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Filatov A., Kazyro I., Komissarova D.
Digital Immortality

Belarusian National Technical University
Minsk, Belarus

The death of any actor during the production of a film can seriously affect the course of filming: the team is forced to redo the script in a hurry and finish the project without his participation. But with the advent of computer graphics, this has ceased to be an obstacle – now digital doubles are used in cinema. These are exact copies of deceased people, with which you can shoot the remaining scenes without any special obstacles.

The process of creating doubles is very similar to digital rejuvenation technology. At first, graphic specialists work separately on the face of the deceased actor: if there is a ready-made digital scan, then it is used as the basis for a computer double. If there is no scan, the face can be created from scratch based on old footages. Then the finished image is connected to the body of the understudy – so, for example, they created doubles of Paul Walker from "Fast and Furious" and Peter Cushing from "Star Wars".

Now the film studios have come up with a new idea: they are going to use the doppelgangers of the cult actors of the past. Perhaps we will see Marlon Brando, Charlie Chaplin and other celebrities on the screens again, and in a few years it may even become a new trend in the industry. Before the advent of computer graphics, the problem of an actor's death during filming was solved in two ways: either they hired another actor, or they worked with already filmed scenes.

Everything changed when advanced computer graphics appeared in the 90s, and studios were able to create the first digital doubles. The most famous case is connected with the production of the action movie "The Raven" starring Brandon Lee. During the filming, he was wounded in the stomach by a blank cartridge and died of a hemorrhage in the hospital. There were three days left before the end of production.

Director Alex Proyas decided to finish the film with the participation of stuntman Chad Stahelski — in the future he will become known as the director of "John Wick". At the post-production stage, a digital copy of Brandon Lee's face was superimposed on the body of Stahelski and another understudy, which allowed the production of "The Raven" to be completed.

The result was successful: the audience did not notice the difference between the real face of the actor and his digital copy. "Raven" opened the way for studios to create digital actors.

The creators of the Soprano Clan series also faced a similar situation when Nancy Marchard, who played Tony Soprano's mother, died between the filming of the first and second seasons. Her character was an important part of the story, but after the death of the actress, the writers had to come up with a reason for her absence from the series.

The team came to the conclusion that the character of Marchand should be removed from the overall plot. On the set, an understudy was used, which was then overlaid with the face of the actress. For voice acting, I had to pick up deleted replicas of Nancy Marchand from the first two seasons.

The result was ambiguous. The digital copy in "The Sopranos Clan" scares with its implausibility: the old lines of the actress sound alien in this scene, and her facial expressions look unnatural. This scene remained in history as a textbook example of bad CGI. Since then, digital doubles have rarely been remembered.

But in 2015, the situation changed dramatically. After the tragic death of Paul Walker, the creators of "Fast and Furious 7" found themselves in a difficult situation: unlike previous examples, the actor did not have time to act in a significant number of plot-important scenes. Moreover, his character was central to the film, and shooting without Walker's participation was impossible to complete.

The studio considered several solutions to the problem, up to the recast, but the producers decided that they would complete the production with the help of computer graphics. The leap in the development of CGI helped the creators to make a full-fledged digital copy of Paul Walker: to do this, they used deleted replicas of the actor from the previous parts and invited his two brothers to become understudies for the digital copy.

Weta Digital employee Joe Letteri told The Hollywood Reporter that the studio struggled to make the Paul Walker lookalike as believable as possible. Even a small mistake could cause the audience to feel like an "ominous valley", and they could not allow it.

The result was imperfect, but quite convincing. In addition, "Fast and Furious 7" entered the history of cinema as the first film where a computer double fully participated in the plot.

Now the use of digital doubles in films is already considered the norm — not least for financial reasons. Creating computer graphics is expensive, but in most cases insurance companies in the United States are ready to cover the costs of filming scenes with the participation of deceased actors — death, with some exceptions, refers to insured events.

Thus, computer doubles have become a kind of security guarantee for filming — the death of one person no longer brings big problems to the rest of the team.

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