues that AI screenwriting tools are not merely productivity aids but active collaborators that redistribute creative agency across a network of human and non-human actors—prompt-engineers, training datasets, proprietary models, and the writers who curate, rewrite, and polish machine output. This redistribution is particularly consequential for Indian cinema, where the screenwriter has historically occupied an unstable position: central to the creative product but marginal to the industry's power structures, often uncredited, underpaid, and treated as interchangeable labour rather than as an author in the legal or artistic sense. AI enters this already-fragile ecosystem not as a disruption from outside but as an intensification of dynamics that were already in motion.

II. Theoretical Framework: Authorship as Network, Not Origin

The Death of the Author, Reanimated by AI

When Roland Barthes declared the "death of the author" in 1967, he was not making a prediction about artificial intelligence. He was arguing that the meaning of a text is not determined by its creator's intentions but produced by the reader in the act of interpretation. "The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture," Barthes wrote, and the author's only power is "to mix writings" (p. 146). Barthes could not have anticipated that, six decades later, a machine trained on millions of texts would literalize his metaphor—a "tissue of quotations" stitched together by an algorithm that has no intentions, no biography, and no claim to originality in the Romantic sense.

AI screenwriting renders Barthes' theoretical intervention concrete. When a language model generates a scene of dialogue, it is not "creating" in any intentional sense. It is statistically predicting the most probable sequence of tokens given its training data and the user's prompt. And yet the output functions as a screenplay—it has format, structure, characters, conflict. The question of who "authored" this output has no stable answer. Is it the prompt-writer who specified the parameters? The model's developers who designed the architecture? The thousands of screenwriters whose work, scraped from the internet, trained the model? Or is the output, in a Barthesian sense, authorless—a tissue of quotations whose origin point is the entire textual history of cinema?

Barthes' framework, applied to AI, suggests that the anxiety surrounding machine authorship is misplaced. The author was never a singular origin-point; the author was always a cultural construction retroactively imposed on a distributed process of meaning-making. AI makes that distribution visible in ways that are industrially and legally disruptive, but conceptually continuous with what literary theory has argued for decades.

Distributed Agency and the Posthuman Screenwriter

Where Barthes destabilizes the concept of the human author, posthumanist theory destabilizes the binary between human and machine that the AI authorship debate often assumes. Karen Barad's (2007) concept of intra-action—where entities do not pre-exist their relations but are constituted through them—provides a framework for understanding AI-assisted screenwriting as a practice in which "screenwriter" and "tool" are not separate agents interacting but phenomena that emerge together in the writing event. The

screenwriter shapes the prompt; the model shapes the output; the screenwriter reshapes the output into a draft; the draft reshapes the screenwriter's understanding of their own story. Agency circulates; it does not reside in a single location.

Bruno Latour's (2005) actor-network theory extends this analysis into the material and institutional dimensions of screenwriting. In Latour's framework, agency is not a property of human subjects but an effect of networks that include non-human actors—software, contracts, guild rules, production budgets, formatting conventions. An AI screenwriting tool is an actor in this network, one that exerts force on outcomes in ways that are neither fully controlled by the human writer nor fully autonomous. The finished screenplay is not the product of a singular authorial mind but of an assemblage: the writer, the model, the training data, the studio notes, the producer's commercial calculations, the guild's credit-determination process.

Indian cinema's screenwriting culture makes this networked character of authorship particularly visible. Bollywood scripts have historically been produced through collaborative, often uncredited processes—junior writers drafting scenes that senior writers or directors revise, dialogue writers brought in after the story structure is locked, song lyricists contributing to narrative mood without being considered "authors" of the film. AI enters this ecology not as a foreign intruder but as another node in an already-distributed system. The question is not whether AI belongs in the writer room but how its presence reshapes the power relations, credit structures, and creative hierarchies that already define it.

The Tools: What AI Screenwriting Actually Looks Like

The landscape of AI screenwriting tools can be broadly categorized into three tiers, each with distinct implications for authorship.

General-purpose LLMs such as ChatGPT, Claude, and Gemini are the most widely used, particularly by independent and early-career screenwriters. These tools are not designed for screenwriting but are co-opted for it: writers use them to brainstorm plot ideas, generate character backstories, draft dialogue in specific registers, and produce formatted script pages through careful prompt engineering. The output is variable—sometimes surprisingly competent, more often requiring substantial revision—but the accessibility of these tools (many are free or low-cost) has made them a de facto presence in writer rooms globally, including in Mumbai's independent film scene.

