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2026 THEME \ HUMANS AND THEIR TOOLS

DISRUPT

AI FILM FESTIVAL BY TBWA

DAIFF.COM.AU

FOREWORD



KIMBERLEE WELLS
CEO, TBWA\Australia

For more than four decades, TBWA has held a simple belief. Creativity can shape culture, shift industries and redefine what's possible. We call it Disruption®: the willingness to challenge convention and lead when others choose to follow.

The DISRUPT AI Film Festival is an expression of that belief.

When we launched DISRUPT in 2025, much of Australia's conversation about AI centred on infrastructure, compliance, productivity and risk. All important, but incomplete. What was missing was a space to explore the creative and human potential of this technology. A place where the industry could move the conversation from "What will AI take?" to "What can AI do?".

A year on, with AI tools that can seemingly do almost anything, the question has evolved again to "What should AI do?".

As this year's entries showed, tools alone are not enough to make a creative moment linger or connect with an audience. Craft, judgement and human perspective still matter. For every business leader navigating technological transformation, this point cannot be overstated. While it is tempting to hand tasks over to automation, the standard must come from people who are clear and intentional about what good looks like. Mastery of the tools is not a proxy for creative excellence.

DISRUPT keeps human storytellers at the centre of how this technology evolves.

Nearly four in ten Australian creators who entered the 2026 festival were making an AI film for the first time, while one in five returned for a second year. DISRUPT is becoming both a launchpad for emerging talent and a home for a growing creative community. We set out to make a hidden movement visible. Today, we're helping Australia's next generation of creative pioneers find their audience.

The inaugural festival also generated data that informed the academic white paper Creative AI as National Infrastructure. That research established a baseline for understanding AI's impact on creativity in Australia that we'll continue to build on in the years ahead.

To our partners Google, Indeed, BMW and Holding Redlich, alongside our academic partners Swinburne and Deakin, thank you for continuing to back a festival dedicated to the future of creativity. Bringing together perspectives from creativity, business, employment, law and academia is deliberate. From Indeed's perspective on the future of work to Holding Redlich's expertise on authorship and intellectual property, these conversations help ensure we keep debating what AI should do, not simply what it can do.

To our 12–person jury, thank you for your generosity, expertise and passion. It was a privilege to witness your deliberations and the care you brought to every discussion.

And finally, to the DISRUPT team, particularly our Festival Co–Chairs Paul Reardon and Lucio Ribeiro – you make magic happen.

As technology continues to change what's possible, human creativity must always decide what matters.

Enjoy the showcase.

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1 \\ FAST FACTS

487
TOTAL ENTRIES
371 IN 2025, +31%

112
AUSTRALIAN ENTRIES
73 IN 2025, +53%

~55
AVG DAYS TO MAKE, SHORTLIST
~50 IN 2025, +5 DAYS

45
SHORTLISTED FILMS
38 IN 2025, +18%

1,197
AVERAGE NUMBER OF PROMPTS FOR SHORTLISTED FILMS
1,357 IN 2025, —12%

9,720
MINUTES SUBMITTED
4,040 IN 2025, x2.4

TOP FILM GENRES

1. DRAMA
2. SCI—FI
3. FANTASY
4. EXPERIMENTAL
5. ANIMATION

TOP TOOLS UTILISED ON FILMS

1. SEEDANCE
2. CHATGPT / ELEVENLABS
3. NANO BANANA
4. KLING
5. SUNO
6. CLAUDE
7. HIGGSFIELD
8. GOOGLE VEO
9. MIDJOURNEY

2
\\ THE JUDGING CRITERIA

The DISRUPT AI Film Festival exists to celebrate human storytellers, and their skill in wielding generative AI tools.

However it can never simply be a celebration. It must also be an interrogation of AI itself. Generative AI is revolutionary. Few would argue otherwise. But its unprecedented rise brings a flood of questions — practical, philosophical, ethical, and everything in between.

As human creators, to merely applaud what AI can do, without addressing what it should do, when it should and should not be used, or where it fails, would be irresponsible.

1. How original is this story?

SCORE OUT OF 10

2. How well told is this story?

SCORE OUT OF 10

3. Does this piece evoke an emotional human connection and response?

SCORE OUT OF 10

4. Did using AI genuinely improve this story?

SCORE OUT OF 10

5. How well does this piece overcome the clear and current limitations of AI production?

SCORE OUT OF 10

6. Would I ever choose to watch this again?

SCORE OUT OF 10

3

\\ A WORD FROM THE JURY CHAIR



PAUL REARDON
Chief Creative Officer,
TBWA\Melbourne and
DISRUPT Co—Founder

Last year, I closed my reflection by saying that, at the speed things were moving, this festival might look very different a year on. The jury and I joked about this often. Turns out we weren't joking.

This year we received 487 submissions, up 31% from 371. What struck me most wasn't the volume. It was the jump in executional quality, and how unevenly creative judgement kept pace.

The tools have moved incredibly quickly. Faces are better. Movement is better. Consistency is better. Filmmakers can create worlds that 12 months ago would have been extremely difficult, prohibitively expensive or, in some cases, probably impossible. One film sent us back to the entry form to work out how much of what we'd just watched was GenAI.

