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Provocative engagement: documentary audiences and performances in *The Act of Killing* and *The Look of Silence*

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Abstract

Through an analysis of documentary audiences for *The Act of Killing* (2012) and *The Look of Silence* (2014), this article explores the idea of provocative engagement as a way of extending our understanding of the affective dimensions of documentary and its role in civic engagement. The study draws on qualitative empirical research, based on interviews with the filmmaker, and interviews with fifty-two viewers in four different countries and cultures (Denmark, Sweden, Japan and Colombia). This data is used to explore the idea of subjectivity in documentary through the performance of memory, power and impunity in both films that are concerned with the perpetrators and victims of the Indonesian genocide of 1965. The analysis shows how a subjective documentary style provokes intensive modes of engagement, in particular with the performance of memory and violence that engenders ethical shock and moral ambiguity amongst audiences. Crucially, the research demonstrates how the contexts of engagement matter, as the symbolic power of the films shifts in different reception contexts. For Scandinavian audiences, there is an engagement with the films as cultural and moral resources to perform as self-reflexive citizens in democratic

societies. Japanese audiences engage with the style and moral ambiguity of the films, and at the same time question Western perspectives on Asian political struggle, and reflect on the risks of remembering traumatic histories for victims and their families. Colombian audiences have a raw engagement with the films as shocking and surreal, reminding young citizens of injustice and their continuing struggle for peace in a country scarred by war. Overall, our analysis highlights how performance documentary challenges the affective relationships between filmmakers and their audiences, and in this particular case we see a type of raw, provocative engagement with the act of documenting genocide, the act of watching, and what this means to people in the context of their political and lived realities.

Keywords: documentary audiences, political and cultural engagement, performance of memory, documentary ethics, qualitative audience research

Author biographies

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'The Act of Killing forces me to become engaged.' (47 year old Danish female freelance artist)

This comment brings to the fore engagement as provocation. What is striking is that this viewer is referring not only to issues raised by the film, but the way the style of the documentary forces her to engage with the genre and its subject matter. *The Act of Killing* (2012, director Joshua Oppenheimer, co director Christine Cynn and Anonymous Indonesians) uses a performance mode of documentary, and enactments filmed by the perpetrators of the Indonesian genocide of 1965, to explore impunity and amnesty. *The Look of Silence* (2014, director Joshua Oppenheimer) uses a more poetic mode of documentary to follow a victim's family across generations and their search for recognition. The shocking style of both films poses an ethical challenge for audiences. For example in *The Act of Killing* there is the ethical shock of the generic style of the enactments as musicals or film noir, or the performance of perpetrators of violence remembering the past in relation to their present day impunity; in *The Look of Silence* there is the struggle by victims to receive social justice. These documentaries on the performance of memory surrounding the Indonesian genocide invite intense moral, critical and reflexive modes of engagement; audiences are forced to *become engaged* with the dark imaginaries of the perpetrators of violence and the struggle over the rights of victims to remember the genocide in ways that contest those who remain in power in Indonesia.

Oppenheimer (2014) notes how performance documentary challenges pre-conceived notions of truth and objectivity: 'Instead of pretending to document the world as it unfolds, here is this opportunity to make visible the fictions that constitute our factual reality.' He refers to the visible fictions surrounding dominant narratives of the mass killings where there is 'an official history that erases the genocide from public discussion' (ten Brink and Oppenheimer, 2012: 8). The use of enactments in *The Act of Killing* highlight what Diana Taylor (2003) calls embodied memory; the subject

position of victims and recognition of their alternative histories of this traumatic past become part of the performances within the film. The tensions across fiction and factuality exist not only in the documentary genre and ethics of filmmaking, but in the way Indonesian political culture is shaped by the impunity of those who were directly and indirectly involved in the violence.