Specialized screenwriting platforms such as Sudowrite, SAGA, and ScriptBook represent a second tier. These tools are purpose-built for narrative prose and screenplay formatting, offering features like beat-sheet generation, tone analysis, character-consistency checking, and automated coverage reports that simulate the feedback a studio reader might provide. Sudowrite's "Story Engine," for instance, can generate a full prose draft from a premise, which a writer can then adapt into screenplay format (Beverly Boy Productions, 2025). These tools position themselves as assistants rather than replacements, but their capacity to generate structurally coherent long-form narrative pushes against that framing.

Studio-internal and proprietary systems form a third, less visible tier. Major production houses, particularly in Hollywood, have begun developing in-house AI tools trained on their own libraries of scripts, enabling sequels, franchise extensions, and formula-driven content to be generated with minimal human writing labour. While this tier remains largely opaque—studios have commercial incentives to obscure the extent of their AI use—the WGA's 2023 contract provisions requiring studios to disclose when they provide AI-generated material to writers suggest that the practice is already widespread (WGA, 2023). Whether Indian

studios are developing comparable systems is difficult to verify, but the economic logic—reducing writing costs in price-sensitive markets—makes adoption likely.

III. Case Studies

Case Study 1: *Sunspring* (2016) — The Machine as Auteur of the Absurd

Oscar Sharp and Ross Goodwin's *Sunspring* remains the most visible landmark in AI screenwriting. Goodwin built "Benjamin," an LSTM (long short-term memory) neural network, and trained it on a corpus of science fiction screenplays, including works from the *Star Trek* and *X-Files* franchises, sourced from internet archives. The resulting screenplay was performed by actors who were instructed to deliver the lines as written, without correction or interpretation, and to follow the scene directions—which included instructions like "He is standing in the stars and sitting on the floor"—with absolute fidelity (The Guardian, 2016).

The film is, by conventional standards, a failure. Its narrative is incoherent, its dialogue is surreal, and its emotional beats land only because the human actors impose affect on text that contains none. And yet this "failure" is precisely what makes *Sunspring* significant. It demonstrates that AI-generated text, when performed by skilled human actors within the framing apparatus of cinema, can produce an experience that audiences find compelling—not in spite of the machine's limitations but because of them. The machine becomes a kind of absurdist auteur, its "voice" recognizable precisely in its estrangement from natural language.

For this paper's purposes, *Sunspring* establishes a baseline: the earliest publicly visible instance of AI-as-screenwriter, in which the machine's output is treated as authoritative (the actors may not alter it) and the human creative labour consists entirely in the performance and production surrounding the text. Authorship is split: the machine writes; the humans stage. Neither would produce a film without the other.

Case Study 2: *Maharaja in Denims* (2025) — AI Comes to Bollywood

In 2025, the Indian film industry produced what was widely publicized as one of the world's first AI-generated feature films: *Maharaja in Denims*, based on the bestselling novel by Khushwant Singh. The project, billed as a groundbreaking fusion of artificial intelligence and cinema, encountered significant technical challenges during production—difficulties that were themselves extensively covered in trade media (AskFuzz, 2026). The film's AI-assisted script became a marketing point, generating curiosity and scepticism in equal measure.

The specifics of the AI's contribution remain ambiguous. Press materials emphasized the novelty of AI involvement without clarifying what the AI actually generated—whether it produced a full screenplay draft, contributed dialogue suggestions, or was used primarily for promotional and post-production elements. This ambiguity is itself instructive. It reflects an industry moment in which "AI-made" functions as a marketing signifier before it functions as a verifiable production practice. The film's claim to AI authorship is performative as much as it is technical, signalling technological sophistication to investors and audiences without necessarily reflecting a substantive transformation of the writing process.

For the Indian context, *Maharaja in Denims* is significant less for what the AI did than for what the discourse around it reveals: a growing recognition that AI will reshape film production, coupled with a

profound uncertainty about how, by whom, and under what legal and ethical frameworks that reshaping should occur.