Yet some filmmakers became a little too seduced by what I like to refer to as 'the glint in the machine'. The model gives you something technically remarkable and you think, Wow, look what it can do. But then you need to take a step back and ask: Is it believable? Does it belong in the film? Is it making the story better?
Or, quite simply, why is it there?

Creative restraint, or what I'd call creative distillation, is the theme the jury kept returning to. When the tools allow you to make almost anything, the fundamentals of storytelling matter more, not less.

We saw this most acutely in the longer films. Some of the work was extraordinary, but there were moments when I wanted to lean through the screen and say finish the story, finish the story. I know you've got 15 minutes. You don't have to use it. One film was visually stunning and I remember thinking, this is awesome. Now shave four minutes off it immediately.

That might sound flippant, but it speaks to something fundamental. Knowing what to leave out is craft. Knowing when the story is over is craft. Sound, editing and performance are craft, too. Last year I said the technology doesn't fill the gaps, it magnifies them. As it gets better, that only becomes more obvious. It's also why I came out of judging believing so strongly in collaboration. GenAI has created an extraordinary opportunity for one person to do what previously required a crew, and I love that. But you can spend three days getting a shot exactly right and still need an editor to walk in with fresh eyes and say, Why is that still in the film?

Voice was the clearest example. I'd be completely immersed in a film when a heavy—handed synthetic voiceover would arrive and I'd think, why? Why did you do it? The scene was already working. Then another film used a synthetic voice that was creepy as hell. I loved it. It was exactly the voice that film needed. Same technology. Completely different creative judgement.

And then there were standout films. The ones that seamlessly blended the craft of storytelling with the tools of the day. The ones that took us from analysing AI and how the films were made into embracing the way the films made us feel.

3

\\ A WORD FROM THE JURY CHAIR



PAUL REARDON
Chief Creative Officer,
TBWA\Melbourne and
DISRUPT Co—Founder

(continued)

We just wanted to know what happened next. That, for me, remains the test. We often say in advertising, make me laugh or make me cry. But that's ridiculously binary. There are hundreds of human emotions between those two things. One film this year left me genuinely uncomfortable. I couldn't quite describe the emotion. Dread, perhaps. Whatever it was, it stayed with me. And I remember thinking, well, that probably shouldn't be ignored.

That's what great storytelling does. It leaves something behind. The strongest films weren't defined by the capability of the tools. They were defined by the quality of the decisions behind them. Our theme was Humans and Their Tools. We've since spent a lot of time talking about the human in the loop. This year's work makes a stronger case for something different.

The human in the lead. Someone with taste. Someone with a point of view. Someone with intention. Someone who understands what these tools can do, but importantly understands what they should do, and who is confident enough to direct the technology rather than simply react to what it gives them.

To our jury, thank you. I chose this panel to spark constructive discussion, and it delivered. What impressed me most was everyone's willingness to make a strong case for a piece of work. There were films I loved that I was fairly sure I'd get outvoted on. I did. And you made me think twice about others I was sure I'd made my mind up about. That's the joy of a jury like this. The technology changed enormously in 12 months. Human judgement still made the difference.

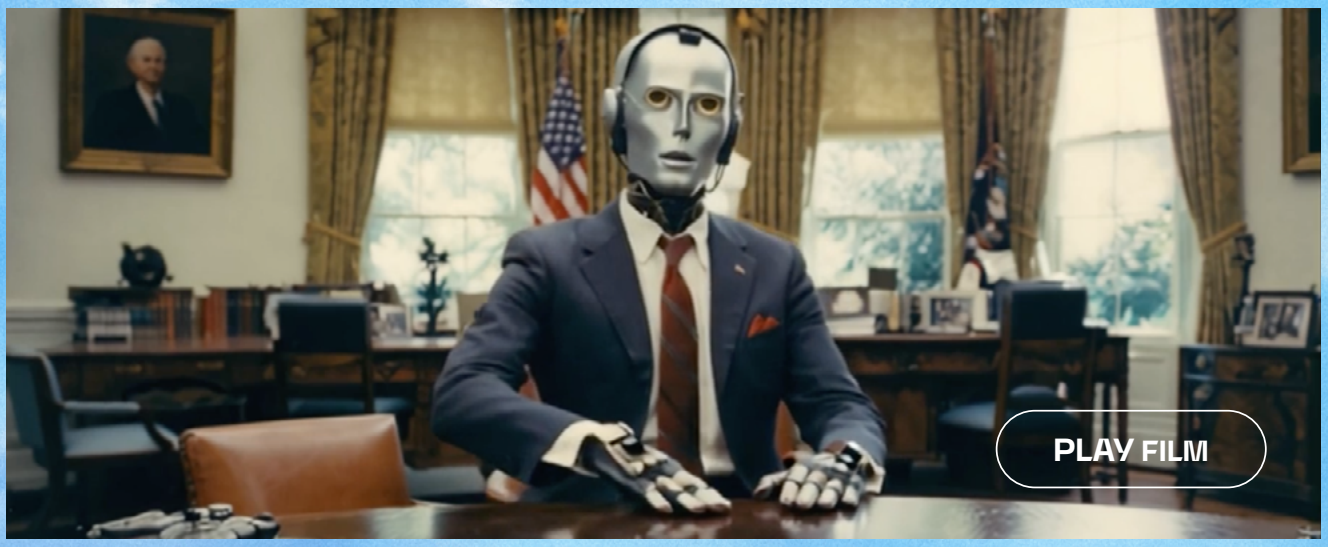
And I'm very happy about that.

