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The politics of fictionality in documentary form: *The Act of Killing* and *The Ambassador*

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**ABSTRACT**

This essay sets out to do two related things: to investigate how the documentary films *The Act of Killing* and *The Ambassador* challenge the political and ideological ground of their audiences through radical experiments with documentarist strategies and fictional discourse. In order to carry out this investigation, the essay, secondly, presents and further elaborates a new way of approaching and making sense of fictional discourse using the concept of ‘fictionality’, an approach inspired by *The Rhetoric of Fictionality* by Richard Walsh and recently developed further by Henrik Skov Nielsen, James Phelan and Walsh. One of the benefits of this new paradigm is that it offers productive ways of coming to terms with the aesthetic and ethical ramifications of cultural forms that are heavily invested in current political events and issues while at the same time employing experimental uses of fictional discourse.

Imagine having a group of genocide perpetrators produce a film about their earlier wrongdoings, starring themselves as victims, oppressors and bystanders in fictive scenes based on their own experiences. Or, imagine having a respected intellectual leave behind his identity as critical journalist in order to become a trader of illegal diamonds, thereby taking advantage of juridical loopholes as well as of the local population of one of the poorest countries in the world. Both things have taken place and have been documented in two controversial films, *The Act of Killing* (2012) and *The Ambassador* (2011), respectively. The films are highly interesting as well as exemplary for their time. Contemporary Western culture has seen an increase in the production and dissemination of genre-bending hybrid products – products that employ non-conventional forms of fictional discourse in order to highlight, restate or subvert established political notions. Non-trivial uses of fictional discourse appear ever more frequently across a broad spectrum of artefacts across media, combining re-enactments, documentation, intervention, testimony and invention to express political critique (examples mentioned below).

In this essay, we set out to do two related things: the first of these is to investigate how *The Act of Killing* and *The Ambassador* through radical experiments with what we will call fictionality come up with forms that challenge the political and ideological ground of their audiences. In order to carry out this investigation we want to, secondly, present and elaborate...
a new way of approaching and making sense of fictional discourse and fictionality, an approach inspired by Richard Walsh in *The Rhetoric of Fictionality* (2007) and developed by Henrik Skov Nielsen and others (Nielsen, Phelan and Walsh, 2015). One of the benefits of this new paradigm is that it offers productive ways of coming to terms with the aesthetical and ethical ramifications of cultural forms that are heavily invested in documenting current political issues while at the same time experimenting with the forms and functions of fictional discourse, as is the case with these two films.

It is worth stressing from the outset that we consider both films to be driven by a basic documentary impulse. As formulated by Bill Nichols, ‘documentaries address the world rather than a world imagined by the filmmaker’ (2001: XI). In spite of the artificiality and various artistic choices involved in its making, a documentary is fundamentally a non-fictional genre or it is not a documentary. And this, in turn, leads us to emphasise the distinction between representation and the inevitable construction associated with any representation, including documentary ones, on the one hand, and the specific and deliberate choice to employ fictional discourse in order to present non-actual states of affairs, on the other hand.

Creating forms in which to document and address political injustice is challenging. Documentary films and the critics of such films face several dilemmas. One dilemma has to do with objectivity and subjectivity. Another has to do with the ethics of the medium. As Alan Rosenthal put it in 1988, ‘the question of ethics is at the root of any consideration of how a documentary works … the filmmaker should treat people in films so as to avoid exploiting them and causing them unnecessary suffering’ (Rosenthal, 1988: 245). A third dilemma arises if the documenting lens is pointing from somewhere privileged towards somewhere less privileged. When documentary crews from the northern parts of the planet attempt to shed light on matters taking place in the southern parts of the planet, a string of questions regarding, for instance, colonialism or neo-colonialism, follows suit.

*The Act of Killing* and *The Ambassador* are examples of an ongoing trend in contemporary documentary film to put a new spin on the dilemmas of objectivism, ethics and issues related to colonisation and globalisation. Projects by Sacha Baron Cohen, The Yes Men, Joshua Oppenheimer and others can be seen as moving beyond the normative call for an ethics of documentary film (as represented by Rosenthal) towards deliberately ethically and aesthetically challenging productions. In a recent issue of *Studies in Documentary Film* (2015), Selmin Kara and Camilla Møhring Reestorff suggest a name for this tendency: ‘unruly artivism’: ‘The emphasis is on performative and mediatized aesthetic practices, in which the artist, performer, filmmaker, etc. “misbehaves”, i.e. transgresses the law or the codes for ethical behavior or representation’ (2015: 6).

