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Article

Generative AI and the Reconstruction of Visual Reality: Creative Intervention and the Boundaries of Authenticity in Documentary Media

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Abstract: Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) is fundamentally changing how documentary images relate to the reality they represent. Documentary has never been a simple reproduction of reality; filming, editing, and narrative construction have always involved subjective creative choices. However, GenAI introduces a further paradigm shift by allowing audiovisual material to be generated or reconstructed without a corresponding act of photographic recording. This technological leap makes the traditional relationship between photorealism and indexicality significantly less stable. Consequently, an image may look convincingly real without being a photographic record of an actual event. Furthermore, GenAI radically alters creative practice. Prompting, selecting, correcting, regenerating, and sequencing generated material can distribute creative agency across human creators, generative systems, training data, and complex production processes. Yet, distributed creative agency does not mean that factual responsibility can be distributed in the same manner. This article therefore considers documentary authenticity through four related dimensions: referential authenticity, procedural authenticity, narrative authenticity, and factual responsibility. By examining contemporary case studies and theoretical frameworks in media ethics, this research highlights the evolving challenges in visual documentation. Rather than making documentary truth irrelevant, GenAI makes it more necessary than ever to explain how an image relates to historical reality, how it was produced, how it functions within a documentary narrative, and who is ultimately responsible for its factual claims.

Keywords: generative ai; documentary film; visual authenticity; creative agency; synthetic media; indexicality

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1. Introduction

Documentary images have long maintained a distinctive relationship with the historical world. Unlike fictional works, documentaries, news footage, and other nonfiction forms typically refer to people, events, and places that exist—or once existed—outside the image. This relationship is partly grounded in indexicality: the physical connection between a photographic image and the scene present before the camera at the moment of capture [1]. Documentary authenticity, therefore, concerns the relationship between representation and reality, though it cannot be reduced solely to the mechanical properties of image capture.

This does not imply that documentaries deliver an entirely objective record of reality. Documentary practice has long been understood as involving creative engagement with actuality [2]. Choices about framing, filming, editing, sound design, and narrative structure consistently shape how reality is rendered. Rather than passively observing or

reproducing a pre-existing reality, documentary practice involves ongoing negotiation among reality, image, interpretation, and perspective. Creativity and fidelity to actuality are thus not mutually exclusive; on the contrary, authenticity may emerge precisely through deliberate creative techniques.

Digital imaging had already transformed this relationship prior to the emergence of generative artificial intelligence. Advances in digital image processing and synthetic image creation challenged conventional understandings of photographic truth. Generative AI extends this transformation—not merely by producing highly realistic visual outputs, but by participating across multiple stages of documentary production, including script development, narrative structuring, audiovisual generation, historical reconstruction, and post-production [3]. Technological involvement has thus shifted from modifying recorded material to actively generating and organizing documentary content.

Recent scholarship has begun re-examining documentary authenticity in light of these developments [1]. Some studies explore how generative production affects foundational expectations of documentary integrity and emphasize the need for transparency proportionate to the extent of technological involvement. Others approach the issue through questions of ethical responsibility, institutional standards, mediation practices, and accountability. Collectively, these perspectives indicate that the challenge posed by generative AI cannot be reduced to binary distinctions between 'real' and 'fake' images. Instead, authenticity increasingly depends on the conditions under which generative material is produced, situated, and presented as part of a documentary claim. At the same time, differing conceptual approaches leave room for integrated analysis of how multiple dimensions of authenticity interact when generative systems contribute to both production and narrative construction.

Against this background, this article addresses three interrelated questions [4]. First, how does generative AI differ from earlier photographic and digital technologies in its role within documentary representations of reality? Second, how does the integration of generative systems into production and narrative construction affect human creative agency and narrative authority? Third, if visual resemblance to reality no longer ensures a direct link to a recorded event, what alternative grounds support documentary authenticity?

This article contends that generative AI does not render documentary authenticity obsolete; rather, it transforms the conditions under which authenticity is established and assessed. A connection to recorded reality remains significant, yet it may no longer be sufficient in isolation. Drawing on concepts of documentary authenticity, indexicality, simulation, and creative agency, the article investigates how authenticity is reconfigured when generative technologies participate in both the production and narrative construction of documentary material [5].

