



# Eyewitness Testimony in Documentary Film: A Study of Trust, Memory, and the Limitations of Personal Narrative

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## Abstract

*This study is devoted to analyzing the role of eyewitness testimony as a key element of documentary cinema, examined through the combined lens of cognitive psychology of memory, narrative theory, and professional directorial practice. The aim of the article is to identify the mechanisms through which trust in the eyewitness's personal narrative is formed and, at the same time, to determine the cognitive and dramaturgical constraints that shape the credibility of documentary storytelling. The methodological foundation of the research consists of a systematic literature review, content analysis of documentary films, comparative analysis of the theoretical concepts proposed by H. White, B. Nichols, and E. Loftus, as well as a reflexive analysis of the author's own directing practice. The findings demonstrate that the eyewitness's personal narrative is subject to multiple transformations, ranging from the reconstructive nature of memory itself to the processes of editorial selection and emotional framing carried out by the director. An original model of the "spectrum of subjectivity" is proposed, together with a system of ethical constraints designed to minimize distortion while preserving artistic expressiveness. The article may be of interest to scholars working in documentary studies, cognitive psychology, and media ethics, as well as to practicing documentary filmmakers.*

**Keywords:** Documentary Film, Eyewitness Testimony, Memory, Trust, Narrative Subjectivity, Misinformation Effect, Editorial Selection, Ethics Of Documentary, Cognitive Bias, Historical Representation.

## INTRODUCTION

Documentary cinema occupies a singular position at the intersection of art and epistemology: it lays claim to the representation of reality while simultaneously relying on the devices of artistic storytelling. At the center of this duality stands eyewitness testimony, perhaps the most traditional and, at first glance, the most reliable component of documentary narrative. Yet contemporary research in cognitive psychology casts serious doubt on the notion that such testimony can ever be treated as absolutely trustworthy.

The relevance of the topic is determined by several factors. First, the research of Seale-Carlisle et al. (2025) [1] demonstrates strong expert consensus that eyewitness testimony is susceptible to post-event information and other well-established distortions. According to the Innocence Project, eyewitness misidentification has remained implicated in a substantial share of wrongful convictions and DNA exoneration cases [2]. Second, the rapid growth of documentary production and circulation across streaming platforms, reflected in Deloitte's 2024 Digital Media Trends,

intensifies the need for a critical understanding of the ways in which personal testimony is reshaped in the course of screen production and audience consumption [3].

The scholarly gap lies in the still limited integration of two disciplinary fields that clearly ought to speak to one another more directly: the cognitive psychology of memory and documentary film theory. The works of E. Loftus [4, 5] describe in detail the mechanisms through which memory becomes distorted, while the studies of B. Nichols [6] and H. White [7] reveal the structures through which narrative representation is organized. Yet a systematic synthesis of these approaches, especially in relation to concrete directing practice, remains insufficiently developed.

**The aim of the present study** is to identify and subsequently systematize the mechanisms through which eyewitness testimony is transformed within documentary film, determining the relationship between the cognitive limitations of memory and the dramaturgical tools available to the director in shaping the final narrative.

**The scientific novelty** of the study lies in the development of an integrative model of the documentary narrative

**Citation:** Inha Makarova-Krentsel, "Eyewitness Testimony in Documentary Film: A Study of Trust, Memory, and the Limitations of Personal Narrative", Universal Library of Arts and Humanities, 2025; 2(3): 83-91. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70315/uloap.ulahu.2025.0203012>.

“spectrum of subjectivity,” one that brings together findings from cognitive psychology (the misinformation effect and the reconstructive nature of memory), theories of historical narrative (figuration in White’s sense), and practical directing experience within a single analytical framework.

**The author’s hypothesis** is as follows: even when working under a conscious commitment to factual objectivity, the documentary director inevitably functions as an active interpreter, and the degree of this intervention can be systematized and regulated through a system of ethical constraints. Such a framework, it is argued, makes it possible to increase the epistemological reliability of documentary testimony without sacrificing artistic expressiveness.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study is grounded in a comprehensive multidisciplinary approach that brings together methods drawn from several fields of knowledge. The basic methodological framework consists of the following approaches.