4
\\ 2026 WINNERS



BEST STUDENT FILM

DING!
QIAN DENG



BEST SHORT FILM

QWERTY
JONATHAN HEATH

4
\\ 2026 WINNERS



BEST LONG FILM

DAYLIGHT SAVING TIME!
GENKI YAMASAKI



GRAND PRIX

EVERYTHING SOFT
JAMIN TASKER

5
\\ JUDGES' REFLECTIONS



CLAYTON JACOBSON

Film Director,

Writer and Producer

It's been a pleasure judging the films of the DISRUPT AI Film Festival.

What has become very apparent judging so many AI films, is how quickly the medium is evolving and enabling storytellers to explore worlds and experiences that are both nuanced and deeply personal.

As an audience member, I want my emotions and expectations stirred, challenged and transformed. A storyteller's job is to draw us in and keep our imaginations alive: to make us wonder, anticipate and feel. A conclusion needn't explain everything, but it should leave us with the sense that the journey has mattered.

The awarded films that resonated most deeply with me moved beyond their initial premise. They explored their themes with curiosity and conviction, offering something fresh and, at times, transformative.

I do however, believe there is a place for a beautifully executed, one–gag short, and there were some wonderful examples of this as well.

Technically, the progress is remarkable. More believable worlds and increasingly less uncanny valley performances are giving filmmakers greater scope to connect and convey their vision.

As a screenwriter and director, I find the freedom AI offers one to follow a spontaneous idea and bring it to life in a relatively short time exhilarating without the usual 10–15-year gestation period traditional films often demand. However, speed is only part of the opportunity, it should not make us lazy or complacent. When examining how my favourite films of this festival were made, I found weeks, sometimes months, of thought, refinement and regeneration were pooled into their considered creation. Their impact came from filmmakers staying with an idea, questioning it and strengthening the themes at its heart.

That's what excites me about festivals like DISRUPT: the possibility of discovering voices that might otherwise never have found a way to the screen, taking us on journeys we might never have otherwise experienced.

For many AI filmmakers, the greatest opportunity for growth remains storytelling itself. Several films began with real promise, only to lose momentum or end just as their ideas were beginning to blossom, others simply just ended. They took us somewhere, but didn't always give us the satisfaction of a fully realised journey.

Festivals like DISRUPT help raise the AI bar for storytelling and as such the creators will need to work harder to find their audience. In time the debates about the validity of the medium will gradually recede as the undeniable arresting vision of fresh new talent competes in this exciting new marketplace.

What will endure is what has always mattered as far back as the original campfire chat: tell a good story. It was an honour and privilege to judge and award the films that did exactly that.

5
\\ JUDGES' REFLECTIONS



LUCINDA LONGCROFT
Director of Policy
& Government Affairs
Tech Council Australia

I approached judging the adoption of AI in a field as gloriously creative as telling stories in film with trepidation. The topic of the DISRUPT AI Film Festival is tense in my household with a daughter who has decided acting is her life's work and feels the threat of AI to her chosen profession.

Can human creativity be enabled by AI, or will it be occluded by it, as she fears? What will be the impact of AI avatars and AI–generated voices, AI–music and AI–generated scripts and storylines on the profession of actors, voice–actors, musicians, dramatists and storywriters?

These questions are live.

But we need to ask the hard questions – because AI is being used across the arts including in film, and expanding our horizons in terms of who can create, and what can be created.

Creative industries are adopting AI to hone their productivity and efficiencies in a competitive commercial landscape. Creators are both adopting and fighting AI. And the legal system is playing catch up – whether in protecting creators from infringing AI reproductions of their works that may threaten their livelihoods, or in granting rights to creators in AI-generated works they seek to protect from infringement or to license.

As an intellectual property lawyer, my work focuses on how to protect works of human innovation and creativity with rights that allow creators to make a living from their skill, ingenuity and imagination. While copyright law always evolves in response to technological change and societal need, these periods of change and uncertainty are hard.

In this context, the DISRUPT jury-judging process was revelatory – the mixture of creative expressions among the entries was as joyfully diverse as human creativity itself. What stood out for me were the many dedicated creative artists with backgrounds in filmmaking, whose months, weeks, days and hours of effort were channelled through thousands of AI choices and prompts, crafting meticulously with AI. The artistry behind each prompt and each choice of tool confirmed the films' creators as all-human, enabled by their imagination to use an extraordinarily competent tool.

What stood out among the entries was the crafting of a story, images and narratives with emotional impact, stories that surprised, amazed or touched or hurt – AI didn't provoke those reactions, the artist controlling the AI did. And the varying connection the films made to each jury member is as human as good art always is. The answer to the question whether human creativity can be enabled by AI or replaced by it is, in my mind, that both can be true.

However, nothing about technological development is inevitable so, if we care about a good outcome for creators and those who love film, we have to ensure it – we can't assume a Hollywood ending.

5
\\ JUDGES' REFLECTIONS



MARK WHEELER

Director of Ads Marketing

AUNZ

Google

When I was invited to judge the GenAI category at the DISRUPT AI Film Festival, I felt a mix of anticipation and curiosity. I have the privilege of working at Google and YouTube experiencing firsthand how the technology is evolving and helping creators bring their ideas to life.

