[CLAIMS] Journal of Critical AI and Media Studies

Araştırma Makalesi
Research Article

Yıl 2026/ Cilt 1/ Sayı 1
Year 2026/ Vol 1/ Issue 1

Kotey, C. (2026). Professional Identity in Freefall: What It Means to Be a Filmmaker When Everyone Can "Make Films". *CLAIMS*, 1(1), 94-103.

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY IN FREEFALL: WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A FILMMAKER WHEN EVERYONE CAN "MAKE FILMS"

SERBEST DÜŞÜŞTE MESLEKİ KİMLİK: HERKESİN "FİLM YAPABİLDİĞİ" BİR DÖNEMDE FİLM YAPIMCISI OLMAK NE ANLAMA GELİR

Christian Kotey*

Abstract

The spread of AI powered visual production tools has provoked a crisis of professional identity among filmmakers, educators, and media practitioners. Drawing on years of experimentation with AI storytelling tools, a career spanning independent through to international productions, and my research as a master's student, I argue that what is underway is not the flattening of expertise but its forced redefinition. AI has levelled a playing field that was never level, dissolving class barriers that historically determined who tells stories on screen. Yet this democratization introduces dangers of its own: the tyranny of infinite choice, the erosion of productive constraints and happy accidents central to creative discovery, and the narrowing of whose stories get told to those who can afford the technology. The filmmaker who survives this transition will not be the one who resists AI but the one who understands what it cannot do: decide what is worth saying, navigate the ethics of representation, and sustain the human connections from which meaningful stories emerge. This piece is both a theoretical argument and a practitioner's testimony from someone who has watched the industry move from scepticism to quiet acceptance of tools reshaping what it means to make a film.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, filmmaking, professional identity, democratization, creative labour

Özet

Yapay zekâ destekli görsel üretim araçlarının yaygınlaşması, film yapımcıları, eğitimciler ve medya pratisyenleri arasında mesleki kimlik bağlamında bir kriz yaratmıştır. Yapay zekâ hikâye anlatımı araçlarıyla yıllara yayılan deneyimlerime, bağımsız üretimlerden uluslararası projelere uzanan mesleki kariyerime ve yüksek lisans öğrencisi olarak yürüttüğüm araştırmalarıma dayanarak, içinde bulunduğumuz sürecin uzmanlığın düzleşmesi değil, zorunlu bir yeniden tanımlanması olduğunu ileri sürüyorum. Yapay zekâ, hiçbir zaman gerçekten eşit olmayan bir alanı görünürde eşitlemiş; tarihsel olarak kimin ekranda hikâye anlatabileceğini belirleyen sınıfsal engelleri çözmüştür. Bununla birlikte, bu demokratikleşme kendi risklerini de beraberinde getirmektedir: sonsuz seçeneklerin tahakkümü, yaratıcı keşfin merkezinde yer alan üretken kısıtların ve "mutlu kazaların" aşınması ve anlatılan hikâyelerin, teknolojiye erişim sağlayabilenlerle sınırlanması. Bu dönüşüm sürecinde ayakta kalacak olan film yapımcısı, yapay zekâya direnen değil, onun neyi yapamayacağını kavrayandır: neyin söylenmeye değer olduğuna karar vermek, temsilin etik boyutlarını yönlendirmek ve anlamlı hikâyelerin doğduğu insani bağları sürdürebilmek. Bu metin, hem kuramsal bir tartışma hem de sinemanın ne anlama geldiğini yeniden şekillendiren araçların, sektörde kuşkudan sessiz kabullenişe doğru ilerleyişine tanıklık etmiş bir uygulayıcının ifadesidir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: yapay zekâ, film yapımı, mesleki kimlik, demokratikleşme, yaratıcı emek

* Ulster University, Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, United Kingdom, ORCID:0009-0005-7421-0558

1. Introduction

I have been experimenting with AI as a filmmaker for the last few years, exploring what it can do to bring my visions to life. In that time, I have watched the industry's relationship with these tools undergo a transformation that is rarely discussed honestly. The public posture has moved from complete scepticism, outright dismissal, mockery, moral panic, to something quieter and more complicated: a widespread, often secret acceptance. Filmmakers, producers, and post production houses are using AI tools daily, whether they admit it publicly or not. The gap between what the industry says about AI and what it actually does with AI has become one of the defining hypocrisies of this moment.