Case Study 3: The WGA Strike and the Contractual Precedent (2023)

While not an Indian case, the WGA's 2023 strike and the resulting contract are the most consequential global precedent for screenwriter-AI relations and will inevitably shape how Indian guilds approach the issue. The WGA secured three key protections: first, AI cannot be a "writer" or receive writing credit under the MBA (Minimum Basic Agreement); second, AI-generated material is not considered "literary material," meaning studios cannot use AI output as source material that a writer must adapt without compensation for the adaptation work; and third, studios must disclose to writers if any material they are given to work with was generated by AI (WGA, 2023).

These provisions are not perfect. They do not prevent studios from using AI internally; they merely prevent studios from forcing writers to engage with AI output without knowledge and fair compensation. They do not address the use of writers' existing work to train AI models without consent—a separate issue that the WGA continues to litigate. But they establish a contractual framework that recognizes AI as a labour issue, not merely a creative one. The SWA, which represents Indian screenwriters, has not yet secured equivalent protections, and the Indian film industry's more informal, relationship-based labour structures make such protections harder to negotiate and enforce.

IV. The Indian Legal Vacuum: Copyright and the Non-Human Author

Indian copyright law, governed by the Copyright Act of 1957, offers no explicit framework for AI-generated works. Section 13 of the Act protects original literary, dramatic, musical, and artistic works, but the concept of "originality" has been interpreted by Indian courts to require human authorship—a standard that aligns with the position of the US Copyright Office, which has repeatedly affirmed that copyright protection requires human creative input (Vintage Legal, 2026; Griffith Barbee, 2026).

The regulatory gap is not merely theoretical. If an Indian screenwriter uses ChatGPT to generate a scene of dialogue and incorporates that scene into a screenplay, who owns the copyright to the AI-generated portion? Under current law, the answer is unclear. The screenwriter might claim ownership on the basis of their curatorial and editorial labour—their selection, arrangement, and revision of the AI output. But if the AI contribution is substantial and unmodified, a court might find that the generated portion lacks the human authorship required for protection. This creates a scenario in which parts of a commercially valuable screenplay could exist in a copyright grey zone, unprotected and potentially unprotectable.

The Indian Copyright Act does contain a provision—Section 2(d)(vi)—that recognizes authorship "in relation to any literary, dramatic, musical or artistic work which is computer-generated" as vesting in "the person who causes the work to be created." This provision, inserted by the 1994 amendment, was designed for a era when "computer-generated" meant works produced using software tools under direct human control—not autonomously generated by AI models making independent compositional decisions. Whether this provision extends to LLM-generated text is legally untested, and most scholarly analyses conclude that it does not adequately address the current technological reality (Lexology, 2025; IJIRL, 2024).

Table 1: Comparative Legal Frameworks — AI Authorship

Jurisdiction	Key Provision	AI Authorship Stance	Implication for Screenwriters
India	Copyright Act 1957, Section 2(d)(vi)	Ambiguous; "computer-generated" provision drafted pre-LLM era; untested in court	Screenplays with AI-generated portions may have incomplete copyright protection
United States	US Copyright Office policy (2023–present)	Human authorship required; AI-generated elements must be disclaimed in registration	Writers must disclose AI use; pure AI output is unprotectable
European Union	EU AI Act (2024); existing copyright framework	Human authorship generally required; AI-assisted works may qualify if human creative choices are identifiable	Case-by-case analysis of human creative contribution
United Kingdom	CDPA 1988, Section 9(3)	Unique: "computer-generated works" have a deemed author (the person who made arrangements necessary for creation)	More protective of AI-assisted output than other jurisdictions; law predates modern AI

V. Labour Implications: The Junior Writer and the Machine

Bollywood's screenwriting ecology is hierarchical. At the top are the named writers and writer-directors who receive credit, publicity, and compensation commensurate with their market value. Below them are layers of junior writers, dialogue writers, script doctors, and uncredited contributors who perform much of the actual drafting labour but receive neither public recognition nor significant financial reward. This structure, while not unique to India, is particularly entrenched in Bollywood, where the "writer" as a professional category has historically been undervalued relative to directors, stars, and music composers.

AI enters this hierarchy at its most vulnerable point. The junior writer who is currently paid to draft scenes based on a senior writer's outline, or to polish dialogue for consistency, or to research background material for historical dramas, is performing precisely the kinds of tasks that AI tools are increasingly capable of automating. If a studio or senior writer can generate a draft scene through ChatGPT in seconds—even a draft that requires substantial revision—the economic rationale for employing a junior writer to produce that first draft weakens.