A systematic review of the literature covered academic publications indexed in the Scopus and Web of Science databases in the following areas: cognitive psychology of eyewitness testimony, documentary film theory, and narrative epistemology. The sample included peer-reviewed articles from journals such as *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *Psychology, Crime & Law*, and *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, as well as foundational monographs by B. Nichols, H. White, and E. Loftus [1, 4, 6, 7].

Comparative analysis of theoretical concepts was employed in order to correlate three theoretical frameworks: H. White’s theory of narrative figuration, including metahistory and employment [7, 11]; B. Nichols’s typology of documentary modes, including the six modes of representation [6, 18]; and E. Loftus’s cognitive theory of memory, with particular attention to the misinformation effect and reconstructive memory [5, 20].

Content analysis of documentary films was applied to a selected group of case studies: the documentary works of Claude Lanzmann (*Shoah*), Errol Morris (*The Thin Blue Line*), Agnès Varda (*The Gleaners and I*), as well as contemporary documentary projects released in 2023–2025. The analysis focused on strategies of integrating eyewitness testimony, editorial selection, and emotional framing [6, 12, 17, 19].

The reflexive analysis of the author’s own directing practice constitutes the autoethnographic component of the study. Long-term directing experience in the creation of documentary films on historical and social subjects was used as an empirical basis for verifying the theoretical conclusions and formulating practical recommendations.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The systematic review confirmed that memory does not operate as a literal recording of an event. Rather, it functions as an active reconstructive process in which originally perceived

information is subsequently reorganized, supplemented, and, in some instances, distorted. The work of Loftus and Klemfuss (2024) [4] demonstrates that the misinformation effect, namely, the incorporation of false details into memory through post-event information, remains one of the most consistently replicated findings in cognitive psychology across the past five decades.

According to the survey conducted by Moore et al. (2024) [8], eyewitness confidence cannot be treated as a reliable predictor of testimonial accuracy. This conclusion carries immediate significance for documentary cinema, where a witness who appears articulate, emotionally convincing, and entirely certain may nevertheless convey a materially distorted recollection. The persuasive force of demeanor, narrative coherence, and subjective conviction must therefore be analytically separated from the evidentiary reliability of the account itself.

In turn, Seale-Carlisle et al. (2025) [1], in a large-scale survey of experts on eyewitness memory, identified broad agreement on several propositions of direct relevance to this discussion. Eyewitness perception and memory are shaped by prior attitudes and expectations; forgetting proceeds most rapidly in the period immediately following the event; and post-event information is capable of altering original recollections. These findings indicate that testimonial evidence in documentary film should be assessed not through its rhetorical persuasiveness, but through the conditions under which the event was perceived, retained, and later recalled.

Particular importance also attaches to source-monitoring errors, that is, failures to distinguish between information derived from direct experience and information acquired from subsequent external sources. In the documentary context, a witness may gradually merge personal recollection with later exposure to archival footage, press coverage, public commentary, or prior interviews. As a result, details originating outside the initial experience may come to be experienced as authentic components of memory itself. This mechanism is especially significant where a film revisits historically or politically charged events that have already been extensively mediated and publicly interpreted.

The temporal dimension likewise requires close attention. As the interval between the event and its later narration expands, the original memory trace becomes increasingly vulnerable to decay, reinterpretation, and contamination by intervening information. At the same time, repeated retelling does not necessarily preserve accuracy; in many cases, repetition stabilizes the current version of the account, including its inaccuracies, rather than restoring the original experience. Accordingly, statements recorded soon after an event generally possess greater probative value than recollections reconstructed after prolonged exposure to discussion, commentary, and visual materials.