As marketers and storytellers, we are constantly asking what these new tools are capable of. As a judge, I wanted to see how filmmakers would push creative boundaries to deliver concepts previously deemed unachievable, while still honouring the fundamental craft that all storytelling needs to engage, delight and entertain an audience.

Would they pioneer entirely new story arcs, or would they stick to tried–and–tested structures? How would they integrate dialogue and infuse audio to bring their narratives to life? And crucially, how would they use emotion to connect the characters and storyline with their audience?

Going in, I expected clever technical experiments, with some gaps in execution due to technology limitations. What I actually experienced throughout the judging process blew me away. The sheer talent, the breadth of ideas, and the high production values across the board were outstanding. The quality of both the visual filmmaking and the accompanying sound design was exceptionally high. It was so high that it made judging very difficult, especially for the long form category.

The most compelling submissions were those that didn't treat AI as a gimmick, but as an enhancer for genuine, emotional storytelling.

I loved how several pieces leaned into deeply human narrative structures, utilising unique, boundary–pushing ideas to show what is now possible. The technology continues to improve and the filmmaking shown here pushed the boundaries of what is possible.

5
\\ JUDGES' REFLECTIONS



STEPHEN DE WOLF

National Chief Creative Officer

Clemenger BBDO

It's incredible to see how far the tools have come in just a year, and the impact they can have on powerful storytelling.

The films that really stood out had three key elements: originality, emotional connection and craft that transcended the very technology they were showcasing.

Seeing what can be done by one or two people is truly inspiring. That said, it did highlight the open space for more collaboration with craft specialists within the discipline of AI filmmaking.

Not going to the extremes of huge crews; rather, bringing in editors, sound engineers, colourists and even actors, to name a few, to elevate the storytelling and connection.

Masters of craft bring with them ideas that add to the idea and storytelling. They bring the friction and serendipity creativity needs to create viscerally great stories.



VICTORIA BERTHINUSSEN

Head of Creative & Creator Partnerships

Google

It's not often you get to sit down and dedicate time to watching over four hours of films, especially as a mum with two feral girls. But my god, it was fun. A roller coaster of joy and sorrow, epic editing and nasty cuts, incredible design and questionable AI voices.

For me the festival reinforced a fundamental truth: AI is simply a powerful tool in the creative toolkit, but the real craft and epic ideas are still coming from human–led storytellers.

The technology does not magically fill narrative gaps; if anything, it magnifies them. The films that truly shone were those where the creator's taste, intent and emotional vision directed the tool, rather than letting the tool dictate the film. The tools didn't replace the artist; they amplified their human potential, turning ambitious ideas into reality.

To our gifted Australian filmmakers, thank you for showing us what is possible.

5
\\ JUDGES' REFLECTIONS



ANDREA MARTENS

Non—Executive Director and Adviser

Having spent much of my career in marketing, brand building and leadership, I've always believed great storytelling is one of the most powerful ways to connect with people. Judging this year's DISRUPT festival has reinforced that belief.

What struck me was the creative potential AI is opening up. Ideas that once required significant budgets, production teams and technical resources can now be brought to life by individuals with imagination, curiosity and a willingness to experiment. That is exciting, and I think we're only beginning to understand what it means for the creative industries.

But my biggest takeaway is that the tools don't make the story. The storyteller does.

There was an incredible range of techniques, visual styles and creative approaches across the films. Some were technically impressive but struggled to hold my attention. Others were much simpler yet managed to create a genuine emotional connection. For me, that's what matters most.

Whether you're creating a film, building a brand or communicating a business strategy, the fundamentals remain the same. You need to understand your audience, know what you want them to feel and give them a reason to care.

Storytelling is a craft. It requires insight, imagination, judgement and an understanding of human behaviour. Technology can help bring an idea to life, but it doesn't replace the importance of having something meaningful to say.

I also think we need to be careful not to confuse novelty with creativity. Just because we can create something extraordinary with AI doesn't necessarily mean it will resonate with an audience. The opportunity is in combining the capabilities of these new tools with human creativity, emotional intelligence and strong storytelling.

For me, the most successful films weren't necessarily those that demonstrated the most sophisticated use of AI. They were the ones where the technology served the story rather than becoming the story.

Ultimately, people don't remember the tools you used. They remember how you made them feel.

And I think that will remain true no matter how sophisticated AI becomes.

5
\\ JUDGES' REFLECTIONS



LEE HICKIN
Executive Director
National AI Centre

I'm not a filmmaker, nor someone who would usually describe themselves as 'creative'. But as I watched these films, something unexpected happened. I started noticing details I'd either ignored or accepted in non–AI–generated content. A pause held too long. An unfamiliar facial expression. Sound that felt disconnected from the image.

I started to recognise and had a new appreciation for just how important the editor is. I had, perhaps lazily, assumed that anyone who could use the tools could make something great with them. In the world of AI, we often reach for the piano and synthesiser analogy.

A synthesiser can help with timing, rhythm and all sorts of technical processes. You might assume that anyone with access to one could write a masterpiece. But an ordinary person using a synthesiser will probably produce ordinary audio. Give Beethoven access to it, and perhaps he changes the very way we think about how music makes us feel.

Films like 'QWERTY' stood out because they were original, in concept at least, visually compelling, and the sound, editing and mix came together so well that I forgot I was judging an AI film festival. I was simply enjoying how it made me feel.