Our essay focuses on the ways in which the two films engage in experimental and potentially subversive uses of fictional discourse or, as we shall call it in the following, fictionality. After a presentation of the concept of fictionality, we engage in more detail with the formal and thematic complexities of the films, leading up to concluding remarks about what these films may teach us about the political potentials of fictionality and vice versa.

**Fictionality**

Drawing on recent developments in narrative theory, we suggest a rhetorical and communicational approach to the topic of fictionality inspired by Walsh (2007) and more broadly
by rhetorical narratology such as that proposed by James Phelan. The approach suggests that the use of fictionality serves purposes, including political and ideological ones, that can be rigorously analysed and described. This entails, first of all, concurring with Walsh that we can usefully distinguish between fiction as a set of conventional genres (the novel, the short story, the Hollywood film and so on) on the one hand, and fictionality as a quality on the other hand. The employment of fictionality is clearly distinct from lies as well as from truth, and its fundamental nature is not to deceive but to invite emotional and imaginative responses to a story given and taken as invented. We move, thus, from a generic approach to fictionality to a communicational one. We see fictionality as a way of speaking rather than something determining a genre. Furthermore, we argue that fictionality is a quality that does not apply only to fiction in the generic sense. Conversations, advertisements, Facebook updates, court proceedings, philosophical investigations, thought experiments, news shows and – as we are about to see – documentaries, regularly and routinely employ fictionality without thereby turning into generic fictions.

The most basic move on a conceptual level, we suggest, then, is to switch from a generic approach to fictionality, where fictionality is examined in a series of allegedly fictional genres such as the novel and the short story (i.e. in fiction), to a rhetorical and communicational approach where it is examined as the result of a specific communicative act about invented states of affairs, common in non-fictional as well as in fictional genres and texts. It is very prevalent in speech and writing but can clearly also take visual forms as in a picture of a unicorn, presented as a fictional rather than a real creature. Fictionality is present whenever a piece of communication signals its own imagined nature. Talking about fictionality as something not defined by and not confined to certain genres but as a way of speaking means acknowledging that it can be employed in any type of serious communication as a way of signalling that the communication is not directly about actual states of affairs.

It can take the forms such as: ‘once upon a time there was an enchanted castle’ or ‘we’ve got to name this condition that he’s going through. I think it’s called “Romnesia”. That’s what it’s called. I think that’s what he’s going through.’ Or ‘Je suis Charlie Hebdo.’ All of these sentences are blatantly not true, yet they are also clearly not lies. Fictionality can also take very simple forms such as ‘what if?’ ‘imagine that’ and ‘if someone had told me then’.

Just as there is no one-to-one correspondence between irony and any single genre, the employment of fictionality does not have a one-to-one correspondence with fiction as a genre. When fictionality is extricated from fiction in the generic sense, its overwhelming prevalence in numerous areas of expression is revealed. Thus stories that are emphatically presented as invented are regularly and pervasively employed in political rhetoric, as vehicles of cultural memory and ideological negotiation of past and present, in thought experiments, scenario thinking and risk assessments, and in many other areas of the societal, political and cultural fields. Fictionality, in this sense, is present whenever the invented nature of a communication is signalled exactly as in the examples above.1

A radical separation of fictionality from fiction allows for a new approach to the question of the signposts of fictionality, which has been so frequently discussed in narrative theory, not least by Dorrit Cohn (1990, 1999). This approach, moreover, is much better suited to discussing fictionality outside fiction because it is not aimed at determining a genre but rather at characterising the mode of a discourse.

Self-evidently, whenever signposts of fictionality are found outside of fiction, they can no longer be considered to be signposts of fiction. They can, however, be signs of fictionality.
The separation of fictionality and fiction allows for signposts of fictionality outside fiction and for an investigation and description of these signposts as such. Signs of fictionality do not necessarily determine the generic status of a work, but signal the fictionality of an utterance. Thus, a more radical separation of fictionality and fiction, where paratextual markers are not the only identifiable criteria for the status of fictionality, allows for an investigation of textual signposts independent of a determination of genre. We will return to this point when we turn to the films, especially *The Act of Killing*, because it exemplifies the point that signs can strongly point toward the invented nature of parts of a discourse without changing the generic status of the text or film from non-fictional to fictional.