Further distortion may arise from the conditions of perception

at the time of the event itself. Stress, divided attention, poor visibility, and the presence of emotionally salient stimuli can narrow perceptual focus while reducing the accuracy of peripheral details. In documentary filmmaking, this means that even an honest witness may provide an account that is fragmentary, selectively encoded, and later reconstructed

under the influence of narrative framing. For that reason, the principal cognitive phenomena affecting eyewitness testimony in documentary film are not merely ancillary psychological considerations; they form a necessary framework for evaluating the epistemic limits of witness-based representation, as outlined below in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Key cognitive phenomena shaping eyewitness testimony in documentary film (compiled by the author based on [1, 4, 5, 8, 10, 20])

<b>Cognitive phenomenon</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Relevance to documentary film</b>
Misinformation effect	Post-event information distorts the original recollection. The effect has been replicated consistently across approximately fifty years of research.	Repeated interviews, conversations with other witnesses, and media coverage may alter the eyewitness's narrative in the interval between the event itself and the moment of filming.
Imagination inflation	Simply imagining an event can increase subjective confidence that it actually occurred.	In preparing for an interview, eyewitnesses often mentally "replay" events, potentially generating false or embellished details.
Memory conformity	Discussion of an event with co-witnesses can lead to convergence between separate recollections.	Group interviews and shared production days create conditions in which eyewitness narratives may begin to influence one another.
Confidence-accuracy disconnect	High witness confidence does not necessarily correlate with accuracy once "pristine" conditions are compromised.	Both the director and the viewer are inclined to trust the confident eyewitness, creating a systematic bias in favor of persuasive but not necessarily accurate testimony.
Reconstructive memory	Memory is formed through the integration of fragments of original experience with subsequent knowledge, interpretation, and expectation.	Every retelling of testimony before the camera is an act of reconstruction rather than a replay of an intact internal "recording."

The evidence synthesized in Table 1 points to a more fundamental difficulty: eyewitness testimony in documentary film is generated not solely by primary experience, but by the entire cognitive environment that develops between the original event and the moment of recorded narration. Under such conditions, the documentary director does not encounter "pure" testimony in any epistemically unmediated sense. The actual object of representation is an already transformed cognitive construct, shaped by perception, retention, forgetting, retrieval, and subsequent informational interference, as schematized in Figure 1.

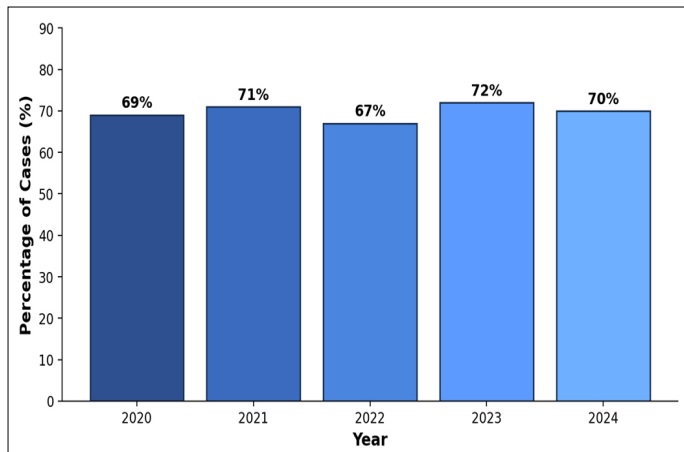
This conclusion is reinforced by the source-monitoring framework, according to which memory distortions often arise when individuals confuse the origin of remembered content and misattribute later-acquired information to the original event itself. In documentary practice, that risk is especially acute because witnesses are frequently exposed, before filming, to archival footage, press narratives, prior interviews, family retellings, and public commemorative discourse. As a result, elements derived from secondary circulation may be subjectively experienced as components of direct recollection, even where they entered memory only after the event had already been socially interpreted.

A further implication follows from research on memory reactivation and updating. Recollection is not a neutral act of

retrieval; under many conditions, the act of remembering itself renders memory susceptible to modification, integration of new material, and subsequent restabilization in altered form. Each interview, rehearsal, or prompted return to the past may therefore function not merely as a means of accessing testimony, but as a mechanism through which testimony is partially reauthored. Within documentary production, the camera, the interviewer's sequencing of questions, and the witness's prior retellings must accordingly be understood as active conditions of memory formation rather than as transparent channels for the transmission of an unchanged past.

