

RETHINKING THE DOCUMENTARY PACT IN THE AGE OF GENERATIVE AI: TRANSPARENCY AND THE ETHICS OF AI IN DOCUMENTARY PRODUCTION

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Abstract: *The present article examines how generative artificial intelligence reshapes the epistemological and ethical foundations of documentary filmmaking. Building on the concept of the documentary “pact” between filmmaker and audience, it argues that AI introduces a qualitative rupture by enabling the production of audiovisual material without an indexical link to reality. To address this shift, the paper proposes a five-level taxonomy of AI interventions, ranging from technical-assistive tools to fully generative, authorial systems. Through comparative case studies, it demonstrates that ethical evaluation cannot rely on binary distinctions between authentic and fabricated content, but must consider degrees of ontological transformation. The article advances the principle of calibrated disclosure, arguing that transparency should scale with the extent of AI intervention, and concludes that maintaining trust in documentary depends on aligning technological practices with clear and context-sensitive ethical communication.*

Key words: *generative AI, documentary film, media ethics, transparency, synthetic media.*

1. Introduction

Documentary film has long been understood as a practice grounded in what John Grierson (1933) termed the “creative treatment of actuality” — a formulation that simultaneously acknowledges the filmmaker's interpretive agency and asserts the primacy of the actual world as raw material. The epistemic authority of documentary rests on what Nichols (2001) describes as an implicit contract between filmmaker and viewer: the presumption that the images and sounds presented bear an indexical relationship to the pro-filmic world, functioning as what Berger (2008) called “quotations from appearances”. This contract, always fragile, has been progressively

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destabilized by successive waves of digital manipulation (Gunning, 2004; Manovich, 2001; Ritchin, 1990) but generative artificial intelligence marks a qualitative rupture rather than a mere intensification of existing trends and intensifies existing dynamics of media manipulation while introducing new forms of uncertainty and challenges to trust (Hancock et al., 2020; Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020a).

Unlike prior digital tools that modified existing footage, generative AI can produce photorealistic imagery and convincing vocal synthesis without any indexical source — no camera, no scene, no witness (Ritchin, 2025). This capacity has already entered documentary production through multiple vectors: deepfake-based identity protection in *Welcome to Chechnya* (France, 2020) posthumous voice synthesis in *Roadrunner* (Focus Feature, 2021), AI-generated visual testimony in the *Exhibit A-i* project (ExhibitAI, 2023), and AI-authored screenwriting in *About a Hero* (About a Hero, 2024). Yet these high-profile interventions represent only the most visible end of a spectrum. Automated transcription, AI-driven color grading, intelligent archival search, and machine-learning-assisted editing have quietly become standard workflow components in many documentary productions (Aston et al., 2017a; Cizek & Uricchio, 2022).

Despite this proliferation, scholarly engagement with AI in documentary remains fragmented. Existing literature tends to focus either on deepfakes as a disinformation threat (Chesney & Citron, 2019; Paris & Donovan, 2019) or on computational creativity as an aesthetic category (Colton & Wiggins, 2012), with limited attention to the differentiated production contexts in which AI tools are actually deployed. The documentary-specific ethical dimensions, particularly questions of consent, posthumous representation, and the spectatorial contract, remain undertheorized (Kääpä & Sills-Jones, 2026).

This article addresses that gap by proposing a five-level taxonomy of AI interventions in documentary film production, organized according to the degree to which each intervention alters the ontological status of the audiovisual material. The taxonomy is integrated with an ethical framework anchored in the concept of *calibrated disclosure* — the obligation to communicate to audiences the nature and extent of AI involvement, scaled proportionally to the epistemic stakes of the intervention. Drawing on five recent case studies that span the full taxonomic range, the article argues that responsible AI adoption in documentary requires neither blanket prohibition nor uncritical acceptance, but a differentiated practice of transparency commensurate with the depth of the ontological transformation involved.

