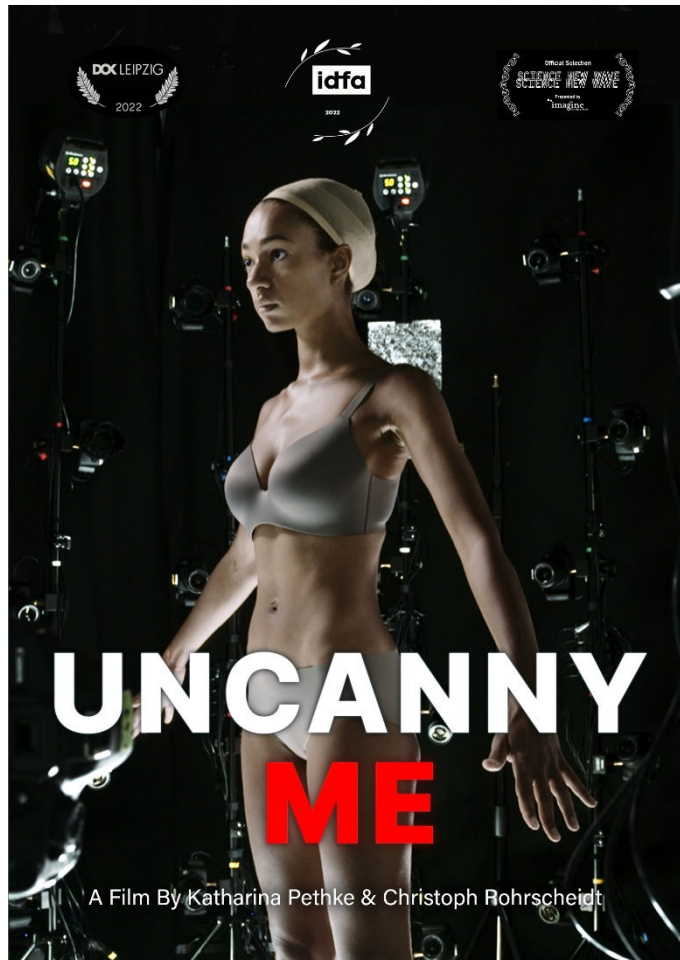# UNCANNY ME

STUDY GUIDE

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Uncanny Me

Augustine, Charmaine and Jim are some of the hundreds of thousands of Native American children placed in residential schools since the 1870s. The United States government funded over 360 boarding schools which systematically destroyed native cultures and communities. The philosophy of the US Indian Boarding School policy was brutal: "Kill the Indian, Save the Man." Discover how three generations of boarding school survivors and their families are dealing with the fallout of cultural erasure and how they are reclaiming their culture today.

Uncanny Me

Around the world, millions of people work as models in the fashion industry, which is one of the largest industries in the world. Within the world of fashion, there are digital models that have been created with artificial intelligence technology and do not mirror real people. There are also digital models that are cloned versions of real people. Both types of digital models are becoming more widespread but have also generated significant controversy.

AI-Generated Digital Models

The world's first digital supermodel is widely believed to be SHudu, created by former fashion photographer and founder and chief executive of AI and 3D modelling agency The Diigitals, Cameron Wilson. Shudu was launched in 2017. She is black. Wilson explains, "I wanted to create a really strong and powerful image that celebrated a beauty I don't see represented in media often enough."[1] Shudu appeared in many major modeling campaigns including for Balenciaga, Lexus and Balmain. However, Wilson was also widely criticized because he was a white person creating a black character, and also because he created a virtual character rather than hiring a real black woman.

Since then, a number of companies have created digital fashion models. For instance, Lalaland.ai, is an AI-based modeling agency that builds custom AI clothing models. Many different aspects of these models can be customized, including their race, hair, body shape, and emotions.

Controversy Related to Digital Models

The use of digital models has generated a lot of controversy. Critics argue that they will take work away from real models. It is also argued that digital models will contribute to unrealistic beauty standards because they can be edited through digital technology in a way that real people cannot. In addition, critics argue that digital models will be used as a way to fulfill requirements for diversity without actually hiring a more diverse group of models. Yve Edmond, a New York City area-based model argues, "We have this amazing Earth that we're living on. And you have a person of every shade, every height, every size. Why not find that person and compensate that person?"[2]

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[1] https://www.elle.com/uk/fashion/a28394357/man-behind-worlds-first-digital-supermodel/
[2] Quoted in https://apnews.com/article/ai-fashion-model-digital-diversity-aaa489111bd8e793aa6e5a531dc7ade2

Some creators have given their digital models personalities and backstories, and this has been even more controversial. Model Sinead Bovell discusses some of the potential problems associated with this. She says, "There are major issues of transparency and authenticity here because the beliefs and opinions don't actually belong to the digital models, they belong to the models' creators. And if the creators can't actually identify with the experiences and groups that these models claim to belong to (i.e., person of color, LGBTQ, etc.), then do they have the right to actually speak on those issues? Or is this a new form of robot cultural appropriation, one in which digital creators are dressing up in experiences that aren't theirs?"[3]

On the other side, proponents of digital models insist that these models have value because they let companies show a greater diversity of body shapes and sizes. Michael Musandu, the CEO and founder of Lalaland.ai explains that one of his goals in creating digital models has been to drive change in the industry. He says, "As a boy growing up in Zimbabwe, I rarely saw anyone who looked like me featured in photos, advertisements or the runway. This deeply impacted me and was a motivating force in my desire to utilise technology — ethically and responsibly — to drive real and sustainable change in representation."[4] Proponents also argue that digital models give shoppers a more personalized shopping experience by allowing them to see items on models that resemble themselves. Further, using digital models can be environmentally beneficial because there isn't the same carbon impact as that associated with traditional photoshoots.