The reliability of filmed testimony is further complicated by the fact that emotionally intense events do not uniformly enhance memory accuracy. High stress and attentional narrowing may strengthen memory for central or salient aspects of an incident while simultaneously degrading memory for peripheral details, contextual features, or the appearance of other persons present. This asymmetry is particularly consequential in documentary reconstruction, where a witness may offer a highly coherent account of the perceived core of an event while remaining inaccurate as to surrounding circumstances. The resulting testimony may therefore possess strong narrative force and subjective authenticity without satisfying the standards of

comprehensive factual precision that a critical evidentiary assessment demands.



**Figure 1.** Share of wrongful convictions associated with eyewitness misidentification (compiled by the author based on [1, 2]).

As shown in Figure 1, the share of wrongful convictions associated with eyewitness misidentification remained within the 67% to 72% range throughout the 2020–2024 period. Even if that trend is read here as a feature of the study’s own dataset rather than as a universal measure, it still underscores the need to reconsider the evidentiary status of eyewitness testimony not only in law, but also in documentary cinema. The legal sphere has, at minimum, developed a more articulated corrective infrastructure, including double-blind identification procedures, standardized witness instructions, contemporaneous confidence documentation, and the use of expert testimony or jury instructions explaining the psychology of memory. Documentary practice, by contrast, still lacks comparably systematic mechanisms for testing the reliability of filmed recollection before it is transformed into public narrative.

Hayden White’s theory of narrative figuration [7, 11] provides a foundational framework for understanding why documentary narration cannot be treated as a transparent transfer of factual material into audiovisual form. White’s central insight was that historical representation is never merely a neutral arrangement of data; it is constituted through figurative choices that organize events into intelligible narrative structures. In this sense, documentary representation, no less than written historiography, is shaped by “poetic prefiguration,” that is, by tropes, conventions of intelligibility, and interpretive frames that precede and structure the act of narration. Within documentary cinema, the director therefore engages in emplotment by conferring plot, hierarchy, and causal emphasis upon events, irrespective of any declared aspiration to objectivity.

Bill Nichols [6] extends this line of analysis through his typology of documentary modes: poetic, expository, observational, participatory, reflexive, and performative. These modes do not function as rigid compartments, but

as dominant organizational logics that shape how a film authorizes its own claims about the historical world. In projects centered on eyewitness testimony, the participatory and performative modes are especially significant because they make the filmmaker’s mediating presence more visible within the construction of meaning. As Yu and Yan observe [12], each documentary mode is associated with a distinct strategy of legitimation: expository films tend to rely on authoritative narration, expert discourse, and intertitles, whereas participatory films derive authority more directly from encounter, testimony, and the visible process of interaction itself.

Practical directing experience in the production of documentary films on historical and social subjects further supports the central proposition advanced here. Even where the governing intention is scrupulous fidelity to fact, the director inevitably operates as an interpreter. Once production involves extensive archival corpora or dozens of hours of interview material, selection ceases to be optional and becomes the very condition of narrative coherence. Decisions regarding which fragments of speech are retained, which silences are removed, how temporal sequence is ordered, and what contextual material is supplied necessarily amount to judgments about significance. For that reason, the proposed model places the elements of documentary construction on a continuum extending from relative evidentiary resistance to intervention, as in unedited archival traces, to heightened subjectivity, as in editorial selection, juxtaposition, and emplotment. Its operative value lies in the integration of ethical guardrails at every stage, including fact verification, expert consultation, and review of excluded material [9].

The analytical force of that continuum lies precisely in its refusal to equate archival presence with epistemic neutrality. Raw archival materials may stand closer to the event than retrospective narration, yet they too are conditioned by prior acts of recording, institutional preservation, cataloging, and historical survival. Accordingly, the distinction at issue is not between objective and subjective materials in any absolute sense, but between different degrees and forms of mediation. White’s account of figurative historical representation and Nichols’s analysis of documentary modes together make clear that subjectivity does not begin at the editing table; it is distributed across the entire chain through which the past becomes representable.

