Return of the living dead?

Film purists may hate it, but a Hollywood company has unveiled ambitious plans to cast long-gone stars like Dietrich and Cagney in brand-new movies, thanks to the latest digital magic.

Marlene Dietrich (right), an audacious pioneer in the art of electronic resurrection, and (at left, from top) three other dead stars coming soon to a screen near you: Sammy Davis Jr., Gracie Allen and W. C. Fields. "The moment of death should not be the end of an actor's career."

Marlene Dietrich's family disagrees about whether she should still smoke because the legendary vamp's screen surfice turned the deeply deployed cigarette holder into a world-famous prop, but fashions — not medical research — change. Finally, the family decided Dietrich can smoke on screen, but she should not promote the tobacco companies' products.

But surely, you say, the German siren with the husky contralto, the Blue Angel, theress of the Blue Angel, the star of The Devil is a Woman, her seductive with whom we can't help falling in love again is dead. She cannot promote anything anymore because only her memory lives.

Yes and no. While it's true that the woman born Maria Magdalena von Loesch did depart this world in 1992, she lives on in celluloid, and the actress in that medium lives on in our brave new cyberworld — the first of potentially very many stars to be electronically examined. Indeed, the new digital Marlene made her debut last week in Los Angeles, appearing in a brief commercial for her new studio, a two-year-old company called Virtual Celebrity Productions.

VCP already has a roster of stars that MGM would have envied. The doyenne comedienne Gracie Allen, her cigar-chomping husband George Burns, James Cagney, Sammy Davis Jr., W. C. Fields, Natalie Wood, Bing Crosby and Vincent Price are all dead, yet they're all clients of VCP. And VCP has great plans for their future. Using a state-of-the-art electronic process that tracks facial expressions and a three-dimensional animation technique, VCP can now bring to digital life the long-gone actors.

The technique owes something to films such as Woody Allen's Zelig (1983) and Robert Zemeckis's Forrest Gump (1994), in which old and new images were married either by matte superimposition or comput erized digital manipulation. Still, those were basically cut-and-paste jobs.

Jeff Lotman, VCP's 38-year-old chief executive and a published animation historian, calls his process "photo surrealism." While acknowledging that there are a few technical glitches still to overcome, he forecasts that VCP will be able to place its star-studded stable of players in cameo roles within the next three years and in full-length features by 2004.

The virtual Dietrich appeared at the Association for Computing Machinery's L.A. graphics exhibition, known as Siggraph. There, the famous voice — actually a rendering by a female impersonator, one of 28 additions — described with unfa tually double entendres what separates the men from the boys. It's all about shape and scale, and how the skill now resides with her animators.

The virtual Dietrich did not precisely replicate the remembered screen image, but it did capture the essence. VCP's animators admit that mimicking muscular movements remains a challenge. To create a "synthesesian," they need to film a similarly built actor and then digitally manipulate the look of Marlene or Cagney onto that image.

With new graphical tricks, animators and technicians can create a three-dimensional model through a Belgian-made technique that uses as many as 5,000 measurements for each film frame (more at 50 frames a second) to raise a living actor from the dead. But VCP's tracking method follows facial features through the frames and reduces the measurements by a factor of 16, to make a digital clone.

This spectre of posthumous immortality via virtual imagery isn't just a technological issue of course. There are legal, monetary and ethical concerns as well. Before "signing" his deceased talent, Lotman must negotiate with the surviving family. In Dietrich's case, the family has almost complete control over what she will "do" for the next few decades. Her grandson Peter Riva, himself a licensing specialist and literary agent in New York, debated the smoking question with his mother Maria, who is 76, and Dietrich's only child.

Riva said: "My grandmother was not an actress but a performer who used literally thousands of props. When we turned them over to the new film museum in Berlin there were 35 trunk loads including 150,000 photographs and 25,000 items of clothes and shoes and jewelry. She used almost any trick after all she brought luxuriosity to the screen and invented her own name at 15 — but there are limits and we can say no."

Riva thinks his grandmother's career can last another 200 years and she calls her new image "the digital original." It is not yet 100-per-cent "correct," he admits, but "about 85 per cent — and you have to see her moving."

For Riva, the electronic images are simply new tools to extend an already catalogued career, and "new tubes of paint with which to color. After all, you never really see Dietrich, just her image on the screen, and that's what we can now continue." Or, as his lawyer Edward Rosenberg put it, "the moment of death should not be the end of an actor's career.

For a 90-minute feature that would be $162,000, high even by today's budgets, Riva personally wants to see his grandmother in a "prequel" to the great Bogart-Bergman classic, Casablanca.

"Remember in the story that Rick was in Paris and got his heart broken by a girl before he met Bergman" he asks excitedly. "Well Dietrich is the girl!" And who would play the late Humphrey Bogart, who died in 1957? "Dodgey himself, of course," says Riva. "Steve and Leslie are already keen; they're just waiting to see how the technology finally turns out." Steve and Leslie: The Bogart hits, of course.