The central contribution is a four-dimensional framework for evaluating documentary authenticity under generative conditions: referential authenticity, procedural transparency, narrative coherence, and factual accountability. Rather than introducing wholly new concerns, the framework integrates existing considerations into a unified analytical structure. Referential authenticity examines how representations connect to historical actuality; procedural transparency addresses how generative material is produced and whether the nature and extent of technological involvement are clearly communicated; narrative coherence assesses whether the arrangement and contextualization of documentary elements remain faithful to the events and circumstances they represent; and factual accountability identifies the individuals or institutions ultimately responsible for the truth claims advanced by the final work. By distinguishing these interdependent dimensions, the framework enables evaluation of authenticity beyond surface appearance—engaging representation, production process, narrative context, and responsibility in concert [6].

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design and Theoretical Framework

This article adopts a conceptual and interpretive research design to examine how the use of generative AI in documentary production may reshape foundational concepts such as authenticity, indexicality, and creative agency. Rather than experimentally measuring causal effects on audience perceptions of authenticity, the study integrates insights from documentary theory, digital imaging, generative media, and creative production practices [7]. It analyzes shifts in the relationship between documentary representation and reality across evolving technological conditions.

Generative AI involvement is understood broadly—not limited to synthetic images or videos, but encompassing multiple stages of documentary production, including script and narrative development, audiovisual enhancement, image and sound generation, reconstruction, and post-production [8]. These applications vary in the degree to which they modify recorded material or produce new documentary content. Their implications for indexicality, creative agency, and authenticity are analyzed in subsequent sections.

The theoretical framework centers on three interrelated concepts. First is documentary authenticity and the indexical relationship between photographic images and the historical world, providing a foundation for assessing how generated material alters conventional claims to visual evidence. Second is the theory of simulation and simulacra, employed to explore how generative images blur distinctions between reality and representation. Third is AI-mediated creative agency: drawing on contemporary understandings of creativity as relational and distributed across human practitioners, technologies, and production processes, this concept informs the analysis of how generative AI reshapes creative decision-making and narrative control in audiovisual production.

2.2. Literature Selection and Analytical Approach

The literature selection followed a purposive and conceptually driven approach aligned with the conceptual and interpretive design of this study. Rather than aiming to exhaustively identify all publications concerning generative artificial intelligence and documentary media, the selection was organized around the main conceptual domains required to address the research questions: documentary authenticity and indexicality; digital and synthetic representation; generative AI and documentary production; and AI-mediated creative agency, transparency, and responsibility. Within established areas of scholarship, priority was given to foundational or influential works that provide the theoretical basis for concepts such as documentary authenticity, indexicality, and simulation. For emerging areas related to generative AI, more recent peer-reviewed studies were prioritized in order to reflect current technological and scholarly developments [5]. Non-academic materials were used only where they provided illustrative examples of current media practice or relevant technical standards, rather than as sources for the article's theoretical framework.

Literature searches were conducted primarily through Google Scholar using combinations of terms including "documentary authenticity," "documentary truth," "indexicality," "photographic indexicality," "digital imagery," "synthetic media," "deepfake," "generative AI," "AI-generated documentary," "documentary production," "creative agency," "creative labour," "transparency," and "AI disclosure." Searches were refined across the different conceptual domains rather than conducted through a single search string, because the study brings together scholarship from documentary theory, digital imaging, generative media, and creative production [9].

Sources were selected according to three main criteria: their direct conceptual relevance to the research questions; their theoretical significance or contribution to the development of the relevant field; and, particularly for generative AI-related research, their relevance to recent developments in generative media practice. Peer-reviewed journal articles and academic books were prioritized. Foundational theoretical works were retained regardless of publication date where they were necessary for establishing the conceptual basis of the analysis. Studies focused primarily on technical model performance, without a substantive connection to documentary representation,

authenticity, or creative production, were excluded. The review is therefore selective rather than systematic, with the aim of achieving sufficient conceptual coverage across the areas necessary for the analysis rather than providing an exhaustive mapping of generative AI scholarship [10].

The analysis proceeds in three steps. First, it compares traditional photography, digital modification, and generative imagery in terms of how each maintains or changes its referential relationship with reality. Second, it examines how creative practices in generative AI-assisted audiovisual production—including prompting, selection, correction, and sequencing—may change the relationship of agency between human creators and generative systems. Finally, drawing on research on documentary authenticity and media ethics, the study considers the conditions under which documentary authenticity may be established and maintained in a generative media environment [1].