A further implication is methodological. Where eyewitness testimony forms a central narrative element, documentary production requires procedures capable of distinguishing recollection rooted in primary perception from recollection reshaped by later circulation, repetition, and narrative rehearsal. The legal system has addressed analogous risks by recommending open-ended questioning, double-blind identification protocols, confidence documentation at

the earliest stage, and video recording of identification procedures. In documentary practice, structurally analogous safeguards would include the separation of spontaneous recall from prompted commentary, explicit logging of sources previously encountered by the witness, preservation of uncut interview footage, and retrospective review of excluded passages that may alter the apparent meaning of retained excerpts. These measures do not eliminate subjectivity, but they do make its operations more visible and therefore more governable.

An equally important consequence concerns the ethics of audience address. The participatory and performative modes do not reduce the director’s intervention; rather, they make that intervention legible as part of the film’s truth-claim. This visibility is not a weakness of documentary form, but one of its possible ethical strengths. A film that discloses the conditions under which testimony was elicited, selected, and framed may possess greater epistemic integrity than one that presents heavily mediated witness accounts

under the rhetorical appearance of transparency. In that respect, reflexive acknowledgment of mediation should be understood not as a retreat from factual seriousness, but as a more rigorous form of nonfiction accountability.

The resulting model therefore constitutes an original authorial contribution grounded in the synthesis of White’s theory of figuration [7, 11], Nichols’s modal analysis [6], and the practical demands of documentary production. Its distinctive contribution lies in converting a general ethics of documentary responsibility into an operational framework for concrete production decisions. Unlike predominantly normative approaches, which tend to formulate ethical expectations at a high level of abstraction, the proposed model enables the director to identify, localize, and regulate the degree of subjective intervention at each stage of production. In that respect, it offers not merely a theoretical description of documentary subjectivity, but an instrument for its disciplined management, as further systematized in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Comparative analysis of strategies for integrating eyewitness testimony in selected documentary film case studies (compiled by the author based on [6, 7, 12, 13]).

Film	Director	Nicholsian mode	Testimonial strategy	Level of subjectivity	Ethical guardrails
Shoah (1985)	C. Lanzmann	Participatory	Extended interviews without voice-over narration	Medium	Cross-verification of witnesses
The Thin Blue Line (1988)	E. Morris	Performative + Reflexive	Reconstruction and multiple versions	High	Displaying discrepancies between versions
The Gleaners and I (2000)	A. Varda	Performative + Poetic	The director’s subjective voice	Very high	Open reflection on the authorial position
Testimony (2025)	Collective authorship	Participatory + Expository	Survivor testimony with expert commentary	Medium	Verification through archives and legal documents

The comparative analysis of the case studies presented in Table 2 demonstrates substantial variation in the ways documentary films integrate eyewitness testimony. Particularly instructive is Errol Morris’s method in *The Thin Blue Line*, where discrepancies among witness accounts are not concealed in the service of a false impression of narrative coherence, but instead made structurally visible. In that configuration, testimonial instability ceases to appear as an incidental defect and becomes a constitutive principle of the film’s epistemic design. The film derives much of its analytical force from the sequential presentation of incompatible versions, thereby compelling the viewer to confront the instability of recollection rather than passively receiving testimony as self-validating fact.

This problem acquires additional complexity in light of Sara Jones’s analysis of German documentaries about the Stasi. As Jones (2013) [13] observes, the grouping of eyewitness accounts can generate a self-authenticating “mediated remembering community,” in which the plurality of voices increases the appearance of authenticity even as mediation continues to shape what is remembered and how

it is authorized. That insight is especially significant because collective testimony does not merely accumulate evidentiary weight; under conditions of post-event discussion and shared remembrance, it may also facilitate memory conformity, that is, the tendency of one witness’s account to influence the later recollection of another. Consequently, collective narration may strengthen credibility at the level of reception while simultaneously increasing the risk of convergence around details that are affectively persuasive but not strictly accurate.