Oppenheimer uses the performance of memory to reflect on different subjective positions: there is the subjectivity of documentary as a genre; the subjective memories of the perpetrators and victims and their experiences as performers in the films; and there is the subjective modes of engagement by audiences reacting to the films as it relates to their experiences (ten Brink and Oppenheimer, 2012). Such attention to the subjective in documentary marks a significant shift in the genre (see Renov 2004, Winston et al 2017), where the act of documenting becomes caught up in reflexive and performative dynamics. In particular, we expand on the subjective in documentary by focusing on the act of watching. Corner (2006: 126) notes that the idea of subjectivity in documentary ‘exerts a complicating pressure’ on theory and practice, where ‘newly perceived dynamics’ redefine audiences’ affective relationships with the ‘levels of truth that documentaries can generate and convey.’ *The Act of Killing* and *The Look of Silence* relocate realities to a performance space where new affective relationships are forged between the filmmaker and their audiences.

We draw on qualitative empirical research, based on interviews with the filmmaker, and individual and group interviews with fifty viewers in different countries and cultures. Our aim is to show through empirical and theoretical analysis the ethical shock of *The Act of Killing* and *The Look of Silence*, and how this provokes audiences to intense engagement with the films and the broader issues of emotions, memory cultures and social justice. A key point that arises from our analysis is that the contexts to engagement matter; audiences from the different regions of Scandinavia, Japan and Colombia, understand the films in nuanced ways that are contingent on their personal and collective experiences of war, embodied memories, and peace negotiations. For Scandinavian audiences, there is an engagement with the films as cultural and moral resources to perform as self-reflexive citizens in democratic societies. Japanese audiences engage with the style and moral ambiguity of the films,

and at the same time question Western perspectives on Asian political struggle, and reflect on the risks of remembering traumatic histories for victims and their families. Colombian audiences have a raw engagement with the films as shocking and surreal, reminding young citizens of injustice and their continuing struggle for peace in a country scarred by war. Overall, our analysis highlights how the performance of memory generates multifaceted engagement with the act of documenting genocide, the act of watching, and what this means to people in the context of their political and lived realities.

Researching documentary audiences

The empirical research was conducted during 2014 to 2016 and was designed as a fit for purpose study (see Research Note for more information). There were 52 interviews: 30 for *The Act of Killing* and 22 for *The Look of Silence*. The majority of viewers lived in Sweden and Denmark (21) with further interviews in the UK (12), Japan (9) and Colombia (10). The initial idea was to recruit viewers in Northern Europe to offer an international perspective of the films and their impact in this region; the documentaries were funded in the UK and edited in Denmark, with co-financing from European public service organisations. Work on Indonesian audiences for the films has been conducted by human rights organisations within the country and detailed in public impact reports. An opportunity arose to conduct exploratory research in Japan and Colombia based on the expertise of the research team and the research grew organically into a study of transnational audiences. The sample and timeframe was connected with the distribution patterns of the two films for transnational cinema goers and television viewers. The research started with interviews for *The Act of Killing* in Sweden, Denmark, and the UK, in 2014 where the film had already been shown at cinemas and was available on DVD and television; the recruitment expanded to Japan and Colombia as the film was still showing in cinemas and festivals at the time of the fieldwork, and two researchers from these countries were able to conduct interviews with cinema goers not long after seeing the film; the fieldwork continued through snowball sampling during 2014-2015 until after the film screenings and television transmission of *The Look of Silence*. Viewers in our study were mainly art house cinema goers; they had seen both films, were aware of

other documentary films on political and human rights issues, and were keen to learn more about Indonesia, and amnesty and peace processes related to war and genocide.

All interviews have been fully transcribed (translations done by interviewers) and analysed using qualitative data analysis, where descriptive and analytical coding was combined with critical reflection of interviews in the context of fieldnotes and the films, including aesthetics, critical reviews and impact studies (Seale 1999). For example, we considered the theme of moral ambiguity in the data, drawing patterns across the interviews on responses to key persons such as Anwar, and linking this theme with the concept of engagement, where deeper analysis suggested that the cognitive and affective work of audience engagement with the theme of moral ambiguity shifted in different social contexts. We conducted analysis of each group of audiences, from Japan, Scandinavia, UK and Colombia, and then compared across the data sets; for the purposes of this article we draw on data from three regions, leaving out the UK sample due to lack of space. Our approach of thematic analysis of the data meant we looked across the data sets from the different regions, rather than focusing on individual cases; we wanted to understand how audiences responded to the documentaries in relation to their lived experiences, thus using themes to build up analytical concepts related to engagement.