3. Results

3.1. *Creative Intervention Before Generative AI*

The analysis first suggests that generative AI should not be regarded as the inaugural technology to shape documentary representation. Documentary has never functioned as a mechanical reproduction of historical reality. Camera placement, shot selection, editing, sound design, and narration all actively influence how recorded events are presented. Documentary authenticity has therefore never relied on the absence of creative shaping. Traditionally, however, such choices have typically operated upon audiovisual material that maintains a foundational referential link to the reality from which it was captured.

A notable early example is a widely studied 1935 film documenting a large-scale public assembly in Nuremberg. While the film records actual gatherings and speeches, its formal construction transforms the event into a highly choreographed visual presentation. The camera movement follows a central figure through assembled crowds, and key addresses are filmed from low angles, producing a distinctive compositional emphasis. Scholarly discussion of this work has centered on its dual role as both a historical record and an exemplar of cinematic technique and rhetorical framing [9].

This distinction highlights two distinct dimensions of documentary fidelity. The first pertains to whether the people, objects, and events depicted existed independently prior to recording — a question grounded in indexicality and referential continuity. The second concerns how recorded material is structured and interpreted through framing, sequencing, narrative organization, and rhetorical positioning. An image may preserve a direct referential connection to an actual occurrence while simultaneously conveying that occurrence through a deliberately shaped interpretive framework [11].

Creative shaping of documentary material predates both digital processing and generative methods. The central issue is not whether documentary images are mediated, but rather the nature and integrity of the relationship sustained between that mediation and historical reality [12]. This conceptual distinction establishes a necessary foundation for understanding why digital alteration—and subsequently, generative creation—introduces qualitatively new considerations for documentary fidelity.

3.2. *From Digital Manipulation to Generative Reconstruction*

Traditional documentary production involves a series of creative decisions, including subject selection, camera placement, material curation, editing choices, and the use of sound, narration, and narrative structure to interpret events. Such selection is integral to documentary practice and does not inherently compromise authenticity [13]. The indexical relationship between photographic material and reality can coexist with narrative construction. What matters is not the presence of creative input, but how that input shapes the relationship between the documentary image and the historical world.

The development of CGI, digital compositing, virtual reality (VR), and 360-degree documentary has extended technological engagement further into the audiovisual experience. These tools can modify visual information, reconstruct spatial environments,

and reshape the viewer's relationship to documentary settings. Conventional media witness presents images and sounds representing an event, whereas VR seeks to simulate experiential engagement aligned with others' lived perspectives. Immersive media therefore alter not only what viewers perceive, but also how they situate themselves in relation to represented reality.

An early example is Nonny de la Peña's *Hunger in Los Angeles*, presented at the Sundance Film Festival in 2012. The project reconstructed an incident outside a Los Angeles food bank, where a man experienced sudden physical distress while waiting in line. It combined a digitally reconstructed environment with authentic audio recorded during the actual event, enabling participants to engage with the scene through a head-mounted display. Rather than observing from a fixed external viewpoint, participants experienced a simulated sense of presence within the reconstructed setting. This case illustrates how immersive technologies can transform documentary engagement while preserving grounding in documented events and verifiable evidence [14].

This introduces a dynamic interplay between immersion and nonfictional representation. Users of VR documentaries may suspend disbelief regarding their virtual presence while still accepting the underlying content as factually grounded. The simulated sensation of 'being there' does not imply erasure of the historical referent. Immersive technologies can profoundly reshape how reality is perceived without displacing the real-world context to which the documentary refers [1].

Generative AI advances this transformation significantly. It introduces a qualitative shift in documentary production by enabling the creation of audiovisual material without requiring an indexical link to physical reality. This distinction is critical: while mediation has long been inherent in both traditional and digital documentary practices, generative AI operates across multiple production stages and generates audiovisual elements independently of prior recording acts [9, 14].

This article characterizes this evolution as a transition from digital modification toward generative reconstruction [12]. The distinction does not imply earlier digital technologies lacked capacity for synthetic or fictional imagery. Rather, generative AI lowers the technical threshold for integrating audiovisual generation into routine creative workflows. Through prompting, iterative generation, selection, refinement, and repeated revision, creators can produce or reconstruct audiovisual material without directly recording its apparent subject. The significance lies not merely in enhanced capacity to alter documentary images, but in the growing accessibility of generating photorealistic material absent any corresponding photographic event—thereby foregrounding questions of indexicality.