To summarise the conceptual arguments about fictionality before engaging with the two films: where most earlier theories of fiction conceive of fiction as something that is delimited by a book cover or a DVD cover and in this sense segregated from the world, this rhetorical approach asks instead how and why fictionality is used as a means to achieve certain ends. Fictionality then is seen not as a specific way of turning the back to the world but as a way to interact with it and thus as a real-world communicative strategy, among others. Fictionality is thus seen as a means to real-world interaction and intervention. Fictionality and reality are not each other’s opposites but stand in a relation of mutual exchange and have done so at least since the time of Aristophanes. A rhetorical approach wants – among other things – to ask what techniques, strategies and means are used to achieve which kind of ends. It is worth making explicit that the employment of fictionality as a rhetorical mode is in and of itself one such strategy and means. But why? Why would one fictionalise outside fiction? Say, specifically, that you wanted to say something about democracy. Why fictionalise? Or, even more specifically: you want to talk about Liberia, the Central African Republic, diamonds, criminals and capitalism. Why fictionalise? Or about Indonesia, genocide, freedom and the possibility of testimony. Why fictionalise? Why deliberately invite people to understand that you are not talking about what actually is, while at the very same time you go to great lengths to document or to affect something real?

**The Ambassador – hearing whales**

While you take in hand to school others, and to teach them by what name a whale-fish is to be called in our tongue, leaving out, through ignorance, the letter H, which almost alone maketh up the signification of the word, you deliver that which is not true.

*Hackluyt (Moby Dick, Melville, 1952: n.p.)*

Mads Brøgger’s *The Ambassador* is a film about the buying and selling of illegally mined diamonds – so-called conflict or blood diamonds – from central Africa. It documents how illegal funnelling takes place: through the expensive leather briefcases of high-level diplomats, exploiting their diplomatic immunity in order to skip standard airport customs. The primary focus point of the documentation is the process by which one can, through bribes and illegally obtained documents and credentials, become such a diplomat, provided one brings enough money, determination and cynical disregard for both written and unwritten codes of conduct. Viewers follow someone they initially take to be the Danish journalist and intellectual Mads Brøgger through a series of shady deals with shady dealers. He buys a fake diplomatic passport and travels to one of the poorest and most underdeveloped countries in the world, the Central African Republic, with the goal of becoming Liberia’s ambassador to the Central African
Republic. This project involves his subsequently setting up a fake match factory to simulate the intent to develop the host country; it involves him striking deals with a local diamond mine lord; and it involves him meeting up with and bribing senior officials in the Liberian foreign ministry. All of this appears to be motivated by the intent to acquire diplomatic immunity and influence and to use this to be able to traffic in conflict diamonds.

The film goes to great lengths to document that the events narrated actually took place. Traditional markers of documentary authenticity feature heavily in the formal rhetoric of the film. The viewer is presented with a series of visualisations of actual documents, proving the names and addresses and thus the reality of the people portrayed in the film in classical documentary black-and-white style. The viewer is also told that several people lost their lives during the shooting of the film or shortly thereafter, including the slightly obese head of security caught on hidden camera. Lots of scenes suggest to the viewer that most of the film has been shot by cameras not visible to everybody present on the set: footage comes from small handheld cameras and from hidden cameras, documenting conversations and actions that were supposed to be kept secret or at least confidential. But the film not only documents or intervenes in the systematic exploitative strategies surrounding the trade of blood diamonds; rather, its protagonist also replicates these strategies through his own actions. Instead of proving that fake diplomatic passports exist, he travels on one; instead of pointing out how fake developmental aid is used to cover up exploitative behaviour, he engages in this behaviour. Instead of revealing the corrupt nature of a country handing out diplomatic credentials, he throws a huge party celebrating his own status as ambassador.

One way of describing the reasoning behind this portrait of an evil European diplomat is to say that the protagonist of the film is fictionalised. There are indeed some signs or signals in the film that suggest that the protagonist has constructed a character or persona different from the one he normally inhabits: at the very beginning of the film the voice-over of Mads Brøgger tells us that he is leaving his former identity behind. And the name on the fake passport seems to confirm a transformation of sorts: the historical person Mads has replaced his normal surname (Brøgger) with what was formerly his middle name, ‘Cortzen’. But the transformation entails more than a change of names, since the new character, Mads Cortzen, performs actions and voices opinions radically different from those normally ascribed to Mads Brøgger. Cortzen draws heavily on a broad spectrum of clichés about the white man in Africa, almost all of which are known through popular fiction and mass cultural sources, ranging from the Phantom with his ring and the man with the yellow hat from Curious George to (perhaps most prominently) Doctor Müller from *Tintin in Congo*. While incarnating these fictional figures, Cortzen also incarnates almost every stereotype imaginable about the white coloniser in Africa right down to his exorbitant, colonialist riding boots.