Digital Clones

In addition to AI-created digital models, there are now a number of digital models that are clones of real people. This has also provoked widespread controversy. Critics warn that models may lose control of their digital clones. For instance, Sara Ziff, who founded advocacy group, the Model Alliance, talks about fit models, who are booked by companies to try on clothes in order to check fit and silhouette. She explains that these types of models might be replaced by digital clones generated through body scans. She says, "So they're able to design the clothes on virtually using a scan of the model's body, rather than actually having to book the model in person."[5]

However, some models insist that having a digital version of themselves is beneficial in many ways. For instance, The Diigitals created a virtual twin of London-based model Alexsandrah, and she insists that her digital twin gives her more freedom. She says, "You don't have to travel, you don't have to do the airport runs, you don't have to do anything. It gives people an opportunity to also just live their lives and do other things, and be in two places at the same time." In addition, she maintains that she is able to maintain control of her twin. She says, "I will benefit from it because it's literally an AI version of me, I'm not cut out from anything. All the proceeds, if any proceeds are made, will be coming to me."[6]

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[3] https://www.vogue.com/article/sinead-bovell-model-artificial-intelligence
[4] Quoted in https://www.voguebusiness.com/technology/ai-models-are-here-can-they-actually-improve-fashion-representation
[5] Quoted in https://www.nbcnews.com/business/business-news/ai-models-levis-controversy-backlash-rcna77280
[6] Quoted in https://www.bbc.com/news/business-68347250

Clones in Other Industries

Digital clones are not just being created in the world of modeling. They are becoming more and more common in a variety of other places. For instance, many different types of business people have created online clones of themselves to help them answer the large volumes of questions they get from clients and the general public. One example is property expert Rob Dix, who created a virtual clone of himself and trained it from content that he has already written. Dix uses his clone on his website, to answer questions that he would otherwise not have time for. He explains, "We answer questions from property investors in a weekly newspaper column and a phone-in show, but there are always far more questions than we can individually answer... Yet most of the answers are embedded somewhere in the thousands of pieces of free educational content we've put out over the last 10 years." He says, "We've been able to organize all this information to coach people through their issues and find answers. As long as we train the AI with our words, our audience members get good responses to whatever they ask."[7]

A Growing Reality

Despite the controversy, the use of digital models is relatively widespread. Experts warn that whether people like it or not, digital models will become more and more prominent in the fashion world and that the best strategy is to ensure that this technology is used responsibly. John Horner, director of the British Fashion Model Agents Association warns, "AI is coming and the industry needs to be prepared and to adapt its business model to reflect this."[8]

Discussion Questions:

1. Images of models are often edited digitally. Do you agree with this practice? Why or why not?
2. What are some of the differences between digitally editing images of a model prior to publication, and creating an entirely digital version of a model that can be manipulated prior to publication?
3. What do you think would be some of the benefits of creating a digital clone of yourself? What about the risks?
4. If you create a digital clone of yourself, do you think it is possible to maintain control of it? Why or why not?
5. What do you think are some benefits associated with being one of the first models to create a digital clone of yourself? What about the risks?

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[7] Quoted in https://www.bbc.com/news/business-67623614
[8] Quoted in https://www.bbc.com/news/business-68347250

Additional Resources

- Sinead Bovell, "I Am a Model and I Know That Artificial Intelligence Will Eventually Take My Job," Vogue, July 21, 2020.
  https://www.vogue.com/article/sinead-bovell-model-artificial-intelligence
- Sam Gruet, "'My AI Twin May Get Me More Modelling Work,'" BBC News, March 6, 2024.
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- Holger Harreis, Theodora Koullias, Roger Roberts, and Kimberly Te, "Generative AI: Unlocking the Future of Fashion," McKinsey & Company, March 8, 2023.
  https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/retail/our-insights/generative-ai-unlocking-the-future-of-fashion
- Bernard Marr, "Pixel Perfect: The Rise of AI Fashion Models," Forbes, June 7, 2023.
  https://www.forbes.com/sites/bernardmarr/2023/06/07/pixel-perfect-the-rise-of-ai-fashion-models/
- Claire Savage, "AI-Generated Models Could Bring More Diversity to the Fashion Industry—Or Leave It With Less," AP News, April 14, 2024.
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- Maliha Shoaib, "AI Models Are Here. Can They Actually Improve Fashion Representation?" Vogue Business, April 25, 2023.
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