I loved 'Through Glass' because it took me on a ride. Yes, the dystopian trope was familiar, but the story, the setting and the way the narrative unfolded captured me.

And 'FRANK!' surprised me. Here was a genre I wouldn't typically enjoy or seek out, yet watching it simply as a creative work showed me how incredible AI in the hands of a master can be.

The other reflection was something I shared during our jury discussion: regardless of quality, use of AI, visual style or story, one of the hardest things to do when you create something is to know when to cut bits out. To recognise when the story is actually better with less rather than more.

In some films, I found myself wishing the story would move on. In others, the visual effects began to distract me from the idea. It made me think about how tempting it must be to keep adding when the tools offer so much. But knowing when you have enough, and what to leave out, matters just as much.

I came away from judging with two quite different feelings. On one hand, I have a tremendous sense of hope and aspiration for the future. I imagine all the incredible stories out there that will now find a way to be told in engaging and unique ways through this technology. That is an exciting prospect.

But on the other, I see the danger in a future where anyone can make anything. Where truly great stories are overwhelmed by a deluge of 'get rich quick' content. My concern is that this doesn't just take visibility away from the stories that move us. It chips away at the spark of human creativity itself.

5
\\ JUDGES' REFLECTIONS



TESSA CONRAD

Global Head of Innovation
TBWA\Worldwide

It seems like every day, something new and exciting is happening with AI; on the flip side this year's festival gives us a great chance to have a marked, annual comparison of just how far AI can move in 12 months — and wow, it's insane. To give some perspective, a year ago we were able to tell whether a video was AI due to the number of fingers or the robotic look in human eyes. Now, the easiest way to tell if video is AI is if it looks "too perfect" — talk about big moves! The DISRUPT AI Film Festival is a great way to mark progress, our hopes for what's next and our vision for the future.

For me, more specifically, DISRUPT brought three key things into focus. Sound. Hopefulness. Artistry. All important for where we're heading with new tools being unveiled daily, but all also marking a clear nod to the need for humans in the future of creativity.

First, if there's a lagging part of AI filmmaking, it's audio of people speaking. While it's definitely gotten better, it's still tough to match speech to lips, to get the cadence and emotion correct and all the tiny things that make speech sound human. With that said, it feels like the tools are at the cusp of making it more seamlessly possible — but for now, it's still a bit of a watch-out. If anything, it drives home for me the importance of creators partnering with other experts in filmmaking, bringing in audio-focused friends to the table.

Second, I'm relieved to see some hopefulness when it comes to AI and creativity. It's easy to fall into the trap of dystopian or sci-fi takes when literally using AI to create, but hopefulness helps us get closer to using AI as an always-on tool vs a gimmick. 'Everything Soft' was a great take on this — with gorgeous cinematography and art direction, it was the perfect blend of "reality" and humanity through an AI lens. 'My Mia' was also a great take on how while there's plenty of rooted bias in AI we must stand against — it can also be a tool for underserved people and communities to create more freely.

Third and finally — I'm so happy to see a real blend of artistry enter into AI, beyond being more passable as a typical film. 'QWERTY' was laugh-out-loud funny but also a great blend of film styles and inspiration. On the flip side, 'Appetite' absolutely terrified me and I had to watch it a few times to try to figure out how it could be made and what styles it was drawing on. I love seeing humans use AI to delve into different styles of filmmaking vs just filmmaking holistically — getting to this nuance of creativity is really the next step of our creative evolution.

5
\\ JUDGES' REFLECTIONS



BRUCE HUNT

Film and Advertising Director and DISRUPT 2025 Best Short Film Winner

I thought this was a terrific bunch of entries. I was really impressed by the scale and scope the creators were able to bring to these works. I can see there is a great leap forward a year on in the photorealism, movement, character and performances.

And a real mix of talent. There are first–time filmmakers experimenting with stories they have waited to tell, and others who are mixing it up with their existing methods of photography, filming, animation or CGI.

What is the same is they are primarily made by single creators or teams of two, and they are punching far above their weight in scale and scope, with tiny budgets for the production value, look and feel of these films.

One creative choice that stayed with me was the way characters cry. With this and AI films in general, I have identified a particular genre of eye–wateringly close–up shots of characters crying. Creatures, animals and animated figures are all doing it. And remembering it's all coming from a machine that doesn't know what crying is, it's becoming a trope. Now, unless this is selling the cutting of onions or advertising eye drops, I have to ask the filmmakers to consider if they really need to do this. It does not denote good emotional performances. All it shows is that the machine has a neat trick.

The audience is smart. They want to feel it, not be shown it.

Animation films were super experimental this year, using GenAI to support the traditional or create a hybrid look. The mixes of stop motion and 2D or 3D or comic book looks were a great indicator of the real strength of using generative AI. The concept design and the whole look of the film can be defined by real–world photographs or artwork made by the creators.

Seeing what the tools could do made me think about how much further filmmakers could take the human side of the work. My overall takeaway is that it's an extraordinary time for filmmakers with all the tools. We see lots of ability to get machines to emote on cue, so I feel we can push harder the other way and actively choose to be more human–centred. I would encourage more films using human performance and creators' own photographs and artwork as the driver for the performances, rather than letting the machine or machine agents interpret their text. This would make the films more distinctly theirs and avoid repeating unknown IP, which will become an issue for showing and distribution of your works.