3.3. *Synthetic Images and the Weakening of Indexicality*

The previous section shows that documentary images have always been mediated, but this does not mean that all forms of mediation have the same relationship with reality. A second finding therefore concerns the weakening of indexicality under generative production. The mechanical indexicality of the camera refers to the relationship between a photographed or filmed image and the material that appeared in front of the camera. From this perspective, one reason photographic images have traditionally been able to function as visual evidence is that something had to exist in front of the camera for the image to be recorded. Framing, editing, and narration may strongly influence how this material is interpreted, but the photographic trace still originates from something that was present during the act of recording.

Digital imaging had already complicated this relationship before the development of generative AI. Digital alteration and synthetic image creation challenge established notions of photographic veracity because captured images can be modified while photorealistic images can also be constructed without direct optical capture. Generative AI pushes this further. Based on prompts, training data, and learned statistical patterns, generative models can produce photorealistic people, environments, objects, and actions that do not necessarily correspond to an event that occurred and was recorded by a

camera. As a result, the appearance of photographic realism can become increasingly separated from the existence of a prior photographic event [11].

This distinction requires three related concepts to be treated separately: photorealism, indexicality, and historical actuality. Photorealism concerns whether an image looks like a photograph of the real world. Indexicality concerns the relationship between an image and a referent that existed in front of a recording device. Historical actuality concerns whether the represented person, event, or action actually existed or occurred in the historical world. These concepts may overlap, but they are not equivalent. A generated image may appear highly photorealistic without having a direct indexical relationship with a photographed event. At the same time, generated material may reconstruct an event that historically occurred. Documentary authenticity therefore cannot be decided by visual appearance alone.

The epistemological problem extends beyond direct deception by a single synthetic image. Exposure to political synthetic media has been found to produce uncertainty more readily than straightforward deception, and this uncertainty has been associated with lower trust in news on social media [5]. This suggests that synthetic media can weaken confidence in visual evidence even when viewers do not simply accept false content as true.

3.4. Creative Agency and Narrative Control in AI-Assisted Documentary Production

A further change concerns creative agency and narrative control. In traditional documentary production, filmmakers construct meaning through decisions about whom and what to film, camera position, material selection, editing, sound design, and narrative structure. Generative artificial intelligence does not eliminate these forms of creative decision-making. Instead, it introduces additional operations into the production process. Creators can use prompts to describe intended outputs, select or reject different generations, revise or regenerate unsatisfactory material, and integrate generated elements into a broader narrative through sequencing and contextualisation.

At the same time, a generative system is not simply a neutral tool that produces exactly what a creator intends. Its outputs are shaped by human instructions, model architecture, training data, learned patterns, and system limitations. The resulting material cannot always be attributed to a single human act of creation. This does not mean that the AI system should be treated as an autonomous creator. Rather, production involves ongoing interaction between human intention, model capabilities, data, generated outputs, and repeated acts of human selection and revision.

Empirical research with film practitioners across several European countries challenges the idea that creativity is a capacity possessed exclusively by humans or machines. Instead, creativity is understood as a networked and distributed form of agency. Such studies also show that the introduction of AI does not eliminate human creative work. Practitioners invest time in learning AI tools, developing and refining prompts, experimenting with different outputs, and adjusting AI-generated images. Creative labour therefore does not necessarily disappear when generative systems enter production. Some of it is reorganised around interaction with, evaluation of, and refinement of machine-generated material [2].

This redistribution of creative agency is particularly important for documentary production [12]. In fictional media, questions about authorship and creative ownership are already significant. Documentary, however, adds another dimension because its images and narratives make claims about people, events, and conditions in the historical world. A documentary sequence may be produced through a distributed process involving filmmakers, prompts, training data, generative models, and post-production decisions, but the factual claims made by the final work still require identifiable human and institutional responsibility.

Creative agency can therefore become more distributed without factual responsibility becoming equally distributed. The involvement of generative AI changes how documentary content is produced and who or what participates in its production,

but it does not remove the need to determine who is responsible for the relationship between that content and the historical reality it claims to represent. This distinction between distributed creative agency and identifiable factual responsibility becomes important when considering how documentary authenticity should be evaluated under generative conditions [10].

4. Discussion

4.1. From Indexical Reality to Generative Simulation

Theoretical frameworks concerning simulation and simulacra offer a useful lens for interpreting the changes identified in the previous section. In conventional documentary production, reality may be selected, edited, framed, and ideologically constructed, but its claim to authenticity typically continues to refer to people, objects, or events that exist or existed outside the image [7]. Generative media complicate this relationship because a highly photorealistic scene can now be produced without a corresponding act of photographic recording. From this perspective, representations may no longer depend on a prior referent in the same way as conventional photographic images.