2. Rethinking the Documentary “Pact” in the Age of AI

Documentary filmmaking is generally represented under what scholars have variously described as a “pact” or “contract” between the filmmaker and the audience regarding the film’s truth claims and the relation to historical reality (Nichols, 2017; Renov, 1993). At its core, this contract rests on the assumption that the images and sounds presented in a documentary bear a privileged relationship to the actual world. As John Berger suggests, visual images play a primary role in shaping how reality is perceived and understood, as the documentary image isolates and frames fragments of reality, giving

the impression that what is shown has been encountered rather than constructed (Berger, 1972). Bill Nichols (2017) reaffirms the theory as it identifies the documentary film as an indexical relationship with reality, which allows the image to represent a specific aspect of the historical or contemporary world with a great accuracy.

However, given the recent advancements of technology and the rise of artificial intelligence, particularly in its generative forms, each of these premises are being disrupted. A synthetic voice does not require the speaker to have spoken and a generative image does not require a camera, a scene, or a witness. Also, an AI-authored screenplay does not require a human author's lived experience or intentional meaning-making. As Ritchin emphasizes, generative AI represents a paradigm shift: stating that it may simulate photography, but there is no longer a witness present at the scene, nor is there a camera (Ritchin, 2025). The ontological rupture is not merely technical but epistemological: it destabilizes the viewer's capacity to assess what kind of evidence is being presented and, consequently, how much epistemic weight to assign it. The disruptions that AI brings to documentary is not simply a matter of authentic versus fake, but also implying a wide range of AI applications such as enhancement, restoration, and even reconstruction, that do not necessarily interfere with a documentary connection to the real world and questions authenticity. Mitchell's early account of digital image manipulation already anticipated processes mentioned and that they occupy very different positions along a continuum that does not map cleanly onto the opposition between the real and the fabricated (Mitchell, 1992), generating a point that has only grown more pressing as generative tools have become increasingly accessible to documentary practitioners.

What AI unsettles, therefore, is not simply the credibility of individual images but the stability of the documentary contract itself where filmmaker and viewer negotiate the truth status of what is shown (Bruzzi, 2006; Nichols, 2017). As researchers argue, we can no longer treat documentary's relationship to the real as a self-evident baseline from which deviations can be measured and judged. That relationship must now be understood as something actively negotiated, contingent on the specific tools employed, the intentions behind their use, and the degree of transparency with which those choices are disclosed to the audience (Aufderheide, 2007; Lees, 2024).

Archival Producers Alliance notes that generative AI features are continuous with older documentary techniques such as reenactment, but its accessibility and scalability introduce pressures of a different order (Jenkins et al., 2024). The ethical question, then, is not where to draw a single boundary between the permissible and the prohibited, but how to distinguish between AI as a tool of preservation, reconstruction, and fabrication.

As Hight (2022) argues, synthetic media can be understood both as a disruption of documentary conventions and as an extension for representational practices, suggesting that the answer is not the prohibition but the differentiation. This differentiation matters because, as Lees (Lees, 2024) demonstrates through documentary case studies, deepfake applications vary enormously in intent and effect — from protecting the identities of vulnerable subjects to reconstructing the voices of the dead — and collapsing these distinctions into a single ethical verdict obscures more than it clarifies.

The question of transparency becomes central here: as Jenkins, Petrucelli, and Antell (2024) warn that generated material presented as real may be recirculated across platforms and productions, “forever muddying the historical record,” particularly in a documentary ecosystem where images are repeatedly reused and recontextualized.

3. A Taxonomy of AI Interventions in Documentary Production

3.1. Level 1: Technical Assistive

At this level, AI tools operate on existing documentary material without altering its representational content. Applications now span the entire production pipeline: automated transcription platforms (OpenAI's Whisper, Otter.ai, Trint, Descript) convert hours of interview footage into searchable, time-stamped text within minutes; AI features embedded in industry-standard editing suites, Adobe Premiere Pro's Sensei engine, DaVinci Resolve's neural engine, Final Cut Pro's ML-based tools, provide automated scene detection, auto-reframing, color matching, and intelligent shot tagging; dedicated audio tools such as iZotope Neutron and Adobe Podcast Enhance use machine learning to remove background noise and improve vocal intelligibility from field recordings (Azzarelli et al., 2025). As Anlen and Cizek (2024) observe, most documentarians are already integrating AI into their daily workflows, “often without realizing the broader ramifications.” These tools function analogously to traditional post-production technologies: they optimize workflows and reduce labor without introducing new representational claims. The indexical bond between the image or sound and its source remains undisturbed. Ethical obligations at this level are minimal, disclosure is unnecessary, just as filmmakers are not typically expected to identify the specific editing software or color grading tool used in a project.