Also, film is collaboration. I hope these creatives can use their skill set and talent and reach out to other creators, editors, musicians and sound designers to collaborate and learn their craft together.

One observation I'd take beyond the jury room is some of the most daring films were not photorealistic at all. Animation films were super experimental this year, using gen AI to support the traditional or create a hybrid look. The mixes of stop motion and 2D or 3D or comic book looks were a great indicator of the real strength of using generative AI. The concept design and the whole look of the film can be defined by real–world photographs or artwork made by the creators.

I loved the thoughtfulness of some of these entries. You can see that these people have stories to tell and this allows them a different way to create. Very excited to see the possibilities.

Thanks to DISRUPT again for having me in the room and to judge the works. It's a celebration of Australian talent that is inspiring to watch.

5
\\ JUDGES' REFLECTIONS



MAX SCHLESER
Associate Professor,
Film & Television
Swinburne University
of Technology

Filmmaking has been both an art form and a business for about 130 years. In 2026, we can see GenAI filmmaking cutting across the many genres, forms, formats and styles of screen storytelling.

From independent productions and classical Hollywood narratives to experimental aesthetics, animation and live–action traditions, the DISRUPT AI Film Festival 2026 features a cross–section of them in one festival.

GenAI films show us worlds that we have not seen before whether futuristic, historical or entirely synthetic. As in the inaugural edition, science fiction remains a genre of choice for GenAI screen producers. This year, Blade Runner–esque visions were prominent, alongside fascinating moving–image artworks referencing essayistic traditions. The surreal motif was as present as last year.

While the tools have reached new levels of sophistication, it is great to see filmmakers continuing to shape novel workflows, their unique creative practices and some filmmakers returning to DISRUPT. Once again, we have seen a number of 'AI auteurs' emerge.

These GenAI creatives imagine, script, prompt, edit, shape and produce their own story worlds. Some stories will challenge you, some will entertain you, and some will make you rethink what is possible on screen. Collectively, these GenAI screen producers show us how stories can be shaped in a 21st–century context and how filmmaking itself can be reimagined.

DISRUPT 2026 reveals the directions in which the screen industry will evolve. It is a snapshot of a fast (very fast)–moving ecology. With 31% more submissions and an increasingly expanding range of tools available, there is an opportunity to shape how we frame filmmaking and celebrate storytelling.

The jury confirmed what the Creative AI as National Infrastructure white paper identified: judgement, taste and intention are the heroes in this story. Taste is not a predictive model, but a socio–cultural construct. The DISRUPT AI Film Festival is developing a national infrastructure: a forum for the creative arts, industry, creative technologists, emerging talent and established filmmakers alike to explore new frontiers in filmmaking.

5
\\ JUDGES' REFLECTIONS



LUKE HEEMSBERGEN
Senior Lecturer,
Communication & Director,
Master of AI for Creative
Practice and Design
Deakin University

The growth of this festival from its inaugural year to this year's second iteration is remarkable across many dimensions. The number of entries, the expansion from national to global creators, the technical sophistication, creative ambition, and perhaps most importantly, the quality of its storytelling have all shown a significant expansion. Quantitative measures of growth — both at home and abroad — as well as the types of people submitting films tell us that use of AI tools in the creative industries continues to evolve, expand, and entrench themselves at a rapid speed. Workflows, apps, and use cases have shown a step change from experimentation and proofs of concept to well—considered and sophisticated infrastructures for creative ideation and output.

The machines are working. This technical acceleration has erased many of the constraints encountered from earlier models and human patience in the process. The jury could see this plainly: the technical accomplishments, from fidelity to camera movement to shot length and consistency of characters seemed unconstrained.

Relatedly, types of films that were previously beyond the tools were engaged with by our human creators with aplomb. Episodic content, character—driven affect, and the tricky comedic timing were all on display. Many a glistening AI tear was beautifully shed down synthetic pores. Yet capacities unconstrained do not guarantee good art.

Considering self—constraint, pushing non—obvious AI aesthetics, and surprising with deliberate creative choices became what increasingly distinguishes compelling filmmaking from 'mere' technical accomplishment.

It was delightful to note that the top storytellers were emerging as our top picks. This is not to discount the technical prowess of creatives' workflows, or how new forms pushed the envelope of what was possible, desirable, and appreciated.

Innovations of technique — whether on computation or composition — were palpably creating forms of media that transgressed the expectations of film and leaned into the affordances of generative models. These entries offered hints at something that was genuinely new; we are witnessing the remediation of content, ideas, and forms of one set of media being reworked into another. Yet, what remains most exciting about these media is when there is a palpable sense of a human leading their audience somewhere unexpected, extraordinary, and memorable.

6
\\ A CRAFT PERSPECTIVE



PAT SOFRA
Head of Art and Design
TBWA\Melbourne

One of the things that really stood out to me in this year's DISRUPT submissions was how much the standard of AI filmmaking has improved. And I don't just mean the technology. The filmmakers themselves have become better at using it. The craft has improved, too.

There's a noticeable difference in the films that use AI as part of a more traditional filmmaking process. The films I connected with most had something to say, characters I cared about and a reason to keep watching. AI was simply how the filmmakers brought those ideas to life.