In terms of research on documentary audiences, there are a handful of studies that connect with our work. Thomas Austin (2007), John Ellis (2011) and Ib Bondebjerg (2014) looked at the politics and reception of documentary film, exploring affect, cognitive engagement and social interactionism. More closely connected to this research is the work of Kate Nash and John Corner (2016) on strategic impact documentary, where they suggest there is a new mode of impact documentary, one that specifically aims at social activism and provokes public engagement in the form of campaigns, press, and social media (see also Nash, Hight and Summerhayes, 2014). Both of the films studied have elements of strategic impact documentaries in that there is a clear invitation to engage and participate in the human rights issues arising from the films, for example impact reports by human rights organisations within Indonesia (see Freedom Watch and post film discussions (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R-hKIDC57Ac>), or campaigns for a petition on the official websites (<http://thelookofsilence.com/participate>)).

We found our viewers were intensely engaged with documentary style and subject matter, and their own subjective positions as reflexive citizens. This meant the impact of the films was connected with enhancing knowledge and the role of documentary as a resource for identity and reflexivity. This knowledge was not generalised across the sample, suggesting that audience engagement with documentary is highly contextual to their personal and cultural experiences. In countries such as Denmark and Sweden, viewers found the films a resource for citizenship, engaging with the ethically shocking nature of the films, reflecting on the significance of making this genocide visible to a more global audience, and placing an emphasis on dialogue about human rights and justice in a deliberate democracy. In contrast, viewers from countries at war such as Colombia, or coming to terms with the traumatic memories of war in Japan, found the films more difficult to engage with, the style and subject matter proved to be a troubling resource for identity work and moral and political reflection.

The findings from the empirical data suggest two core areas to address in the article, first documentary engagement, reflexive citizenship, and civic action, and second performance and cultural memory. We draw on Peter Dahlgren's work on affect and performance in political engagement (2006, 2009). He argues that the cognitive and affective elements of political engagement are steps towards participation in democracy. In his research engagement is a subjective energy force that drives citizenship, a necessary pre-condition for political participation. Whilst a few cases show how political engagement leads to civic action, such as activists in Colombia, the point of our research is to bring to the fore the role of engagement in knowledge and critical reflection on memory, violence and performance as explored in the films and experienced by viewers in different contexts.

This connects the idea of documentary engagement with the performance of cultural memory. The work of Diana Taylor (2003) illuminates how a performance can offer alternative perspectives of traumatic pasts. In Taylor's research enactments form a significant means of researching knowledge, both written and embodied knowledge. 'Analysing enactment' allows researchers to understand culture 'as an arena of social dispute in which social actors comes together to struggle for survival' (2003: 7). Taylor uses the ideas of the archive and repertoire to explore how 'embodied and

performed acts generate, record and transmit knowledge' (2003: 21). One of the most significant aspects of these documentary films is the use of enactments to challenge official histories. Viewers in our sample engaged with the enactments in *The Act of Killing* as social dispute, where performance brought about an embodied knowledge experienced by the performers acting as perpetrators and victims. This was particularly the case with audience engagement with the character of Anwar, as we explore in the analysis. Just as Taylor suggests, performances generate knowledge for those participating in the films, but more importantly for our research these performances generate conflicting knowledge for audiences struggling to engage with the subject matter of the films that addresses moral ambiguity, violence and impunity.

Provocative engagement

The Act of Killing and *The Look of Silence* visualise memories of the 1965 genocide in contemporary Indonesia, but do so in unusual and different ways. The first film uses a performance mode to highlight how the perpetrators took inspiration from crime films or action movies they watched at the time, depicting themselves as heroes in Indonesia's political history, feted by society for the part they played in the genocide (Anderson, 2012). The performance mode involves enactments, where the perpetrators became directors and performers in the restaging of their part in the genocide. The enactments allow us to see the reactions of the performers as perpetrators and victims, with some key persons, such as Anwar, reflecting on their reactions when they watch the film footage at home. The visualisation of violence is highly contentious, and the film leaves viewers to make up their own minds about the moral responsibility of the perpetrators, and their real, or apparent, regret for past actions.