3.1. Level 2: Enhancement-Restorative

Such as for enhancement and restoration, AI modifies the perceptible qualities of existing material while preserving its representational content. Applications include upscaling and restoration of degraded archival footage (e.g., Topaz Video AI, DaVinci Resolve's Super Scale), audio enhancement and noise removal from historical recordings, AI-driven colorization of black-and-white footage (e.g., DeOldify), and frame interpolation for smoother playback of archival material. These techniques build on a longer history of digital restoration. Still, machine learning has dramatically reduced the time, cost, and expertise required, making interventions previously reserved for well-funded archival institutions accessible to independent documentary teams (Fossati, 2018).

The key distinction from Level 1 is that these interventions alter what the viewer perceives, the footage looks or sounds materially different, without changing what it *depicts*. The indexical source remains intact; only its sensory presentation is modified. Ethical obligations at this level are emerging but modest: filmmakers should ideally indicate when historical material has been significantly enhanced, particularly when colorization or upscaling risks leading audiences to misattribute a recording's original

quality, provenance, or era (Cherchi Usai, 2001). The documentary *Endurance* (Pennington, 2024), about Ernest Shackleton's Antarctic expedition, exemplifies responsible practice at this level: the Ukrainian company Respeecher used AI to clean up century-old wax cylinder recordings of Shackleton's voice and generate enhanced audio that preserved the original speech content, while the film clearly situated these recordings within their archival context.

3.2. Level 3: Substitutive-Protective

Deepfakes are represented by media content (images, videos, audio) created or modified using advanced artificial intelligence techniques, especially deep learning. They can replace the faces or voices of real people, creating the false impression that individuals said and done things they never actually did (Altuncu et al., 2024). The term “deepfake” is a combination of “deep learning” and “fake” and was first introduced in 2017 on the Reddit platform, where users created and shared pornographic videos manipulated with the faces of celebrities (Tual, 2024).

In documentary filmmaking, AI replaces specific elements of the material, typically for ethical rather than aesthetic reasons, while the broader representational context remains indexically grounded. The most genuine example is the AI-driven face replacement in David France's *Welcome to Chechnya* (2020) documentary, where machine-learning-based “digital prosthetics” were applied to protect the identities of LGBTQ+ individuals fleeing persecution in Chechnya. Volunteer activists donated their facial likenesses, which were then digitally imposed over the subjects' actual faces. The rest of the footage such as locations, actions, body language, emotional expressions, remained unaltered. As VFX supervisor, Ryan Laney explained that the technique drew on the same machine learning techniques that inspired deepfakes, but reversed the intent: instead of fabricating deceptive content, it created a protective digital mask (Grobar, 2021).

The technique used in the premiere was considered by the International Documentary Association a “game changer” in terms of protecting identity, while the directors believe that filming the protagonists in a way that would protect their identity by either blurring or filming their faces in shadow would not have had the same impact on the audience (Thomson, 2023).

The ethical logic at this level is distinctive: the substitution is performed *in service of* the documentary's truth-telling mission, enabling testimony that would otherwise be impossible due to safety risks. As Bill Nichols (2017) argues, documentary authority derives not from the absence of mediation but from the establishment of a credible relationship between image and historical reality. Similarly, Stella Bruzzi (2006) conceptualizes documentary as a performative practice in which truth emerges through negotiation rather than direct capture. From this perspective, the visible traces of manipulation in *Welcome to Chechnya* do not undermine its truth-claims but instead function as markers of reflexivity, reinforcing the conditions under which safe testimonies for actors become possible.