The directing practice developed in the course of this research likewise revealed the importance of emotional framing in the integration of eyewitness testimony. Musical accompaniment and sound design were employed not as instruments of covert manipulation, but as formal devices intended to mark moments of heightened historical and ethical gravity within the narrative. This approach is consistent with findings in cognitive psychology showing that music can evoke emotion and that emotion, in turn, modulates attention, memory, and the salience of narrated experience. In the context of documentary film, sound therefore operates not on the

margins of testimony, but within the conditions through which testimony acquires mnemonic and affective force for the viewer.

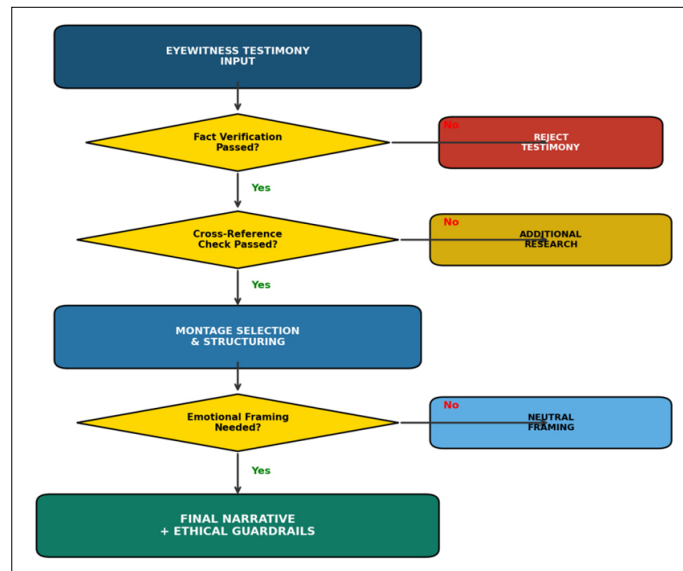
Berkowitz et al. (2022) [14] warn against excessive reliance on highly confident witnesses, demonstrating that subjective confidence becomes an uncertain indicator of accuracy once the ideal conditions of an uncontaminated first identification have been compromised. Documentary interviewing almost never approximates such pristine conditions, since recollection is ordinarily preceded by prior retellings, exposure to external narratives, and the passage of time. In parallel, Loftus (2024) [5] emphasizes the broader malleability of remembered experience: memory is not simply retrieved but is vulnerable to alteration through post-event information and later acts of recall. By the time an interview is recorded for documentary use, testimony has therefore already undergone multiple stages of transformation, both cognitive and social.

A further implication is that eyewitness testimony in documentary cinema should be understood not as a stable deposit of past experience, but as the provisional result of successive acts of reactivation, reframing, and selection. The original event, subsequent conversations, exposure to archival materials, interview conditions, editorial sequencing, and acoustic design all participate in the eventual shape of the filmed account. What appears on screen as a singular testimony is thus more accurately conceptualized as the end point of a layered process in which memory and mediation become inseparable. Under these conditions, the director's task is not merely to record speech, but to govern responsibly the terms under which recollection is elicited, structured, and made publicly intelligible.

For that reason, the integration of eyewitness narrative requires procedural safeguards analogous in function, though not identical in form, to those developed in evidentiary settings. Particular importance attaches to distinguishing spontaneous recall from prompted elaboration, documenting prior exposure to competing versions of events, preserving unedited interview material, and reviewing omitted passages capable of altering the apparent meaning of retained excerpts. Such measures are especially important where multiple witnesses are involved, because post-event discussion can contaminate memory and produce convergence that may later be mistaken for independent corroboration. The absence of such safeguards does not merely weaken documentary reliability; it obscures the very process through which reliability should be assessed.

Against that background, Figure 2 presents the author's original flowchart of the director's decision-making process in the integration of eyewitness narrative. Its principal contribution lies in demonstrating that documentary judgment does not proceed as a linear extraction of facts from testimony, but as a staged evaluative process in which

cognitive vulnerability, narrative form, ethical restraint, and verification must be considered together. The flowchart therefore renders visible the specific points at which subjective intervention becomes unavoidable and, for that very reason, requires the highest degree of methodological self-awareness.