The Look of Silence uses a poetic mode to reflect on victims of the genocide. The long term impact of trauma across generations is explored through one family's story where the horrific murder of their son is remembered and celebrated by the perpetrators. Much of this film is based on either footage filmed by the central character Adi in his family home, showing the memories of trauma across generations, or involves interviews conducted by Oppenheimer and Adi with the

perpetrators of the violence, or surviving victims of the massacre where Adi's older brother was murdered. The interviews with perpetrators are shocking to watch; they enact the brutal murder at a river bank, now a natural and peaceful setting but then a crime scene for mass murder (Walker, 2013). The perpetrators justify their violent actions, and appear to feel little remorse; the film offers no easy resolution for the victims, or for viewers, in many ways showing how victims are denied recognition and social justice. It exemplifies Taylor's point about making visible embodied memory, performed by the participants in the film which now serves as an archive for their experiences of the genocide past and present (2003).

Both documentaries invite intense modes of engagement. According to Dahlgren (2009) engagement is a subjective condition, involving a mixture of cognitive and affective work by audiences. Political engagement can involve a combination of thinking and feeling; people draw on the media as resources for working through their identities, what kinds of knowledge they use to make sense of politics, what values they ascribe to media or political culture, and how they react, form opinions, and potentially act on their engagement in the form of citizen participation. Taken in relation to documentary engagement, Hill (2013) has explored multiple modes of engagement with documentary that include physical and sensory modes, psychological and emotional modes, and critical modes of engagement. Multi-modal engagement captures the combination of cognitive and affective work of audiences, where they react, relate, and interact with the subject matter of documentaries and their reflections on what this means in their lived experiences. In terms of our empirical data, we found the documentaries provoked an intense engagement. This kind of intense engagement can be expressed through the body, such as feeling sick, it can be articulated by moral discussion of the ethics of documentary or performances of people in the films, and it can be seen in critical reflection on both the subject of the documentary, and what it means to watch these films, thus inviting reflections on reactions within and outside of documentary.

We use the term provocative engagement because the dialogue between the filmmakers and their audiences is framed in relation to intense, visceral reactions and moral ambiguity regarding the performance of memory and violence. Bill Nichols called the first film a surreal world that 'seems so far removed from the frame within

which most viewers conceive of reality' (Nichols, 2013: 25). Critical reviews and social media helped frame the documentaries as different and unsettling; this meant that audiences were aware of the film's reputation to provoke strong reactions. Words such as shock, horror, sick ran through people's comments. This visceral engagement is shaped through the affective structures within the film where editing and storytelling and style fuse into an overall feeling of a nightmare. One Swedish viewer explained: 'I had heard of the film of course. When I talked to my friends about it afterwards I likened it to the footage of the planes flying into the skyscrapers on 9/11. Half of the time all you can think about is "I can't believe they caught this on tape"' (31 year old Swedish male social worker).

John Corner has written about difficult aesthetic experiences that involve processes of perception and engagement (2016), typically involving audiences asking 'what am I to make of this?' *The Act of Killing* was a very difficult film for audiences: 'I was so uncomfortable I had to watch it in several parts... my brain fights me, it goes into denial' (36 year old Colombian male visual content creator). For some viewers the difficulty in aesthetics and subject matter proved to be a barrier to communication, but for others difficulty was the attraction: 'Where am I in this? can I do anything? Why am I watching this? This is what makes it an amazing documentary' (28 year old Swedish male student).

There has been some criticism of this film shocking audiences without giving them contextual information that can aid political understanding of the genocide; in Winston et al's research they acknowledge the strengths of the film maker and his style of performance documentary, influenced by the work of visual anthropologist Jean Rouch, but at the same time they are concerned about the influence of the film if 'audiences shift focus from what is being documented to the way it is done' (2017: 201). According to ten Brink and Oppenheimer (2012: 7) non-fiction cinema needs to document 'moments of violence and humiliation that otherwise would remain invisible.' The 'narratives of obscenity and excesses' (Heryanto, 2014: 118) within the film are a provocation to shock viewers into thinking and feeling about the enactments, the memory of violence, and how to make this visible to viewers.