3.3. Level 4: Generative-Reconstructive

At more advanced stages of intervention, AI generates audiovisual content with no direct indexical source in the profilmic world. While such material may draw on real data — including personal writings, testimonies, or historical records — the resulting image or sound remains synthetic, as it is computationally produced rather than recorded from reality. (Fallis, 2021; Koutras, 2023; Manovich, 2001) Two contrasting cases illuminate the ethical stakes at this level. In Morgan Neville's *Roadrunner: A Film About Anthony Bourdain*, AI was used to generate three sentences in Bourdain's voice — lines he had written but never spoken aloud. The AI model was trained on approximately twelve hours of Bourdain's existing vocal recordings. Crucially, the synthetic lines were designed to be indistinguishable from authentic recordings, and the film did not disclose their use. When the technique was revealed by journalist Helen Rosner in *The New Yorker*, it triggered major controversy. Neville's remark, "We can have a documentary-ethics panel about it later", was widely criticized, and Bourdain's ex-wife Ottavia Busia denied having given consent (Rosner, 2021). Documentary filmmaker Alan Barker described the issue in terms directly relevant to this taxonomy: "There is an unwritten social contract that documentaries are comprised of actualities not contrivances." (Carey, 2021). The ethical failure in *Roadrunner* was not the use of AI per se, but the absence of disclosure: by blending synthetic voice seamlessly into authentic recordings without any signal to the viewer, Neville violated the spectatorial contract at a level where transparency is non-negotiable.

The Exhibit A-i: The Refugee Account project (2023) offers a contrasting model. Produced by Australian social justice law firm Maurice Blackburn, the project used generative AI to create photorealistic images based on over 300 hours of witness testimony from refugees detained in Australian offshore processing centers on Nauru and Manus Island. Because cameras and journalists were banned from these facilities, no photographic evidence existed. The AI-generated images were workshoped with survivors to ensure accuracy, reviewed by award-winning photojournalist Mridula Amin, and presented with consistent labelling identifying them as AI-generated. The project was exhibited at the PhotoVogue Festival in Milan and at Australia's Immigration Museum, and the materials were presented to the Australian Minister for Immigration. Here, generative AI served as what Ritchin calls a way to "depict that which is outside the scope of photography" — not as a substitute for the real, but as a visualization of testimony where no indexical alternative exists. The ethical model is transparent, survivor-led, and consistently labelled: a paradigm for responsible Level 4 practice (Braeunert, 2026).

3.4. Level 5: Ontological-Generative

AI is not merely a tool used within an otherwise human-directed documentary process; it becomes an authorial agent. The most notable example is Piotr Winiewicz's *About a Hero*, which opened the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA) in November 2024. The film is adapted from a screenplay generated by "Kaspar," an AI

language model trained on Werner Herzog's body of written and spoken work. The resulting narrative — a surreal murder mystery set in a fictional German town — is interspersed with real interviews with artists, philosophers, and scientists reflecting on originality, authenticity, and creativity in the age of AI. Herzog himself gave permission for the project and approved the final film, while the Ukrainian company Respeecher created a synthetic version of his voice.

About a Hero occupies a deliberately liminal position in documentary practice. It opens with a disclaimer: "Viewers are advised to exercise caution in trusting its visual and auditory components". The film does not claim to document reality in any conventional sense; rather, it documents the process and consequences of delegating creative authority to a machine. As Winiewicz stated, the project was never intended to challenge Herzog, but to provoke reflection on "our inherent sense of superiority that ultimately leads to technophobia". The documentary dimension lies not in what Kaspar produced, but in how humans responded to and shaped that output (Barraclough, 2024).

Level 5 interventions fundamentally reconfigure the question of authorship in documentary by redistributing creative agency beyond the human filmmaker. As Lev Manovich (Manovich, 2013) argues, contemporary computational media operate through automation and variability, challenging traditional notions of singular authorship and intentional control. In parallel, Kate Crawford (2021) emphasizes that AI systems are not neutral tools but complex socio-technical assemblages, embedding multiple layers of human and non-human agency into cultural production. Applied to documentary practice, these perspectives complicate the attribution of authorship and destabilize the category of "actuality," which can no longer be understood as a direct capture of reality.