In a central scene, Cortzen trains pygmies to work at the match factory, which he and the viewer know will never come into existence. Posters are produced to teach the pygmies that the Chinese and French are there only to exploit them. On the posters the Chinese are portrayed in a racist fashion and the French are depicted as beret-wearing and baguette-eating decadents. But the many references to comic fiction and the extensive use of clichés make it obvious that Cortzen is not only just as exploitive as the Chinese and the French are depicted to be, but also just as much of a caricature. But, and this is a real challenge of the film, after having established the diamond-trader Mads Cortzen as a fictionalised character, the film does very little to manifest any difference between him and the real Mads Brøgger, and many things to blur the possible distinction. Two such features deserve mention: The
opening scene shows the protagonist hosting a party in celebration of his newly gained title as ambassador. This scene, which shows Cortzen in full effect as someone who in his own wording knows little about protocol but a lot about alcohol, is repeated as the final scene of the film. The second feature that adds to the blurring of the distinction between the fictionalised character Cortzen and the historical person Brøgger is that the voice-over of the film is indistinguishable from the voice of Cortzen. For example, he is, in the voice-over, quite racist – as is the character of Cortzen.

The effect of the narrative’s circular structure and the lack of difference that is made between the framing and the framed version of the protagonist is that viewers are denied an anchoring of the voice telling the story: Mads Brøgger has really been left behind, it seems, and when the film ends it leaves us behind as well, inside the limbo of illegal and cynical exploitation strategies that keep Africa in a hopeless situation while making it possible for unscrupulous high-class westerners to dine on caviar and champagne. We are never offered a position behind the decadent Cortzen. This lack of differentiation between the redemption-seeking, ethically shaken, politically appalled documentarist and his racist, colonial, limousine-driving, caviar-eating evil twin creates a double complicity with the viewer: not only the documenter but also his western audience are inseparable from the problem under scrutiny. The material, political and ideological exploits are part of the northern documenter and he is part of them; and this complicity effect reaches beyond the screen and takes hold of the viewer as well. Cortzen’s charm, wit and style and the structure of the voice-over documentary invite the viewer to identity with him and his quest, perhaps even at times root for his success, even when this success is the success of a criminal exploiter.

*The Ambassador* highlights some of the potentials as well as some of the pitfalls of combining political and ideological critique with experimental uses of fictionality. The text gains in excitement and dubiously charged entertainment value and has reached a broader audience than many more neutral and detached documentaries. At the same time, however, it is much harder to know how to respond to this rhetorical act. An important part of this doubt stems from the fact that it is often unclear to what degree *The Ambassador* documents a pre-existing world and to what degree it is engaged in creating the ethical dilemmas it documents. Several people in the film died during the shooting of the documentary or shortly thereafter, and many people were deceived by the film-maker and given false hopes, such as the locals who are promised a match factory. One can ask, of course, if the pseudo-actions performed by Cortzen serve a greater good and whether it is always necessary to break eggs to make an omelette, as the saying goes. On the other hand, as a student put it to one of us during a discussion of the documentary, one can also wonder if it is worth breaking ethical eggs to make an aesthetic omelette.

These aesthetic and ethical problems are even more closely interwoven. The film’s almost fairytale-like quest plot – the story of Cortzen’s attempts to become not exactly a king, but an ambassador with all the benefits and liberties this entails – thus contains a significant gap in the narrative. Viewers see him encountering difficulty after difficulty and obstacle after obstacle until suddenly, apparently, he has been appointed ambassador. The actual appointment is never shown and remains a missing link in the narrative. If the documentary were a fictional film, an editor could tell the instructor or producer to remedy this, but the conditions for a documentary are different: sometimes no visual material exists to document an event, even when this event is crucial to the story that the film is trying to tell. This aesthetic problem underscores the ethical problems in that it makes it even harder to gauge
exactly what is documented. One may make sense of this lacking key scene by seeing it as pointing towards an unsolved problem in the documentary process and thus see the film as testimony of a failed endeavour which tries to make the best of material that is not what the documentary maker had hoped for. Or one can make sense of this lack through an even bleaker, absurdist perspective in which the very lack of the key scene becomes the point. The lack of an answer to the complicity problem becomes the answer, in the form of a silent pointing rather than an expository revelation. The absurd does in fact figure prominently throughout the film, most notably in the strangest of many strange scenes where Cortzen is playing a recording of whale songs to the two bewildered pygmy helpers, whom the viewer can only assume to have no knowledge whatsoever about whales, let alone their songs. Cortzen provides them with no contextual knowledge, thus putting them in a similar but radicalised version of the position of the viewer. In the quotation from *Moby Dick* that introduces Melville’s novel and this section of the film, the etymology of cetology is an instruction about the meaning of muteness and silence. The silent ‘h’ in ‘whale’ allegedly determines the meaning of the whole word. The whale is mute and the word for whale contains a silent letter as its most significant feature. If you leave out silence from speech, the instruction implies, ‘you deliver that which is not true’.