Roland Barthes' (1979: 71-3) discussion of shock photos is relevant to our analysis of the difficult aesthetic encounters associated with the films. Barthes notes how 'it is not enough for the photographer to signify the horrible for us to experience it'; a stubborn refusal to explain, an ambiguity in the political framing of shocking images, compels people to 'a violent interrogation', where 'horror comes from the fact that we are looking at it from inside our freedom.' For Barthes, our affective relationship with shocking images generates a symbolic power, where facts 'explode' (1979: 73), forcing us to engage with horror in the context of our lived realities. Barthes' notion of affective relationships with shock photos is similar to Jane Gaines (2007: 36) discussion of the political documentary as a form of body genre that has the ability to circumvent the intellectual and produce engagement through emotion and 'bodily swellings.'

The ethical shock of *The Act of Killing* strongly affected audience relationships with the work in relation to their lives. The fact that Oppenheimer refuses to offer an explanation for the perpetrators of the genocide, or offer viewers a clear moral or political position, pushes audiences to find their own interpretation of the films, reacting to horror inside their sense of freedom, their traumatic memories of genocide, and their fear of violence. For example in the context of Colombia and ongoing peace negotiations this viewer explained: 'I felt violated by my own pain and intimacy, I think that having experienced the Colombian conflict and seeing the horrible truth it allows you to connect with the film in strange ways' (30 year old Colombian male lawyer). In the next sections of this article we explore the contexts to engagement in more detail. Within Indonesia, human rights groups and impact studies highlight a cultural struggle regarding the impunity of perpetrators of the violence, a struggle experienced in the screenings of films and the sharing of content and commentary in a volatile political climate (see Heryanto, 2014, *The Jakarta Post* 2016). Our focus for this article is on the different cases of Scandinavian, Colombian and Japanese audiences, where we find regional audiences reacting to state sanctioned violence and injustices that are part of their memories and experiences.

Scandinavian audiences: self critical engagement

To watch the films in Sweden and Denmark evoked shock, confusion, and self-reflection about the complicity of Western society in the Indonesian genocide. How people react to this film is fraught with moral and political tensions. Sinnebrink (2016) notes how a documentary film about the mediation and memorialisation of political violence can engender an ethical experience; we found our viewers confronted with guilt surrounding their experience, adopting a moral position that was sensitive to how other people would perceive their reactions within a broader framing of liberal political views. For example, viewers felt guilty about being Western tourists: ‘Several times I thought to myself “did that really happen?” I mean, I’ve been to Indonesia, I didn’t have a clue. Why didn’t I see it, feel it? How could I just have been lounging around on a beach and not know anything!?’ (36 year old Danish female teacher). Viewers were critical of themselves as Scandinavian citizens: ‘how can I, a person who is very interested in society and politics, be so unaware of it? (41 year old Swedish female journalist).

Nash and Corner (2016: 7) argue that people can easily take sides on an issue whereas it is ‘much harder to take sides on a story.’ The documentaries challenged audiences, particularly the morally ambiguous character of Anwar in *The Act of Killing*:

he has all these sides: a butcher, a grandfather and he was also quite lower class, he had worked as a doorman, a pretty menial job. You could tell that he had sort of scraped a living. He was given the opportunity to have power. He felt that he finally earned respect. And that is very human feeling, that urge for respect is in all of us... You get a nuanced picture of a man, a human with all of its different facets, the good and the bad. We all have something good and bad in us. (37 year old Danish female clerk)

This viewer finds the nuances of good and evil troubling because it is hard to take a moral position on Anwar’s story – he is a grandfather and a killer. Some viewers contemplated how all humans were inherently disposed to ‘become Anwar’ under acute circumstances: ‘I ask myself if it could happen here. I would like to think not but it probably could... It’s a thought provoking experiment’ (36 year old Danish female teacher).

The films question assumptions about politics and violence (Heryanto, 2014: 118). Scandinavian viewers found themselves with unresolved questions:

Maybe the message is that there's humanity to be found even in the darkest sections of history. That's the sort of thing you might talk about with friends when you're drinking too much red wine, for example: "What was it like for Hitler during the final 24 hours?" It doesn't excuse what he's done, but a suffering person is still a suffering person...The question is: "How many wrong things can you do before it's too late to ask for forgiveness?" (37 year old Danish female clerk)

In another example a similar reference to the second world war was made: 'everyone has the potential to become an Eichmann, or even a Hitler. I'm just lucky I wasn't raised or encouraged to act in such a manner' (31 year old Swedish male social worker). In Europe, the genocide perpetrated by Nazis during the second world war has been subject to war trials, and memories of the war - the violence inflicted on all sides, survivor's accounts, the atrocities of concentration camps - have become part of the mnemonic imagination (Keightly and Pickering, 2012) within countries such as Sweden or Denmark.