My experimentation has also informed my research as a master's student, which examines what happens to a filmmaker's sense of self, imagination, and creative process when the tools fundamentally change. But this essay is not primarily about the research. It is about the lived reality behind it: the professional vertigo, the unexpected freedoms, and the hard questions that arise when someone who has spent a career learning to make films is confronted with tools that allow almost anyone to generate moving images from a sentence.

This essay is an attempt to think honestly about what professional expertise in filmmaking actually consists of now that the technical barriers to visual production have effectively collapsed, and to ask whether that collapse is a loss, a liberation, or both.

2. The Economics of Storytelling: A Class Divide Made Visible

To understand what AI is changing, you have to understand what filmmaking has always been. Everyone I have worked with, from the lowest budget independent shoots to large scale international productions, shared the same fundamental desire: they wanted to be storytellers. That impulse is universal. The economics of actually making a living from it have always been brutal.

My own journey through the industry has taken me from working on low budget films where we begged for every resource, to attempting to self-fund my own projects, to working on big budget productions worldwide. Across all of those contexts, one reality remained constant: filmmaking is expensive, and expense creates a class divide. As Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) have argued in their analysis of creative labour, the cultural industries have always relied on unpaid work, personal networks, and financial self-sacrifice in ways that systematically disadvantage those without existing resources. Rarely did kids from poor backgrounds have genuine opportunities to tell and explore their ideas. Research into creative

graduates' career trajectories confirms that socioeconomic background remains one of the strongest predictors of sustained employment in the creative sector (Comunian et al., 2011). The cost of production meant you were dependent on friends, favours, and a willingness to endure constant struggle just to get something, anything, made. Let alone something of real value that could sustain a career.

I remember being told in a film course: "Just write a script. Don't worry about the budget. Just tell your truth." It sounds liberating. In reality, it is almost dishonest. You cannot just write what you want. You have to think about a career. Writing a VFX heavy science fiction script is almost impossible to fund as a first-time director, let alone a second or third. The advice to "just write your truth" conceals the economic structures that determine whose truths actually get made. With the rise of streaming platforms and their volatile commissioning cycles (Lobato, 2019), and a shrinking theatrical market increasingly shaped by the logic of platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2017), those structures have only tightened. There are fewer opportunities, fewer buyers, and more competition for less money.

This is the context into which AI arrives. And whatever else we might say about these tools, we have to be honest about this: they have levelled a playing field that was never level. In both pre-production and post production, AI has dissolved barriers that once kept entire classes of people from even attempting to realize their visions. That matters. It matters enormously.

3. The Storyboard Artist's Paradox

Before I was a filmmaker experimenting with AI, I was a storyboard artist and concept artist. I spent years not only drawing but trying to teach people who could not draw to previsualize their projects. What I was really trying to teach them was preparation: how to think through a shoot before you arrive on set, how to make decisions on paper that would save time and money on the day. But the inability to draw was always a barrier. People who could see films vividly in their minds had no way to externalize those visions without either acquiring a skill that took years to develop or hiring someone who already had it.

AI pre-visualization tools have effectively eliminated that barrier. A director who cannot draw can now generate concept art, storyboard frames, and mood boards in minutes. The visual language that was once locked inside their heads is suddenly available on screen. From a purely pedagogical standpoint, this is transformative. From the standpoint of someone who built part of their career on being the person who could draw, it is also, frankly, disorienting.

But here is what I have come to understand: the value I brought as a storyboard artist was never really the drawing. It was the thinking. It was knowing which moments in a script needed visual planning, understanding how a camera move would affect emotional tone, recognizing when a director's instinct was strong and when it needed challenging. The drawing was the vehicle. The judgment was the substance. AI has replaced the vehicle. The substance remains.