‘Whale’, ‘white’, ‘whole’ and ‘hole’ form an intricate pattern in a quest that is partly mad. The muteness is at once absurd and significant, Brøgger seems to imply; the whole is not whole without a hole and finally meaning is constituted as much by absence as by presence of signifying sounds. Brøgger can choose freely from hundreds of hours of recording but seems to deliberately stage as well as include a scene signifying absurdity and lack of meaning at the heart of the film.

**The Act of Killing – eating fish**

Where Mads Brøgger’s *The Ambassador* addresses the politics of natural resources in a globalised world, *The Act of Killing* addresses the politics of memory in a specific country. It deals with what Sharon Macdonald calls a ‘difficult heritage’ (Macdonald, 2008), that is, the politics of collective remembrance of a shared, highly troubling past, in this case the mass extermination of alleged communists during what has become known as the Indonesian killings of 1965–1966. Following a coup attempt, the military set out to purge the nation of what the army saw as the culprits behind the coup: the Indonesian communist party, the PKI. During the next year more than 500,000 alleged communists – some sources say up to 2 million – were killed, mostly by paramilitary forces.

The leader of the military, Suharto, proceeded to take control of the country and remained in control for the next 30 years. The nature and extent of these events has been grossly underplayed in official history books and actively repressed from cultural memory in Indonesia. This repression was so dominant that in 2003, when Oppenheimer, the director of *The Act of Killing*, set out to document the mass killings, he had a hard time finding any survivors or relatives of the murdered communists. Instead of victims willing to testify, he found perpetrators eager to brag. They were not only living privileged lives because of their active part in the killings, but they were also willing to give detailed accounts of what had happened, including stories of how they were inspired by Hollywood’s fictional murders (such as the ones found in classical American Westerns and gangster films) when committing their actual killings. Oppenheimer offered some of these perpetrators a chance to return to
their sources of inspiration by letting them direct and star in their own film about the past events. *The Act of Killing* is thus a film about the making of a film. Oppenheimer documents with his camera the process of how the gang of perpetrators/wannabe film stars set up and acted out various fictionalised and often highly stylised scenes of interrogation, torture and execution. In addition to documenting the filming of these scenes, Oppenheimer follows the regular lives and doings of some of the perpetrators. The narrative dynamics as well as the ethical ramifications of the film emerge from the juxtapositions of these scenes of fiction and scenes of lived life.

*The Act of Killing* is particularly interesting in the context of using fictionality as a documentary strategy. As mentioned above, it meticulously stages fictional re-enactments of real killings and puts the real perpetrators of the mass extermination of alleged communists during the Indonesian killings of 1965–1966 in the role of their own former selves as well as in the roles of their victims. The perpetrators are happy to brag about their central role in the events, including their killings, and they are thrilled to have been given a chance to make a film to document what happened, and how. In this sense the film is a powerful testimony to what took place, giving voice to the persons performing the atrocities rather than to the muted or absent victims. It is convincing as a testimony to the fact that what is told now, in the present, took place as reality in the past. In this sense the film contributes to remedying official history and cultural memory in Indonesia. Because of the two timelines of the film consisting of the time of the filming and the time in which the original events took place, it also creates some very peculiar and surprising links between then and now. One of these links is the ways in which the nature of the events in the Sixties is repressed and left un-thematised, so that, for example, children of victims have to live next door to the murderers of their parents, and yet at the same time the events are present as something explicitly celebrated in contemporary news shows where the perpetrators are congratulated on finding new and more humane ways of killing communists. Another link between then and now emerges from the documentation that atrocities continue to be repeated on a daily basis on a (not so very much) smaller scale than in the past. The viewer sees threats and outright extortion and bribing taking place in the present day and in broad daylight in markets and villages with the same groups of people on each side. In this sense the film serves to document the present political climate and state of exception in Indonesia in addition to the ways in which it works as a testimony about what took place in the country during the 1960s.