Oppenheimer noted: 'I hope that the provocation for non-Indonesians is that we need to look at our pasts... We need to look at impunity and amnesty in our own national narratives before we can, without hypocrisy, look at Indonesia (2015). For the viewers in our study, it was important to avoid the self-righteous position of an outsider pointing the finger at a 'cultural other':

the question of how, or if, we should get involved is a really interesting one. Should we be sending weapons to Iraq? We've done it before. Weapons that were later turned against us. Do we interfere? Today, I guess it is not an option not to interfere. Just look at Syria where they are crying for help. (37 year old Danish female clerk).

The film sparked recognition of involvement in current problems closer to home, such as the rise of right wing politics in Europe: 'It's frightening to see how large the Sweden Democrats have become in the latest election, when you see what xenophobic governments can lead to' (21 year old Swedish male student). In doing so, audiences engaged as self reflexive citizens, reflecting on moral judgement and positioning the films within political contexts closer to home. With reference to Taylor (2003), the performance of memory as mediated in these documentary films becomes a resource for knowledge about Western complicity in global politics; the moral ambiguity that

makes the films so troubling to viewers becomes a space for a more personal soul searching about recognition and responsibility for others engaged in social struggle.

Japanese audiences: morally ambiguous engagement

The context of the films in Japan differs from Scandinavia in two ways; the subjective positioning of American, or Western, documentaries on Asian political matters, and the moral ambiguity that frames an uneasy engagement with a performance of memory and the practice of forgetting in Japanese post war culture. *The Act of Killing* achieved high numbers at film screenings, with around 50,000 tickets sold in cinemas, and a high profile promotion of the film by the distributor. It's shocking style drew Japanese art house film goers and generated much debate on the subject matter of the films and moral responsibility.ⁱ The documentaries provoked information seeking, and an uneasy recognition of Japanese and American complicity in the genocide (Blum, 2003; Lindvall, 2013). For example, one student explained how she read alternative news about the press launch: 'Japan does not admit this history...the people do not accept this fact therefore, they do not report this. I think both the Western countries and Japan have a responsibility' (19 year old Japanese female student). She wrote a student paper on this topic, furthering her knowledge of the genocide and moral debates around this issue.

Just as Renov (2004) suggests, the subject of documentary, the filmmaker, was paramount to how viewers engaged with the film: 'who on earth made this film? I did some research' (51 years old Japanese female food producer and social activist). The director's identity as an American generated mixed reactions on Western perspectives, or American political interventions into Asian countries. For example:

Every scene in *The Act of Killing* is a miracle, how on earth did they manage to make it? I cannot imagine an American director coming to Japan and interviewing perpetrators of the war, we were war criminals so there is no hero. (49 year old Japanese female radio presenter)

The USA isn't doing the right thing all the time... 50 years later an American director blames the Indonesians. I agree with the taxi driver, "what could we do at that time?"... ordinary people don't have the power to resist against the powers at that time. We cannot blame them. (39 year old Japanese female student)

Renov's (2004: 21) point about the 'tangled relations between fiction and non-fiction' seems particularly apt to this complicated political and social context. The director and the performance mode exerts pressure on the affective relations of audiences with the films; there is an openness and resistance to the performance of perpetrators of violence in the context of Japan.