4. The Democratization Paradox

The democratization of media production is not new. As Manovich (2001) observed at the turn of the century, digital tools were already transforming who could produce and distribute media, collapsing distinctions between creator and consumer. Every significant technological shift since, from portable cameras to non-linear editing to DSLRs to smartphones, has widened the circle of who can make moving images and narrowed the technical distance between amateur and professional. Jenkins (2006) described this convergence as a fundamental restructuring of the relationship between media producers and their audiences. With the rise of social media and YouTube, we hear stories of anyone becoming a millionaire, making a living regardless of background, class, or education. You just need some basic skills and a connection to an audience. AI tools push this even further. The playing field is now more accessible than it has ever been.

And yet a paradox sits at the centre of this democratization. Previous technologies lowered the cost of execution but still required the operator to possess skill. You needed to know how to frame a shot, even if your camera was cheap. You needed to understand pacing, even if your editing software was free. AI tools, by contrast, can generate visual output from language alone. A person with no knowledge of cinematography, colour theory, or montage can type a sentence and receive a moving image that observes many of the conventions those disciplines have spent a century developing.

The tools have internalized the knowledge that once defined professional competence. The expertise appears to be in the machine. The question this raises is not whether AI can produce competent images, because it can. The question is whether competent images are the same thing as meaningful filmmaking. They are not. But explaining why requires looking more closely at what these tools actually produce and what they leave out.

5. Scripts on the Shelf: AI and the Promise of Unrealized Visions

I have scripts I created years ago sitting on my shelf gathering dust. Scripts I believed in but could not fund, could not crew, could not realize within the economic constraints that govern independent filmmaking. Suddenly, with the evolving capabilities of AI, I can see a way to tell those stories.

This is not a small thing. For filmmakers who have spent careers accumulating unrealized visions, projects that died in development, ideas that were too expensive for their moment, stories that no financier would back, AI represents something genuinely new: the possibility of creation without permission. You do not need a producer's green light to generate a visual world. You do not need a VFX budget to realize a speculative concept. The gatekeepers who once stood between a filmmaker and their vision are, for certain kinds of work, simply gone.

But this promise comes with complications I want to examine honestly rather than celebrate uncritically.

6. The Collaborator Problem: What We Lose When We Work Alone

Filmmaking has always been a collaborative art. The director works with actors, cinematographers, designers, editors, a crew whose collective intelligence shapes the final work in ways no individual could anticipate. As a filmmaker who has worked with crews on projects of every scale, I can say without hesitation that human connection on set is crucial. Some of the most important moments in any production are the ones that were not planned: an actor's improvisation, a lighting accident that created a mood no one anticipated, a crew member's suggestion that reframed an entire scene.

These are what I think of as happy accidents, the productive mistakes, the unplanned discoveries that emerge when human beings collaborate under pressure with limited resources. Just as an artist working with a palette finds that a stray brushstroke becomes the painting's most vital element, filmmakers have always relied on the generative friction of constraint and collaboration. Our mistakes can often be our greatest creations, precisely because they are unintended.

AI filmmaking threatens to eliminate this friction. When you can generate exactly what you envision, when you can iterate toward precision without the interference of other people's ideas, you gain control but you lose surprise. There is substantial evidence in film history of what happens when filmmakers are given too much free reign: unchecked egos producing

bloated, lifeless projects that lack the tension and vitality that constraints impose. AI introduces a version of this danger at an unprecedented scale. Schwartz (2004) described the paralysis that sets in when options multiply beyond our capacity to evaluate them meaningfully, and generative AI creates precisely this condition for the filmmaker. It is the tyranny of too much choice. You can get stuck in the pursuit of perfection, and is that not what machines do best? In that pursuit, do we lose something essential, a certain authenticity, a certain humanness that arises only from the unpredictable encounter between people working together toward something none of them fully controls?

This is not an argument against AI. It is an argument for understanding what AI cannot replace. The tool is just a tool. Just as a chef uses pans and utensils to make a meal, AI is another instrument in the filmmaker's kitchen. If we work with it as a collaborator and do not expect it to do all the work, something genuinely different can be created. But if we use it as a substitute for the human relationships that have always been at the heart of the filmmaking process, we will produce work that is technically accomplished and emotionally hollow.