For our present purposes it is essential to examine the ways in which the film uses fictionality as a means in order to achieve these documentary ends. A communicational approach to fictionality – again, as opposed to a generic one – allows one to identify signals of fictionality without having to say that the documentary is a fiction. If an instance of communication signals its invented nature, it employs fictionality whether or not it belongs to any genre of fiction. In *The Act of Killing* we find several categorically different instances of fictionality. First of all, the re-enactments in fictionalised form serve among other things to document what happened. There are also several instances of dreams and nightmares, either real or themselves re-enacted, most of which are connected to Anwar Congo’s feeling of being haunted by the ghosts of his past. There are embedded imaginings in which the perpetrators imagine what could have happened and what might follow after the film. There are many instances of intertextuality, which do not in and of themselves amount to evidence of fictionality, but nonetheless quite clearly invite the viewer to see the documentary as in part a Western, in part a play within a play and in part a journey into a heart of darkness (a
point we shall return to), even though it is none of these. The important notion of ‘act’ that figures so prominently in the title invites viewers to gauge the similarities and differences between the ‘act’ as (real) deed and the act as (fictional) theatrical performance. Finally, the film contains fictionality as straight invention as, for example, when small scenes that are not re-enactments, such as the one in which Anwar Congo is served his own entrails, are embedded into the larger narrative. The same holds true for the so-called ‘story of beauty’ supposedly materialised in the dance that partly frames the narrative, and – strikingly strange – for the fish also depicted on the DVD cover from which a troupe of dancers emerges in the film. All of these are instances of fictionality and examples of global or local instances of communication that openly signal their own invented nature. In addition, these instances all have in common that their invention is designed not to take us away from the cruel realities but to underline significant aspects of those very realities. The invention associated with, say, re-creating scripts from American Westerns only heightens confrontation and the ethical dilemmas entailed in testimonies from the side of the perpetrator. Similarly, it is fairly obvious that the re-enactments performed in minute detail by the real perpetrators of their past deeds work as testimonies and documentation of actual deeds. It is perhaps less obvious in the case of the fish. We will get back to this fish and the larger purposes it might serve, strange and uncanny as it is. Before doing this, however, we will frame this discussion by briefly looking at the functions of fictionality in the film in general, the purposes it serves and some problems and questions it brings with it.

The most important function of the fictionalised scenes thus seems to be to provide evidence as to what actually took place. How was such an undertaking possible? Did interrogations take place, and what form and function did they have? Who knew about what actually happened? The re-enactments come to serve as thick descriptions, full of evidence in the form of historically accurate details. A second function is to give voice to the victims. It is possible to read the film as a testimonial effort in that many of the re-enactments of the crimes become a way not only to show the perpetrators’ actions but also, by proxy, to make those who disappeared completely in some sense visible. As Derrida and Agamben have pointed out in their readings of Primo Levi, those who experience a genocide cannot bear witness, thus leaving it up to others to bear witness for the actual missing witnesses. In this case – in strange and unsettling ways – the ones who bear witness in place of the true witnesses are the perpetrators themselves.

A possible third function of the fictionalised scenes is to serve to document what the film seems to ask us to see as an existential journey of how one perpetrator comes to understand, confront and possibly even regret his former doings. The Act of Killing contains a great deal of narrative progression. What emerges as the narrative of the film is the story of Anwar Congo’s development. This story seems modelled on a traditional template: it is a Marlowian trip into a mental Congo where the horror of Kurtz is waiting. The first half of the film sees Anwar smiling and dancing, while the latter part shows him plunging deeper and deeper into actual and mental darkness, haunted by nightmares and eventually possessed by the sounds of his dying victims. Oppenheimer even stages the change from light to dark with a clear nod to the opening scene of Coppola’s version of Conrad’s classic in Apocalypse Now: Anwar lying on a bed, surrounded by smoke and a loud mechanical noise leading into the actual journey, not in a helicopter but on a train.