This does not mean junior writers will disappear. The AI-generated draft requires human revision, and that revision requires skill, taste, and cultural knowledge that machines do not possess. But it does mean that the nature of junior writing labour may shift from creation to curation—from generating original text to evaluating, selecting, and refining machine output. This shift has implications for training: if early-career writers spend less time producing original drafts, do they develop the craft skills that enable them to become senior writers? The WGA's answer, implicit in its 2023 contract, is that AI use should be a writer's choice,

not a studio mandate—a protection designed to ensure that the developmental pathway from junior to senior writer is not severed by automation.

In India, where no such contractual protections exist and where the SWA has less bargaining power than its Hollywood counterpart, the risk of deskilling is more acute. The Indian screenwriting community is smaller, less formally organized, and more dependent on personal relationships with producers and directors. A studio-mandated shift toward AI-assisted drafting could reshape the training pipeline without any of the institutional safeguards that the WGA fought for.

VI. Artistic Implications: Voice, Homogenization, and the Algorithmic Unconscious

Beyond the legal and labour questions lies an artistic one: does AI-generated screenwriting have a "voice," and if so, what does it sound like?

Early experiments like *Sunspring* produced text whose strangeness was its defining feature—a machine voice that was recognizably nonhuman, characterized by semantic drift, non-sequitur, and a dreamlike disregard for narrative coherence. As language models have improved, the machine voice has become harder to distinguish from competent human writing. GPT-4 and its successors can produce dialogue that is grammatically flawless, tonally consistent, and structurally sound. The risk is not that AI will produce weird, alien scripts but that it will produce scripts that are perfectly adequate and entirely generic—the narrative equivalent of stock photography, competent but weightless.

This homogenization risk is particularly relevant for Indian cinema, which derives much of its cultural value from linguistic and regional diversity. A Hindi screenplay, a Tamil screenplay, and a Malayalam screenplay are not merely the same story in different languages; they reflect distinct narrative traditions, cultural references, and audience expectations. AI models trained predominantly on English-language screenplays and Hollywood structures may flatten these differences, producing scripts that default to three-act Western story architecture regardless of the cultural context. A Marathi screenwriter using ChatGPT to generate dialogue may find the output inflected with idioms, metaphors, and narrative assumptions that belong to a different storytelling tradition entirely.

The counter-argument is that AI is a tool, and tools are shaped by their users. A skilled screenwriter can prompt-engineer specificity, and models can be fine-tuned on regional language corpora. But the economic incentives point toward homogenization: studios that adopt AI to reduce costs will likely use the most widely available, general-purpose models rather than investing in culturally specific fine-tuning. The "voice" of AI screenwriting, in this scenario, is not a voice at all but an absence of voice—a default register that sounds like everything and therefore sounds like nothing.

VII. Conclusion

AI-generated screenwriting does not herald the death of the author; it reveals that the author—in the singular, Romantic, origin-point sense—was never alive in the way we imagined. Screenwriting, particularly in the collaborative, hierarchical, and often uncredited culture of Indian cinema, has always been a networked practice. AI joins that network as a new kind of node: one that can generate text at scale, that carries the biases and assumptions of its training data, and that has no intentions, no legal standing, and no claim to the creative identity that the term "author" implies.

What is urgently needed is not a ban on AI screenwriting tools—an approach that is both impractical and, given the tools' genuine utility for brainstorming, drafting, and revision, undesirable—but a framework that addresses the legal, labour, and artistic dimensions of their use. The Indian Copyright Act of 1957 requires amendment to clarify the status of AI-generated literary works. The SWA needs contractual protections comparable to those secured by the WGA, adapted to the specific conditions of the Indian film industry. Screenwriting pedagogy must evolve to train writers not only in craft but in the critical use of AI tools—teaching prompt literacy, editorial judgement, and the ability to identify and resist the homogenizing tendencies of machine-generated text.

The most productive way to think about AI and screenwriting is not as a competition between human and machine but as a collaboration whose terms have not yet been negotiated. The screenwriter who uses AI is not being replaced by a machine; they are co-creating with a system that is itself the product of countless human creators whose work was ingested during training. The ethical challenge is to make that collaboration visible, accountable, and fair—to ensure that the network of human and non-human actors that produces a screenplay is acknowledged in law, compensated in practice, and legible to the audiences who experience its output as cinema.

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