7. Copyright, Authenticity, and the Question Nobody Wants to Answer

I am going to say something that will be unpopular in certain quarters: I am not particularly concerned about copyright in the context of AI generated work. I think the question has already been overtaken by reality. Everyone is using AI, whether they admit it or not. The industry's insistence on treating copyright as the central ethical issue of AI filmmaking strikes me as a displacement, a way of talking about ownership instead of talking about meaning.

The more important question is one of authenticity. Not "Who owns this image?" but "Does this image have something to say?" Benjamin (1935) argued that mechanical reproduction stripped the work of art of its aura, its unique presence in time and space. AI generated imagery pushes this further: the image has no original moment, no indexical relationship to a real event. When AI can produce any visual surface on demand, the filmmaker's responsibility shifts from execution to intention. What matters is not whether a machine contributed to the image but whether a human being decided it was worth making and understood why.

If we work with AI as a genuine collaborator, bringing our own vision, our own judgment, our own sense of what a story demands, then something with authorial integrity can emerge. If we treat it as a content generator and press buttons expecting it to do the creative

thinking for us, the result will be technically proficient and spiritually empty. The distinction is not between human made and machine made. It is between authored and unauthored.

8. The Pedagogical Crisis: Instant Gratification and the Erosion of Creative Patience

As a lecturer, I find myself in an increasingly difficult position. The younger generation of students I teach are accustomed to instant gratification, not because they are lazy or shallow, but because the entire architecture of their experience has been designed to provide it. Social media rewards speed. Algorithms reward volume. As Turkle (2011) has argued, the technologies we adopt to connect us often end up diminishing our capacity for the slower, deeper forms of attention that creative work demands. As a society, we give children as young as two access to iPads and phones that keep them occupied, and we rarely ask what this does to their capacity for the slow, frustrating, iterative work that creative development requires. Are we nurturing creativity and entrepreneurship, or are we spoon feeding a generation into passive consumption?

Education has long had a problem of training students to be workers, preparing them for roles in an industry that assumed a stable division of labour. Those jobs are disappearing. AI is absorbing them slowly but surely, particularly in the technical departments of film production: rotoscoping, compositing, colour grading, basic editing, even aspects of sound design. As Hesmondhalgh (2019) notes, the cultural industries have always been shaped by tensions between creative aspiration and economic rationalization, and AI is accelerating that rationalization in ways that will reshape the workforce profoundly. The curriculum that trained students for those roles is increasingly training them for positions that will not exist by the time they graduate.

The response cannot be to simply add "AI skills" to the existing curriculum. The response must be more fundamental: a shift from training students in execution to cultivating their capacities for judgment, ethics, and narrative thinking. Stories are made from life experiences, some happy, some painful, but they are essentially about human connection. If we train students only to operate tools, even very powerful tools, without developing their understanding of what makes a story worth telling and what makes a human life worth representing, we will produce a generation of technically fluent people with nothing to say.

9. The Generational Divide and the Question of Access

There is a generational dimension to this transformation that deserves honest examination. People in my age group, filmmakers in their fifties with decades of experience, can navigate AI filmmaking with a certain advantage. We know the economics of a gig industry.

We know how difficult the work has always been. We have the accumulated judgment, the narrative instincts, and the ethical sensibility that come from years of practice and failure. We are, in many ways, the most skilled generation to receive these tools, because we know what the tools are for.

But the younger generation faces a different situation entirely. They will grow up with AI as a given, not a disruption. The question is whether they will use it to create something genuinely new, new forms, new voices, new modes of storytelling that we cannot yet imagine, or whether they will be constrained by it, limited to producing variations on what already exists, trapped in the aesthetic defaults of models trained on the past.