In this interpretation, one can argue that through its composition the film asks us to understand the fictionalised re-enactments as the main vehicle for Anwar’s process of
becoming more ethical and of eventually identifying with the humanity of his victims. Towards the end of the film this is spelled out when Anwar is shown watching a scene in which he – performing as a victim – was overwhelmed with discomfort and had to ask the person playing the perpetrator to stop. Oppenheimer’s documenting camera kept rolling. On one level this scene is what locks down the film as a portrait of the troubled humanity of the perpetrator. How can someone do what Anwar has done and continue to live? He can do so only on borrowed time, the film suggests. Anwar’s tears are the indexical sign of incipient empathy, remorse and ethical hindsight. On another level, the scene might seem emblematic of some of the problems involved in the construction of *The Act of Killing*. Is Anwar Congo in fact becoming human, or is it just that we come to think so because of the way the documentary has been cut and edited? Does the development transpire then only on the discourse level and not really happen to the real person?

Thus one can ask a three-part question: firstly, does the film suggest that some sort of catharsis takes place for the protagonist? We are ready to answer this question partly in the affirmative. Secondly, does it suggest that this personal development is a good or bad thing? The answer is complex and ties in with an uncertainty that does not concern the atrocities themselves, but rather the potential reality of the psychological journey Anwar may be undertaking. Thirdly, one can also ask if the film stages its last scenes to deliberately make it uncertain whether or not a catharsis is taking place for the perpetrator in pain.

This third question leads us back to the fictionality and the enigmatic cypher of the fish. We wish to conclude this section by focusing on the significance of the artificial fish, which is much less obvious than that of most of the other instances of fictionality. It is probably the part that has most obviously been added to the diegetic universe in an act of fictionalisation. What significance should we attribute to this fish, which seems surely to not document a pre-existing reality?

As is clear, people come out of the fish, and it frames the setting with the dance. The dance itself frames the film-making efforts of the protagonists. It works, we will argue, partly as a metaphor, to support a central theme in the documentary. To many viewers it might also activate a famous passage from Shakespeare’s *Pericles*:

> ‘Master, I marvel how the fishes live in the sea.

**First Fisherman:** Why, as men do a-land; the great ones eat up the little ones.’

(Pericles, Prince of Tyre, Act 2, Scene 1 [Shakespeare, 1981])

In this passage, human beings become a reverse metaphor for how fish actually live, in a way that turns back on our understanding of human life itself and its relation to animality and the realities of existence in the world. The fish serves a similar, albeit also different, purpose in the film. In the first instance we see the large artificial fish as just a prop or backdrop for the dancers. Then we gradually infer – to our horror – that human beings actually go in and out of the fish, as the fish go in and out of human beings in a much more general and horrifying way. At very different times in the film – in ways that are not immediately clear to any first-time viewer – we hear or see that:

- The bodies of the victims of the genocide are thrown into the river.
- Where they are eaten by the fish.
- We watch fish being caught by the perpetrators angling in the river.
• The fish are then eaten by the perpetrators.
• We watch the perpetrator protagonist unable to vomit even as he seems to really need to do so.

This chain of events may be construed as forming an uncanny circular structure, and it is supported by means of fictionality. The bodies and the trauma of genocide remain caught up inside an eternal circle. They can neither be assimilated nor disappear. The circle is at the same time geographical, historical and physical. At the very end of the diegesis of the documentary, Anwar is on the terrace where the killings took place. It is a painfully long scene that can be interpreted as a result of bad acting, as if he is trying unconvincingly to act as if he is vomiting. We would interpret it very differently, though, and see the scene as showing Anwar very convincingly acting out what it means to be unable to vomit. His journey, thus, might be circular and eternal rather than teleological.

**Conclusion and perspectives**

The goal of this essay was twofold. We wanted to investigate how and to what effect *The Act of Killing* and *The Ambassador* employ fictionality in order to challenge political and ideological assumptions about real-world states of affairs. Recursively, we wanted to present and further elaborate on what we, following Walsh (2007) and Nielsen, Phelan and Walsh (2015), see as a new and productive way of approaching and making sense of how fictional discourse functions, especially when occurring outside of the boundaries of generic fiction.

Both of the films discussed here document and address highly controversial political issues through aesthetically transgressive forms. Unconventional uses of fictional discourse serve as the main tool through which these transgressive forms materialise. The concept of fictionality provides powerful tools for dealing with forms such as these where the changes between employment and unemployment of fictionality construct and challenge meaning in these documentaries. The most arresting and telling passages from the films occur when viewers witness modes of fictionality to be evident in something previously assumed to be manifestly real – as with the narrator in *The Ambassador* – or when viewers lose grip of the invented because reality breaks through – as in the acting scenes in *The Act of Killing*. The construction and dismantling of such liminal zones between what is clearly non-fictional and what is clearly fictionalised can be said to be the main formal device by which the films address their political issues.