Moral ambiguity frames public discourses of perpetrators and victims of the second world war (Tsutsui, 2009). One viewer explained 'There are lots of things in Japan after the war: we were perpetrators and victims ... Japanese people tend to have a sense of ambiguity rather than clarifying a fact in black or white. We cannot take any positions' (50 year old Japanese female radio presenter). A refusal to take 'any position', and avoid moral judgement, means the political intentions of the films are open to interpretation: 'The director didn't want to judge who was wrong or bad, but he wanted to show human nature, the people in the film weren't really bad or really mad, they were ordinary people but they were changed by their situations' (33 year old Japanese female school administrator). Some Japanese viewers criticised the director for challenging the impunity of the perpetrators in *The Look of Silence*, offering a black and white moral perspective that implicitly suggested American interventionism (see Tyson, 2015). Viewers felt forgetting the past could be just as powerful as remembering (Lawson and Tannaka, 2010). They questioned 'digging out the dark past', worrying about Adi's life after the film: 'I wonder how he managed to survive. Even amongst family members, they found perpetrators. This made him feel very empty... and it is a feeling that is easy to imagine (50 year old Japanese female radio presenter).

The act of forgetting is part of how these viewers engaged with the documentaries – a performance of memory that closes down, or interiorises, alternative memories of historical trauma. One viewer poetically described this process as 'seal the past to keep living' (50 year old Japanese female radio presenter). She captures the point made by Taylor that embodied performances are multicoded (2003: 69); here the sense of sealing the past, silencing the subjective position of victims, is fraught with tension. It is both a survival mechanism and a site of unspoken trauma. For this viewer it was 'easy to imagine' the feeling of emptiness at the end of *The Look of*

Silence because they had personal experiences of family members from the nuclear attacks of the second world war. People spoke of their memories of violence and the shaming of victims: ‘The real victims of Hiroshima who had bad experiences rarely talk about it... they just want to forget, but they cannot forget. I lived with my grandmother but she hardly talked about her experiences after the bomb’ (39 year old Japanese female student). Although viewers acknowledged the importance of revealing a ‘dark history’ (33-year-old Japanese male school administrator) through the creative practice of documentary, they also worried it was too soon to dig into the past. Such comments show these Japanese viewers reflecting on tensions surrounding the act of remembering and forgetting for conflict and violence.

Overall, the style and moral ambiguity shocked viewers into thinking about how perpetrators who have performed unimaginable acts of violence can be imagined as human beings (see ten Brink and Oppenheimer, 2012). And yet at the same time they were critical of Western narratives about the genocide, and political intervention into Asian countries. Their critical engagement was most vocal around the act of forgetting. These viewers rejected a key point of the films about subverting the narratives of official histories of violence and trauma, narratives written by perpetrators. In this context, moral engagement generated ambiguous responses to generational memories of the second world war in Japan and the sense of ‘sealing the past’ to keep on living.

Colombian audiences: raw engagement

The context to audience engagement in Colombia highlights a volatile political environment and strong disagreement about an ongoing peace process to end 52 years of conflict. During the interviews Colombians were immersed in debate about a peace treaty with the FARC-EP (Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia – People’s Army), a treaty aimed to put an end to a conflict between the Colombian government and the Marxist-oriented guerrilla group. The Yes campaign was led by the Colombian president Juan Manuel Santos, and the leader of the left wing Farc rebel group, Rodrigo Londoño (Timochenko); Santos was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2016 in acknowledgement of his efforts to end 52 years of armed conflict. The No

campaign was led by the former President of Colombia Alvaro Uribe, a controversial leader of the party Centro Democrático, who has been accused, along with other politicians, of links with illegal right-wing paramilitary groups and the mass murder of civilians; Uribe is currently a senator and a key person in the opposition party.ⁱⁱ On October 2nd 2016 50.2% of Colombians voted no to the peace treaty (La Nación 2016). Disparate political views were reflected in the results of the referendum; most rural areas devastated by warfare voted yes to end the conflict whilst urban areas with high population levels voted no.ⁱⁱⁱ

The acute situation of the ongoing war and the fragility of the peace process engenders intense engagement with the films, highlighting how ‘political struggle is moral and emotional’ (Alexander, 2012: 39). These are young educated citizens who watched the films because of the shocking style, and controversial subject matter, and the broader issues of impunity and amnesty. Young citizens who support the peace process are in a minority in populated urban areas, the very places that voted no to the peace treaty; as such, these audiences are seeking understanding and alternative ideas on how to relate what happened in Indonesia to the present conflict in Colombia.

