



CASE STUDY

When should a documentarian consider using
generative AI for supplemental visuals?



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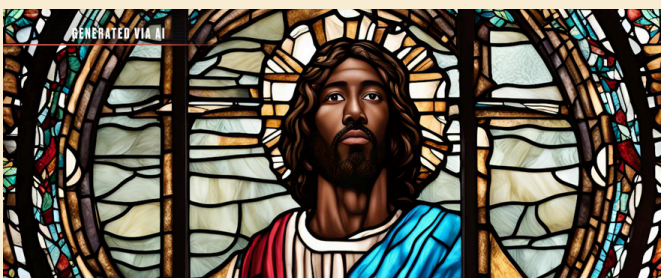
KEY INSIGHTS

- Generative AI can help filmmakers quickly and efficiently create visual coverage for key scenes when other options are lacking, but conventional editing and judgment are still necessary to develop a meaningful scene.
- There are many implications of using AI in a documentary, including ethical, legal, financial, creative and environmental factors, and these can't be separated from each other. Filmmaking teams should carefully weigh these considerations when utilizing generative AI.
- Thoughtful documentary filmmakers can both decide to use AI in their creative process and continue to be uncomfortable with their decision.
- Limited budgets can lead filmmaking teams to opt for less expensive generated content over the higher cost of authentic archival materials.

A DECISION POINT: *MEN OF COURAGE*

Director Byron Hurt was at a decision point — should he use generative AI to illustrate a portion of his film? While working on *Men of Courage*, a short documentary set in the present day that tells the stories of five Black and Brown men in the state of New Jersey who are working to disrupt gender-based violence in their local communities, he realized he needed visuals to go with the voiceover of one of his protagonists.

The film tells the story in chapters, each featuring one of the protagonists discussing their work. For the chapter focusing on Pastor Michael Cupeles in Atlantic City, NJ, Hurt needed footage and/or images to illustrate Cupeles's practice of helping his community with the question "how do you perceive divinity?"



As the pastor asks this question on camera, a stained glass image of Jesus with dark skin appears, much darker than traditional images popular in the West. An illustration of a Black angel and baby follows, while Cupeles reflects, "Divinity is neither male nor female. It's a spiritual being."

In the upper third of the images, Hurt appends a note: "Generated Via AI."

Using generated images for this segment wasn't his first choice, or even his second or third. The director's initial hope was to film the minister in conversation with his community. However, no one wanted to appear on camera to discuss their personal beliefs and how they were re-evaluating them.

"We tried to buy some stock footage, but it wasn't working well," Hurt noted in an interview. "The stock footage my editor kept finding was of White deities, and we were looking for images of people of color to help convey this particular segment."

Hurt considered finding an animator or illustrator, but the budget for the film didn't allow for that. Nor did it allow for an archival producer, who might have been able to spend time sourcing the types of images he needed. "I probably would have opted to go that route," he reflected, "But it wasn't a real possibility."

"I had never used AI before," he added. "I felt as if it's an easy, cost-effective way to tell our story. At the same time I felt it was taking away a financial opportunity for a real live human being to create."

THE PITCH TO THE TEAM – AND QUICK ACTION

Hurt brought the idea of using generative AI to a team meeting with his producer, Natalie Bullock Brown, and his editor. They had all seen the struggles with this particular scene, and they quickly agreed to explore this approach.

"I think we started to discuss which AI platforms or sites that we had to choose from," Hurt recalls from that first meeting. The editor did research on a variety of platforms, and by the next meeting, he circled back with a gallery of images that were ready for discussion. They eventually settled on [Runway](#), which uses a simple conversational textbox where users can prompt image generation and iterate through additional prompts.



"It took us a while to settle on images," Bullock Brown recalled. "Somebody had six fingers or three, things that were like, 'Okay we can't use that.' It was a bit of a process." Even with the images they generated, they still needed to utilize conventional editing techniques, like cropping and framing, to compose the scene effectively.

A second editor in the process helped them cut the usage even further, until they found the right balance. For a while, Hurt recalls, "We felt like we overused the generative AI images, to the point that they were starting to lose their effectiveness."