There were moments when I stopped thinking about how the film was made and just cared about what I was watching. I think that's a pretty good sign that a filmmaker has got things right.

Of course, there were plenty of technically impressive films. The possibilities of these tools are pretty extraordinary, and it's exciting to see what people are coming up with. But there's a difference between making something that looks amazing and making something that actually connects with an audience.

Good composition, editing, pacing, performance and storytelling still matter. If anything, they're more important than ever. The technology might help you create almost anything you can imagine, but you still have to decide what's worth putting on screen.

As the tools become more accessible and the technical quality continues to improve, I suspect the novelty will start to wear off. We'll see more incredible imagery, but that alone won't be enough to make a film stand out.

For me, it's still about the idea, the execution and how a film makes you feel. The best work this year wasn't necessarily the work that showed me what AI could do.

It was the work that made me forget about AI altogether.

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\\ FINAL WORDS



LUCIO RIBEIRO
Chief AI & Innovation Officer
TBWA\Australia

In 1839, Paris unveiled the daguerreotype, the first photographic process the public could buy. The painter Paul Delaroche is said to have declared: “From today, painting is dead.” Painting simply moved. Once a machine could capture a scene perfectly, painters went after the one thing it couldn’t: a point of view. Thirty–five years later, the Impressionists held their first exhibition.

Filmmaking is living through its own 1839. Tessa Conrad, one of our jurors, captured the shift in one line. A year ago, you spotted AI video by the extra fingers. Now you spot it because it looks too perfect.

When we launched DISRUPT in 2025, we made a bet and a decision. That year, the conventional wisdom was that AI would replace human creativity, and most of the debate ran on “we think”. As the Disruption® company, and as believers in creativity, we bet the other way. Our theme, Humans and Their Tools, carried a claim we couldn’t yet prove, that as the tools improved, intention, taste and critical judgement would still decide what’s worth watching. The decision was to test that claim in public and move the conversation from “we think” to “we know”.

Year one gave us the first read. With Deakin, Swinburne and RMIT, we turned 371 submissions into Creative AI as National Infrastructure, an open–access white paper built on the most detailed public dataset yet on Australian AI filmmaking.

Year two was the real test.

The tools moved faster than any of us predicted, and 487 films arrived, up 31%. Australian entries grew 53%. If better tools were going to make judgement redundant, this was the year it should have shown.

It didn’t.

Seedance was the most–used video model this year, and 53 Australian films were made with it. Almost exactly half reached the shortlist: 26 in, 27 out. What separated them was what each maker decided to do with the same tool.

The rest of the data points the same way. Shortlisted films used fewer prompts than last year’s, 1,197 on average against 1,357, while the wider field held steady.

Paul Reardon, our Jury Chair, heard it in the room and named it: the human in the lead. I agree, and I’d go further. Intention, taste and critical judgement are still the marks of great work, exactly as they were in year one. We spend most of our attention on what AI changes and far too little on what stays the same. This is the clearest example I know of something that hasn’t changed.

I’d add one name of my own: the distillation premium. When generation is close to free, value moves to what you choose to keep. Lee Hickin put it from the other side of the jury table. The hard part is knowing “what to leave out”.

Not everything resolves neatly. Our data says the one–person studio led the shortlist this year. Stephen de Wolf and Tessa Conrad both argue the next leap comes from bringing editors, sound designers, colourists and actors back into the room. I think they’re right, and I think the data is right too. Year three will tell us which matters more.

Year one, we promised research and delivered it. This year the promise is bigger: a record. Two years of data is a trend line. Ten years would be the clearest picture anyone has of how Australia makes stories with AI. The white paper called for an Australian Creative AI Futures Index, and DISRUPT’s annual dataset is ready to be one of its inputs.

None of this works without the people behind it. Thank you to our partners Google, Indeed, BMW and Holding Redlich, to our academic partners at Swinburne, Deakin and RMIT, and to a 12–person jury that took the work seriously enough to argue about it.

And thank you to the TBWA team. Some of you gave this festival every working hour you had. Many more of you gave it a small touch at exactly the right moment, and it made a bigger difference than you know.

Delaroche was wrong about painting. The people predicting the end of filmmaking are wrong too. The tools can now make a perfect image on demand. Deciding which one deserves to be seen is still our job.

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MARCELO ANDRADE
Director, Country Marketing APAC
Indeed

THE HUMAN ADVANTAGE IN THE AGE OF AI

CREATIVITY, OPPORTUNITY AND THE FUTURE OF WORK

Artificial intelligence is making extraordinary capabilities available to almost everyone. A filmmaker can create worlds without a studio. A designer can turn an idea into a prototype in minutes. A jobseeker can produce a polished CV in seconds.

But when everyone can create more, faster and cheaper, what becomes truly valuable? This is no longer just a question for creative industries. It's a question for the future of work.

At Indeed, we're witnessing a profound change in how Australians navigate employment. Research conducted with YouGov among 1,034 working–age Australians in March 2026 found that 74% of jobseekers had used AI during their job search. Some 37% used it to rewrite their CVs, 41% to prepare cover letters and 29% to help navigate applicant tracking systems.

Yet technology hasn't necessarily made the experience better. Ninety per cent reported applying for a role and receiving no response, while only 7% of workers felt very confident that hiring processes were fair and unbiased.

We've democratised the ability to apply. We haven't democratised opportunity.

And the transformation goes well beyond recruitment.