And there is a harder question still, one that returns us to where this essay began: the question of access and class. AI tools are often described as the great equalizer, and in many respects they are. But technology is never free. It requires hardware, connectivity, literacy, and time. Zuboff (2019) has shown how digital technologies tend to concentrate power in the hands of those who control the infrastructure, and AI filmmaking tools are no exception. If the future of filmmaking belongs to those who can afford the most powerful AI tools, the most advanced hardware, and the fastest iteration cycles, then we risk reproducing the old class divide in new form. Not a divide between those who can afford cameras and those who cannot, but between those who can afford compute and those who cannot. We risk a future in which the stories that get told are told from a single subject position: the position of those with resources.

10. Conclusion

I began this essay with an account of professional vertigo, the disorientation of watching a tool do what you spent a career learning to do. I want to end not with reassurance but with a redefinition.

The skills that once constituted filmmaking expertise, technical command of camera, light, composition, post production, are being rapidly commodified. This is a fact, not a fear. What cannot be commodified, and what now constitutes the real substance of cinematic expertise, is something more difficult to teach, more difficult to acquire, and more valuable than it has ever been.

It is curatorial judgment: the ability to look at a vast field of generated possibilities and determine which ones serve the story, which ones carry emotional weight, and which ones, despite their technical polish, are empty. In my own experiments, I found that this capacity was

the single most important factor distinguishing work that felt authored from work that felt generated.

It is ethical sensibility: the understanding that every act of representation is a moral act, that AI tools reproduce the biases embedded in their training data, and that the filmmaker's responsibility to interrogate those biases grows more urgent as the tools grow more powerful.

It is narrative intelligence: the ability to construct meaning across time, to pace a revelation, to withhold strategically, to build an emotional architecture that earns its impact. These are capacities rooted not in computation but in a deep, experiential understanding of how human attention and feeling work.

And it is something I have not named until now, something that emerges from my entire career rather than from my experiments alone: the knowledge that stories come from life. From difficulty, from connection, from the irreducible experience of being a person among other people. AI can simulate this. It cannot generate it. The filmmaker who has lived, who has struggled with budgets, collaborated with crews, navigated the brutal economics of a creative industry, learned from failure, and drawn meaning from the messy, unpredictable encounters that constitute a human life, brings something to the work that no tool can provide.

This essay is written from the position of a practitioner researcher, not as a sceptic observing from outside, nor as an evangelist promoting adoption, but as a filmmaker attempting to understand, through direct engagement, what these tools change and what they leave intact. My perspective is shaped by a career spanning low budget independent filmmaking, self-funded projects, and large-scale international productions, as well as by my current work as a lecturer and my research as a masters student exploring AI, imaginative capacity, professional identity, and pedagogical practice. The arguments advanced here are offered not as definitive conclusions but as an informed position in an ongoing conversation about what it means to make films, and to teach others to make films, in an age when the meaning of "making" itself is being remade.

Professional identity in filmmaking is in freefall. But freefall is not the same as falling. It is the condition of discovering that the old supports have dissolved and that what remains, suspended in open space, is the thing that was always holding the work up. Not the technical skill, not the expensive equipment, not the industry credentials, but the filmmaker's capacity to decide what matters, to represent it with integrity, and to shape it into a story that earns its audience's trust.

The machines have not destroyed that capacity. They have, by stripping away everything else, finally made it visible.

References

Benjamin, W. (1968). The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. In H. Arendt (Ed.), *Illuminations* (pp. 217–251). Schocken Books.

Comunian, R., Faggian, A., & Jewell, S. (2011). Winning and losing in the creative industries: An analysis of creative graduates' career opportunities across creative disciplines. *Cultural Trends*, *20*(3–4), 291–308. https://doi.org/10.1080/09548963.2011.589710

Hesmondhalgh, D. (2019). *The cultural industries* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Hesmondhalgh, D., & Baker, S. (2011). *Creative labour: Media work in three cultural industries*. Routledge.

Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. New York University Press.

Lobato, R. (2019). *Netflix nations: The geography of digital distribution*. New York University Press.

Manovich, L. (2001). *The language of new media*. MIT Press.

Schwartz, B. (2004). *The paradox of choice: Why more is less*. Ecco.

Srnicek, N. (2017). *Platform capitalism*. Polity Press.

Turkle, S. (2011). *Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other*. Basic Books.

Zuboff, S. (2019). *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*. PublicAffairs.