Bullock Brown, who directs the Documentary Accountability Working Group (DAWG), felt it was essential to think through the ethical implications of using AI, alongside the creative considerations. The two of them referenced the APA's [Best Practices for Use of Generative AI in Documentaries](#), which has an entire section devoted to Transparency in usage, both for the production teams and for audiences. As the report notes, "We recognize that different types of transparency may be needed, depending on context and the audience's understanding of what is happening on screen."



"We also wanted to make sure we followed what APA laid out as guidance," she noted. "We credited the company that generated the AI. We put an ID or disclaimer on every image that was created by AI. And we tried not to use too much of it. I think the scene was just so void of anything that would really help bring it to life other than the story that the main participant tells. But I feel like we did our due diligence in terms of making sure we followed ethical guidelines in using the material."

In the end, generated imagery took up only 12-13 seconds in a 38-minute film, and its usage was immediately apparent thanks to the crediting and labeling. The intertwining of creative and ethical considerations was an important part of their process. The guidelines on crediting and transparency helped them once they landed on which images to use, but they also had important decisions to make about how many images they wanted, which images were appropriate for the scene, and how to credit the creation of the images in a way that made sense.

PHILOSOPHICAL & LEGAL QUESTIONS

"As a director," Hurt noted, "you work with the tools in your toolbox and field of experiences. Half of the battle with making films is solving creative problems. That's one of the biggest roles of a director."



Hurt and Bullock Brown also thought about how the industry would respond. "I worried about my credibility as a filmmaker and storyteller by inserting AI into a film, where the resources of this film could have been used differently to support another artist," said Hurt. He also recognized that, as more filmmakers use these tools, they become more socially acceptable in documentary practice, and was worried about tacitly endorsing their broad use.

The team had additional practical questions to consider, such as reviewing the specific licenses as a team (the images themselves were not reviewed by an attorney) and then reimbursing their editor for the cost of using Runway. On Runway, users pay a small monthly fee which allows for image generation and storage. While the monthly fee varies based on use, even the high end was substantially lower than paying an animator or archival producer. Using Runway enabled them to generate the images they wanted while staying within their budget.

And the end result? In March, Hurt screened the film for the five men featured in it. While AI was not a substantial part of the group conversation, Hurt discussed it with Wil Dubose, who coordinates the Men of Courage group. He was comfortable with its usage. "You just never know how the participants will feel about your work after they see themselves and their stories on screen. I generally show the final version to participants prior to the premiere — just so that they have time to process it, prepare for the unveiling, and to share their thoughts/feelings, or to express any issues they may have with it."

Of course, philosophical questions continue to remain for the team, everything from the environmental costs of using AI to how these tools might contribute to a blurred sense of what's real and what's not.

"This was an absolute last resort, and I wasn't motivated by using new tools," Hurt reflected. "I'm trying to keep myself open about the positive possibilities that exist for AI, but I would caution filmmakers to ask ourselves, 'Are we hammering the nails to our own coffin by embracing AI in our work?'"

APA EXPERTS RESPOND

How can filmmakers navigate the tension between using GenAI and its impact on creative, ethical and labor concerns?

Each production team has their unique rubric for creative decision making and needs to evaluate if and how they want to use generative AI in light of that. In this team's case, the need to complete their film by getting visuals inexpensively and staying within their tight budget was paramount. In the process of making the film, they weighed the potential pitfalls of using generative AI materials, and mitigated some of those by practicing both internal and external transparency. It's important to note that this is not always as easy as it may seem. External transparency can bring up feelings of vulnerability, such as those expressed by director Byron Hurt, and we're grateful for his candor. And in some cases, internal transparency can lead to fraught conversations between team members with different feelings about emerging technologies.

This case study also brings up an interesting point of flexion within cinematic language. The filmmakers have created an element that's somewhere between animation and "archival," as the synthetic images take the place of primary source materials. It is useful to think about generated visuals as a completely new medium, with their own set of considerations, much as filmmakers have for music vs. animation vs. still photographs, etc. For example, it is important to consider the algorithmic bias and inaccuracy in generated media, and the potential impact these photo-realistic elements can have on the historical record.

At a time when documentary budgets are squeezed dramatically, financial considerations are going to play a part in filmmakers' decisions about choosing AI. It is essential for teams to carefully weigh the pros and cons of the short term savings – as this team did – against the broader impacts of these decisions.