4. Cross-case Analysis: Patterns and Principles

Reading across the five cases mapped onto our taxonomy, several cross-cutting principles emerge for the governance of AI in documentary production. First, transparency must scale with ontological depth. At Levels 1 and 2, where AI enhances existing material without altering its representational content, disclosure remains a matter of professional good practice rather than ethical necessity. At Level 3, it becomes constitutive of the intervention's legitimacy, as *Welcome to Chechnya* demonstrated through its opening disclaimer and deliberate visual imperfections that signalled the substitution to attentive viewers. At Level 4, the divergence between *Roadrunner*'s covert voice synthesis and *Exhibit A*'s consistent labelling illustrates that the same category of intervention can yield opposing ethical outcomes depending entirely on the disclosure regime. At Level 5, transparency must extend beyond individual techniques to encompass the ontological framing of the work itself. This gradient aligns with what Aufderheide and Nisbet identified as documentary filmmakers' core ethical commitment: ensuring audiences can assess the evidentiary status of what they are watching (Nisbet & Aufderheide, 2009).

Second, consent operates as a threshold condition, not a contextual variable. The *Roadrunner* controversy was amplified by its contested consent architecture: Neville

claimed authorization from Bourdain's estate, but his ex-wife publicly denied approving the AI voice reproduction (Aiello, 2021). The *Exhibit A-i* project inverted this dynamic, centering participatory workshops in which survivors actively guided the image generation process, a model consistent with what Aston et al. (2017) describe as co-creative documentary practice. As David Leslie of the Alan Turing Institute argued, posthumous AI reproduction of voice or likeness may serve legitimate documentary purposes, but only under conditions of informed consent and advance disclosure. Without these, the intervention becomes appropriation rather than representation (Leslie, 2021).

Third, ethical intention is necessary but insufficient for ethical outcomes. Both *Welcome to Chechnya* and *Roadrunner* involved AI-driven manipulation of identity markers, and both directors could plausibly claim a benevolent purpose. Yet their ethical evaluations diverge sharply because intent was mediated through radically different transparency practices.

Fourth, AI can extend the documentary's epistemic reach into domains previously inaccessible to the camera. The *Exhibit A-i* project demonstrates that generative AI can render visible what was structurally invisible, not by fabricating reality, but by translating testimony into visual form where no photographic record exists. Ritchin (2025) gestures toward a similar application: using AI to visualize scientifically grounded climate futures as a tool for proactive public engagement rather than retrospective documentation. These cases suggest a productive role for synthetic imagery in what Nichols (2001) termed the "discourses of sobriety," provided the images are clearly marked as reconstructive rather than indexical and framed within an explicit evidentiary context.

5. Discussions, and Conclusion, and Limitations

Artificial intelligence is neither the salvation nor the doom of documentary filmmaking. It is a suite of tools whose ethical valence depends on how, why, and, crucially, how transparently they are deployed. The taxonomy proposed here, ranging from technical-assistive interventions that preserve the indexical bond to ontological-generative applications that sever it, provides a differentiated vocabulary for an industry that has too often discussed AI in binary terms. The case studies confirm both the width of the spectrum and the complexity of the ethical terrain. *Welcome to Chechnya* demonstrates that AI can serve protection and empowerment when transparency is foregrounded; *Roadrunner* illustrates the reputational and epistemic costs of opacity; *Exhibit A-i* opens possibilities for visualizing testimony where cameras are barred; *Endurance* exemplifies responsible archival restoration; and *About a Hero* interrogates the very categories of originality and authorship that documentary has historically claimed to uphold.

The framework proposed here carries limitations that warrant acknowledgment. The taxonomy is derived from a purposive selection of Anglophone and European cases; its applicability to documentary traditions in the Global South, where distinct production ecologies and audience expectations prevail, remains untested (Ginsburg et al., 2002).

The five levels, while analytically useful, describe a continuum — hybrid interventions that straddle adjacent levels may resist clean classification. Moreover, the framework foregrounds production-side ethics; audience reception of AI disclosure — whether it enhances or erodes trust — is an empirical question that this conceptual analysis cannot resolve (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020). Despite these limitations, the principle of calibrated disclosure offers a practical orientation. It respects the diversity of AI applications, avoids the false choice between prohibition and uncritical adoption, and places the spectatorial contract at the center of ethical deliberation. In an era of deepening skepticism toward mediated reality, documentary's greatest asset is not its technology but its trustworthiness. AI can serve that trustworthiness — but only if filmmakers resist the temptation to let its seamlessness become an excuse for silence.

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