Both documentaries can also be said to be ethically transgressive and challenging, even if in rather different ways. The portrait of the diamond-dealing, dictator boots-wearing, bribe-handling, pygmy-assisted Cortzen, who takes over the body and identity of the acclaimed journalist Brøgger, would strike many as ethically dubious. The massive outcry in Denmark and internationally that followed after the release of the film attests to this: it included not only angry dealers of illegal passports and intellectuals but also governmental agencies and embassies, demanding everything from public apologies to the banning of the film. Adding to this the formal inconsistencies of the film, it becomes hard to gauge exactly what is documented. The plot hole in the quest narrative (the complete lack of information about the change from maybe-being-in-the-process-of-being-appointed to having-been-appointed) is perhaps the most jarring example of this. One could, however, also argue that it is precisely by leaving behind the world suggested by the
all-too-well-meaning western voice-over and by taking the viewer inside the world of diplomatic and developmental fraud, that the documentary discloses hidden power structures as well as hidden western desires while positioning the viewer as the one to judge them. The voice-over does not work according to expectations as the voice of authority and detachment but rather as complicit in the unethical behaviour and judgements of the characters.

In *The Act of Killing*, fictionality – or rather the breakdown or transgression of fictionality – makes truths and facts appear that would otherwise remain hidden: the re-enactments make it possible, if by proxy, to get a glimpse of the horrors experienced by the victims as well as by the survivors and the subsequent generations. One could, however, also argue, that through director Oppenheimer’s explicit confrontation with the proto-moral musing of Anwar Congo, the viewer becomes the observer of an act of judgement rather than being forced to come to judgement himself or herself. Seen from such a point of view, the ethical transgressions involved in *The Act of Killing* stem not so much from hanging out with perpetrators as from a more traditional issue when dealing with documentary film: the risk of constructing meaning or moral where perhaps none is to be found.

In both films, the inventive uses of invention produce aesthetically and ethically arresting forms, reproducing in the viewer rather than simplifying for the viewer the difficult choices and dilemmas inherent in their politically charged topics. Fictionality is not a by-product or supplement to the production of these unsettling artefacts but, as we hope to have shown, it is at the very heart of this challenging enterprise.

Fictionality is a flexible means that can be used for a variety of purposes. It holds no prescribed deliberative value in and of itself and is neither necessarily good nor necessarily bad. But whatever it is, it is not escapist and not a way of turning one’s back on the world. In this framework, the analysis of fictionality and the many employments of fictionality in the documentaries are not a means to determine or change a genre – or to think of the films as fiction. Instead, fictionality serves as a means to guide our interpretation and understanding of non-fictional events. Fictive rhetoric across the divide between fictional and non-fictional genres of discourse offers us imaginary perspectives, but these can heavily influence the terms – ethical, emotional, ideological – in which we make sense of our real lives and the real world. For better and for worse, fictionality changes the world and the ways we perceive it.

**Notes**

1. See Gjerlevsen and Nielsen (*forthcoming*), where fictionality is defined as: ‘Fictionality = intentionally signaled invention in communication’.
2. See Gjerlevsen and Nielsen (*forthcoming*).
3. It seems to us that this is different from earlier as well as recent instances of ‘new journalism’ in the sense that new journalism is primarily a style of journalism using literary techniques and emphasising the immersive and subjective aspects at the expense of the objectivity normally associated with the role of the reporter. For us, this does not amount to using fictionality or to signalling invention in communication.
4. *The Ambassador* has given rise to heated debates, centred mostly in a Danish context. See Reestorff (2013) for an overview of this debate as well as for a stimulating reading of the movie as an example of ‘unruly artivism’.
5. *The Act of Killing* has spurred a string of debates both in and out of academia. The critical reception of the movie has been remarkably polarised, with many offerings of high praise,
including taking home many awards, as well as harsh critique. See The Washington Post’s Ann Hornaday’s (2013) review for a notable example of the former, and Oscar-nominee Jill Godmillow’s ‘Killing the Documentary’ (2014) for a notable example of the latter. In 2013, Film Quarterly devoted a special issue to the film (67.2) with contributions from among others Bill Nichols and Janet Walker; Critical Asian Studies devoted most of a 2014 issue to discussions about the movie (46.1). See also Reestorff (2015).

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