From this perspective, the challenge introduced by generative artificial intelligence extends beyond an increase in false or fabricated content. It also alters the conditions under which viewers assess the relationship between representation and reality. A generated image can reproduce many visual characteristics associated with photographic realism—including lighting, perspective, depth of field, texture, and camera movement—without being produced through direct recording of the scene it appears to depict [3]. As a result, visual plausibility becomes less reliable as an indicator of indexical origin.

A recent illustration comes from the Chinese audiovisual production channel MediaStorm (Yingshi Jufeng). In June 2026, the channel published a video titled *AI or Real? Even a VFX Artist Cannot Tell?*, in which participants attempted to distinguish AI-generated online videos from footage captured through conventional production methods. Judgements relied on visual cues such as inconsistencies in moving objects, facial and skin details, perspective, sharpness, and lighting. The exercise serves not as a controlled experiment, but as an illustrative example of the increasing difficulty of identifying generative origin based solely on visual appearance. Even professional expertise in visual production does not guarantee immediate or reliable differentiation between generated and recorded images.

This does not imply, however, that generative artificial intelligence has already produced a condition in which documentary representation is entirely detached from the historical world [2]. Such a conclusion would be unwarranted. Documentary works continue to make claims about actual people, events, places, and historical conditions, and generated material can also be used to reconstruct events that genuinely occurred. Theoretical frameworks concerning simulation are therefore more valuable here as interpretive tools than as literal descriptions of all generative documentary practice.

A more measured conclusion is that generative artificial intelligence further weakens the previously more stable relationship between photorealism and indexicality. An image can appear convincingly photographic without corresponding to a photographic event. As this relationship becomes less self-evident, assessments of documentary authenticity increasingly require attention to information about source, production methodology, application of generative techniques, and narrative context—rather than relying solely on internal visual features.

4.2. Rethinking Documentary Authenticity

Taken together, the previous findings suggest that generative artificial intelligence does not render documentary authenticity irrelevant. Rather, it transforms the conditions under which authenticity is established and evaluated. In photographic documentary, the indexical relationship between an image and the scene present before the camera has traditionally served as a foundational basis for claims to authenticity. Under generative conditions, that relationship alone is no longer sufficient. Documentary material may be

recorded, modified, reconstructed, or generated while still making claims about actual people, events, and historical conditions. Authenticity therefore needs to be considered in relation to what an image refers to, how it was produced, how it functions within the narrative, and who takes responsibility for its factual claims.

Based on this analysis, this article proposes four interconnected dimensions for considering documentary authenticity in the context of generative artificial intelligence.

The first is referential authenticity, which concerns the relationship between represented people, events, places, and the historical world. The central question is whether the documentary representation can be connected to a reality that existed or an event that actually occurred. This does not require every image to have been directly recorded by a camera. A generated reconstruction, for example, may refer to an actual historical event without having a direct photographic index. What becomes important is whether the relationship between the generated representation and its historical referent can be supported by appropriate evidence.

The second is procedural transparency, which concerns how the audiovisual material was produced and how clearly significant generative operations are communicated. This includes whether viewers are informed about which elements were recorded, substantially modified, reconstructed, or generated, and what role artificial intelligence plays within the work. This dimension aligns with the view that transparency should be calibrated according to the degree of artificial intelligence involvement rather than applied uniformly across all uses [14]. Procedural transparency therefore does not require disclosure of every technical operation, but it does require clear communication when generative operations may affect how viewers interpret the evidential status of documentary material.

The third is narrative authenticity. In this article, the term refers to whether generative operations alter the basic meaning, causal relationships, or actions of people represented in a documentary in ways that may mislead viewers about historical reality [10]. Individual details may be factually accurate while their arrangement still produces a misleading overall account. Narrative authenticity therefore concerns the relationship between generated or recorded elements and the larger factual context in which they are placed. The question is not simply whether each individual image is 'real,' but whether the narrative constructed from those images remains responsible to the events and circumstances it claims to represent.

The fourth dimension is factual responsibility. As discussed in Section 3.4, generative artificial intelligence can distribute creative agency across filmmakers, models, training data, prompts, and production workflows. However, the factual claims of a documentary are ultimately presented to viewers by identifiable human creators and institutions. Distributed creative agency therefore cannot be treated as distributed accountability. A generative system may participate in producing an image, voice, or sequence, but responsibility for how that material represents the historical world cannot be delegated to the model.