Indeed's Australian job–title research shows that AI–related titles have tripled in a year, although they still represent just 1.6% of the market. More than a third of newly AI–related titles sit outside technology, including sales, management and education.

AI isn't simply creating new jobs. It's changing the skills and expectations within existing ones.

For young people entering the workforce, this presents both extraordinary possibilities and genuine uncertainty. Technical capabilities are becoming more accessible, but adaptability, critical thinking, collaboration and the ability to connect ideas across disciplines will matter enormously.

The same applies to creative professions. AI can accelerate production, but speed alone doesn't create relevance. The challenge is not simply to produce more. It's to understand what deserves to be made, who it serves and why it matters.

As Indeed's Senior Talent Strategy Advisor, Lauren Anderson, observes:

"We spent a decade telling candidates to stand out, then built hiring systems that could only see what fit a pattern. AI didn't break that system, it simply gave job seekers the same leverage employers have had for years. The CV was never the point. It was always a proxy for judgement, for fit, for whether this person can actually do the work. Now that AI can produce a perfect CV in thirty seconds, that proxy is worthless. But that's not a loss, that's a long overdue invitation to do things differently. Hiring is ripe for innovation, for systems that assess what matters instead of what's easiest to filter."

This is the opportunity before us: to rethink not only how work gets done, but how we recognise talent, create pathways into employment and ensure technology expands human potential rather than simply accelerating existing systems.

Because the future of work won't be defined by who can produce the most.

It will be shaped by those who can make what they create matter.

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\\ HOLDING REDLICH

Holding Redlich has supported the DISRUPT AI Film Festival from the outset and has been a valued partner across our first two years as we navigate the legal questions generative AI raises for filmmakers.

Here, the team examines the current AI and intellectual property landscape, including the rights, risks and evolving legal issues content creators need to consider when using AI.

AI and IP: the current state

Generative AI has transformed content creation, but it has not made intellectual property rights disappear. Faster production does not mean the underlying legal issues fall away and if anything, it complicates authorship, as it is often harder to establish the actual source of the creative work.

New technology, existing rights

Globally, disputes over AI training and outputs continue. Australia has no general US–style 'fair use' defence or broad AI training exception and copyright licensing reform remains under consideration. The Australian government has signalled an intent to introduce legislation around AI and copyright (anticipated around 2027) under its broader AI governance standards. The government has stated these laws will be based around the premise that creators must receive fair compensation and control, and proposed measures will likely prohibit AI systems from training on Australian copyrighted works without permission and financial compensation to the creator.

AI models draw on vast datasets whose sources may be opaque. Outputs can reproduce a substantial part of protected material or incorporate third–party branding. Content creators may face infringement claims, take down requests, and reputational damage. 'AI did it' is not a defence to primary copyright infringement and existing rights still apply.

Can you protect what you produce?

For copyright works, Australian law requires human authorship. Wholly AI–generated text or artwork may therefore lack protection, while AI–assisted work depends on the human contribution. A platform's promise that you 'own the output' cannot create copyright where none exists. The best advice here is to make a record of human creative decisions, revisions and supervision and do not assume prompting alone secures copyright protection.

IP is only the starting point

AI regulation is expanding worldwide. The EU AI Act includes copyright and transparency obligations; Australia has recently announced proposed mandatory frontier–AI safety protections. Existing obligations are also relevant where AI is used to create content: third–party contractual terms, privacy, defamation, the Australian Consumer Law, marketing codes, anti–discrimination and vilification laws, and employment requirements. Ethical questions about transparency, bias and accountability also demand attention.

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\\ ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

> TBWA EXTENDS ITS SINCERE APPRECIATION TO THE ENTRANTS, JUDGES, PANELLISTS, AND SPONSORS WHOSE CONTRIBUTIONS HAVE SHAPED THE SUCCESS OF DISRUPT 2026. YOUR PASSION AND SUPPORT HAVE MADE THIS SECOND CHAPTER TRULY UNFORGETTABLE.

\\ DISRUPT 2027

> 2027 PLANNING IS NOW UNDER WAY, EXPRESSIONS OF INTEREST ARE OPEN, CONTACT LUCIO.RIBEIRO@OMC.COM

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\\ APPENDIX

ACADEMIC WHITE PAPER

CREATIVE AI AS NATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE: EVIDENCE, ANALYSIS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS EMERGING FROM THE DISRUPT AI FILM FESTIVAL 2025

Australia's creative industries operate on a critical misconception: that better AI tools automatically produce better and faster work.

TBWA launched DISRUPT to challenge that convention. Designed as both research platform and training ground, DISRUPT enabled us to test this assumption against real evidence: 371 submissions, actual workflows, creator behaviour, and jury deliberation.

Our new white paper, Creative AI as National Infrastructure, created in partnership with Deakin University and Swinburne University of Technology, is the first academic research paper grounded in Australian GenAI creative data, offering tangible evidence on where creative value is moving. As production costs collapse, the question is no longer capability. It is critical human judgement, intent, and taste. And that changes everything for brands building competitive advantage.

To discover why human intention, taste and critical judgement are still the competitive advantage in a world of AI, download the paper here:

HTTPS://DAIFF.COM.AU/AI-WHITEPAPER

CREATIVE DISRUPTION MEETS
GENERATIVE STORYTELLING

2026

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