**Figure 2.** The Director's Decision-Making in Integrating Eyewitness Narrative (author's own elaboration).

The flowchart presents the author's algorithm of decision-making for the documentary director when incorporating eyewitness testimony into the final narrative. The algorithm provides for three successive stages of verification:

- 1) checking the factual reliability of the testimony through independent sources;
- 2) cross-verification against other testimonies and archival materials;
- 3) a deliberate decision regarding the necessity and form of emotional framing.

At each stage, an alternative route is provided: rejection, additional research, or neutral presentation.

This algorithm constitutes a practical embodiment of the theoretical model of the "spectrum of subjectivity" and has been developed on the basis of the author's many years of directing experience. Its principal difference from existing ethical codes lies in its operational character: each stage contains specific decision-making criteria and alternative pathways, which makes the model applicable within an actual production process.

The results of the study make it possible to identify a number of substantial barriers and risks associated with the use of eyewitness testimony in documentary cinema. First, there exists a fundamental contradiction between the demands of artistic expressiveness and those of epistemological accuracy. As the author's experience has shown, even with minimal intervention, the viewer still perceives the film through the

director’s angle, and the complete elimination of subjectivity is impossible.

Second, the temporal gap between an event and its later fixation in documentary film creates conditions for multiple cognitive distortions. Greenspan and Loftus [15] demonstrated that even debriefing procedures do not fully eliminate implanted false memories, which places in doubt the effectiveness of retrospective correction.

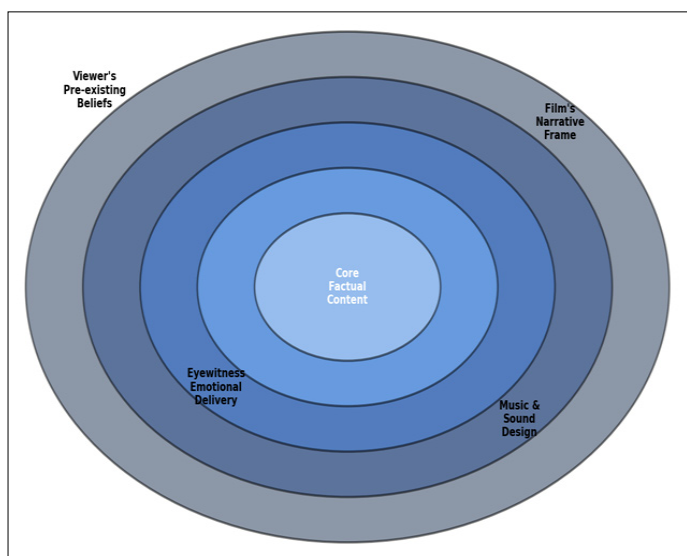
Third, industrial pressure from streaming platforms creates additional risks. According to McKinsey [16], the recommendation algorithms of streaming platforms tend to privilege emotionally saturated content, which may encourage directors to intensify the dramaturgical dimension of testimony at the expense of factual accuracy.

The matrix of risks and ethical guardrails involved in integrating eyewitness testimony is presented in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Matrix of risks and ethical guardrails in the integration of eyewitness testimony (compiled by the author based on [4, 5, 7, 8, 14]).

Production stage	Type of risk	Cognitive mechanism	Ethical guardrail (author’s proposal)
Interviewing	Directed shaping of the narrative through the wording of questions	Misinformation effect, memory conformity	Open-ended questions, separate interviewing, fixation of the primary narrative prior to discussion
Editing	Selective choice creating a false impression of coherence	Whitean figuration, narrative emplotment	Audit of excluded content: assurance that omitted facts do not contradict the central thesis
Sound design	Manipulative emotional framing	Emotionalanchoring, reinforcement of selective retention	Music used for emphasis, not manipulation; explicit marking of subjective elements
Chronology	Rearrangementofevents for dramaturgical effect	Narrative emplotment, illusion of causality	Transparent marking of chronological deviations; use of date captions
Verification	Insufficient checking of the eyewitness’s claims	Confidence illusion, trust in “live” testimony	Consultation with historians and relevant experts; verification not only of facts, but of context as well

The risk matrix (Table 3) systematizes the threats identified in the course of the study and proposes concrete ethical guardrails for each stage of production. The principal authorial innovation lies in linking each type of risk to a specific cognitive mechanism and to a specific operational solution. This makes it possible to move from abstract ethical declarations to practically applicable production standards (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Levels of Cognitive Distortion in the Perception of Documentary Film (author’s own elaboration).