Documentary authenticity under generative conditions can therefore be understood as a negotiated and accountable relationship rather than an automatic property of photographic appearance. Indexical evidence remains important, but it becomes one part of a wider process of authentication [8]. Referential evidence, production transparency, narrative context, and factual responsibility work together to establish whether and how generative material can legitimately function within documentary representation. In this sense, generative artificial intelligence does not remove the boundary between authentic and inauthentic documentary practice. Instead, it makes that boundary more dependent on how the relationship between representation, production, and historical reality is established and communicated.

4.3. Implications for Documentary Practice

The analysis above suggests that documentary practice should not respond to generative artificial intelligence through a simple binary of permission or prohibition.

Different applications of AI carry distinct implications for authenticity. Using AI for technical support—such as noise reduction, transcription, subtitle generation, or restoration—differs fundamentally from employing generative systems to reconstruct a historical person's appearance or voice, or to fabricate audiovisual material depicting an unrecorded event [14]. What matters is not merely whether AI was used, but the nature and extent of modification it introduced, and how that modification shapes the documentary's connection to historical reality. This aligns with proposals for proportionate disclosure, where transparency requirements scale according to the significance of the AI-assisted modification for factual understanding.

Documentary practice therefore requires transparency standards calibrated to both the scope and functional role of generative techniques. When AI-generated material directly influences factual representation, its origin must be clearly communicated to viewers via appropriate on-screen labels, production notes, credits, or other accessible disclosure methods. Where feasible, provenance mechanisms can supply information about the source and production history of audiovisual content. Such mechanisms should not be interpreted as definitive verification of truth or falsity. Instead, they serve as supplementary resources enabling viewers and institutions to assess the origin and creation process of media. Reconstructions generated using AI must remain explicitly anchored to verifiable historical materials, firsthand testimony, archival records, or other forms of factual evidence when presented as part of a documentary narrative [2].

These practices do not entail a return to an idealized notion of absolute objectivity. As discussed throughout this article, documentary has always involved selection, interpretation, and creative construction. The challenge posed by generative AI is therefore not creativity per se, but the increased capacity to produce material that resembles empirical evidence despite lacking photographic or recorded provenance. Enhanced generative capability must thus be matched by heightened transparency and accountability for factual integrity [3]. Generative AI may contribute to documentary creation, yet responsibility for the factual claims conveyed through its outputs rests unequivocally with the human creators and institutions that select, contextualize, and present those outputs to audiences.

5. Conclusions

This article has examined how the growing use of generative AI in documentary production affects authenticity, indexicality, and creative agency. The analysis suggests that the key change introduced by generative AI is not that technology has mediated documentary reality for the first time. Documentary production has always involved selection, interpretation, editing, and other forms of deliberate shaping. The more significant change is that technological mediation is increasingly extending from the selection and modification of recorded reality to the generation and reconstruction of audiovisual representations themselves. Recent work identifies the capacity to produce audiovisual material without a direct indexical link to reality as an important shift in AI-assisted documentary production.

This shift further weakens the previously more stable relationship between photorealistic appearance and indexicality. An image can now appear convincingly photographic without necessarily corresponding to an event captured by a camera. At the same time, practices such as prompting, selection, correction, regeneration, and sequencing expand the ways in which creators can construct and control audiovisual representations. Creative agency in AI-assisted production can therefore become distributed across human practitioners, generative models, training data, and production processes—consistent with contemporary understandings of creativity as a networked and distributed phenomenon.

Distributed creative agency, however, does not imply that factual responsibility can be similarly distributed. This article argues that documentary authenticity under generative conditions should increasingly be understood as a relationship that must be established, communicated, and held accountable—not assumed from photographic

appearance alone. To describe this relationship, the article proposes four interconnected dimensions: referential authenticity, concerning the relationship between representation and historical reality; procedural transparency, concerning the documentation and disclosure of generative methods; narrative coherence, concerning whether the overall documentary account remains grounded in its factual and historical context; and accountability, concerning who bears responsibility for the truth claims advanced through documentary representation.

Generative AI therefore does not render documentary truth meaningless. As technologies become more capable of producing convincing visual representations without corresponding acts of photographic recording, documentaries must answer more clearly what is being claimed as real, how that representation was produced and verified, and who is responsible for the claim. The future of documentary authenticity may depend less on treating photographic appearance as sufficient evidence and more on maintaining an accountable relationship among representation, production process, and the historical world. Because this study is conceptual and interpretive, the four dimensions proposed here should be tested and refined through future research on documentary production practices and audience responses.

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