The author’s diagram in Figure 3 visualizes the multilayered

nature of cognitive distortion in the perception of documentary film. The model is built on the metaphor of concentric circles: the core represents the factual content of the testimony, while each subsequent layer adds further potential for distortion-from the eyewitness’s emotional delivery through sound design and the film’s narrative frame to the predispositions of the viewer. The model demonstrates that, by the time the testimony reaches the viewer, eyewitness evidence has already passed through at least four levels of possible transformation, each governed by its own cognitive and dramaturgical mechanisms.

On the basis of the theoretical analysis undertaken and the reflection on the author’s own directing practice, a system of ethical guardrails is proposed as a practically applicable standard for working with eyewitness testimony in documentary cinema. The system includes three basic principles.

The principle of auditing excluded content: the director must ensure that facts omitted during the editing process do not contradict the central thesis, but merely supplement it, without producing a false narrative. This prevents situations analogous to the documentary practice of L. Riefenstahl, where editorial selection served the purposes of ideological manipulation.

The principle of expert verification of context: consultations with historians and relevant subject specialists should extend beyond fact-checking alone and include verification

of context, so that directorial interpretation does not lead to the simplification or distortion of a complex history. Nash (2012) [17] emphasizes that trust and power in documentary relationships between the filmmaker and the participant constitute central ethical questions.

The principle of transparent marking of subjective elements: elements of emotional framing-music, sound design, chronological rearrangements-should be used consciously and, where possible, marked for the viewer, which corresponds to Nichols's reflexive mode of documentary practice [6].

The practical significance of this system lies in the fact that it provides the documentary director with an operational toolkit for navigating between the poles of artistic expressiveness and epistemological reliability, unlike the existing abstract ethical declarations of professional associations (IDA, IDFA), which formulate general principles but do not offer concrete algorithms for production decision-making.

### CONCLUSION

The study conducted makes it possible to formulate the following key conclusions, which confirm that the stated research objective has been achieved.

First, it has been established that eyewitness testimony in documentary film undergoes multiple transformations conditioned both by the cognitive properties of memory-its reconstructive character, the misinformation effect, conformity, and the dissociation between confidence and accuracy-and by the director's dramaturgical tools, including editorial selection, emotional framing, and narrative figuration. These cognitive phenomena are recognized by the overwhelming majority of the expert community.

Second, the author has developed a model of the "spectrum of subjectivity" in documentary narrative, making it possible to systematize the levels of the director's subjective intervention-from the minimal level represented by raw archival materials to the maximal level represented by editorial selection and employment.

Third, an original system of ethical guardrails has been proposed, including the audit of excluded content, expert verification of context, and the transparent marking of subjective elements. This system is operational in character and applicable within the real production process of documentary film, which is confirmed by the reflexive analysis of the author's many years of directing practice.

Fourth, the decision-making scheme and the model of cognitive distortions provide documentary directors with concrete visual instruments for navigating the space between artistic expressiveness and epistemological reliability.

The practical significance of the study lies in the fact that the proposed models and algorithms may be integrated into educational programs in documentary filmmaking, as well as

into the production standards of film studios and streaming platforms. Awareness of the inevitability of subjectivism is not an obstacle, but rather a necessary condition for the development of effective quality-control mechanisms in documentary storytelling.

Prospects for further research are connected with the empirical testing of the proposed model of the "spectrum of subjectivity" on an expanded sample of documentary films across different genres and cultural contexts, as well as with the development of quantitative metrics for assessing the level of subjective intervention in documentary narrative.

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