We characterise their affective relationship with both films as a raw engagement; troubling, painful, and resonant with the political climate of Colombia. One viewer explained:

oh my God, was it ever so raw! It was so disturbing and so close to me, having lived most of my life in a country with an armed conflict it is just disturbing how violence does not have any boundaries or race, we all are suffering and living in the same world that is just rotten and perverse. (30 year old Colombian male lawyer).

The reference to a rotten society was made repeatedly in the interviews, referring to literally feeling sick whilst watching the films, and the metaphorical meaning of a society where citizens feel injustice and impunity rule:

It leaves you with a taste of a rotten society... I felt repulsion. In Colombia the feeling of injustice and powerlessness is like an extra limb we have grown through living here and it hurts every time. All the injustice that takes place and there’s nothing you can do but observe... the world is not right. (34 year old Colombian male advertiser)

The performance of violence and impunity is reflected in feelings of pain experienced by viewers and their families during decades of armed conflict.

Viewers described the process of watching both films as a hurtful experience. For *The Act of Killing*, in particular, the focus on the world of the perpetrators was sometimes too difficult to bear. Gaines' (2007) idea of body genres touches on the impact of political documentaries on audiences, but the term body swellings doesn't quite capture the way the symbolic meanings open raw wounds. One viewer explained: 'this documentary moved me deeply to the point that I felt violated. Conflict is unnecessary and any conflict has winners and losers, mostly losers because when there are lost lives nobody wins' (30 year old Colombian male lawyer). Another said 'I started to recall all the genocides that took place here and there have been so many though history, Mapiripan, el Salado, the Banana trade company massacre, the Violencia era, so many. It is horrible' (34 year old Colombian male web designer).

The Act of Killing generated strong and contradictory emotions around the character of Anwar. The performance mode and surrealism of many scenes made the harsh realities of the perpetrators of violence even more acute, as viewers associated the impunity of Anwar with those of other war criminals:

Killers also go to parties, they also get drunk, they fall in love, so it is a complicated feeling. Anwar is a killer grandpa and there are many characters like that, Pinochet was in the end just an old grandpa that the international court of justice condemned. (30 year old Colombian female media analyst)

But the feelings associated with this understanding of killers as human beings are not easy to resolve. This same viewer also feels 'they are a bunch of motherfucking killers and they shouldn't be there, they should be condemned to the most horrible torture for what they did.' Faced with the ongoing struggle of impunity and amnesty in Colombia this viewer wants negotiation, indeed she actively supports the peace process, but at the same time the performances of memory and violence are hard to take in the present political context.

Taylor comments on how enactments can transmit knowledge to audiences, citing Colombia scholar Martin-Barbero and his work on viewers living with and recycling media content to make it fit within their everyday environments (2003: 21). One person described the documentaries as ‘shock therapy’, the enactments of the killings can offer victims recognition, or re-enforce the impunity by those responsible. Their physical and emotional distress at watching the films helps to explain why these viewers were so critical of Anwar, rejecting moral ambiguity, refusing to see signs of remorse in his retching on the roof: ‘Anwar was a tool of the director to show that there is still some humanity even in the most awful rotten person... but he did not convince me, it just made me sick to get so close to him, to feel inside the head of a monster’ (30 year old Colombian male lawyer). As this person noted: ‘Uribe is our Anwar, he is still an idol for many Colombians and he is a senator now’ (30 year old Colombian female NGO worker).

For most of the viewers in our sample, these documentary films were a resource for political activism. Viewers were already active in civic society, as human rights lawyers, filmmakers, or NGO workers; they watched the films to enhance their knowledge of the subject matter and how it relates to their social struggle. One activist wanted to use *The Act of Killing* as a participatory tool for the peace process. She proposed to the government office for the reintegration of ex-guerrilla militants to show this documentary and make something similar in Colombia: ‘they all replied to me “why would you do that? This is a crazy violent documentary. We do not think that re-inserted militants should see this.”’ (30 year old Colombian female media analyst). The dilemma for citizens who are pro-peace is that they have been labelled as ‘Guerrilla helpers’, communists, or anti-establishment, and this resistance to amnesty has left them with a sense of exclusion, of being powerless towards achieving a peaceful end to the conflict in their lifetime. These documentary films symbolise the rawness of audiences’ political engagement at a time in Colombian society when the national narrative of impunity and amnesty is in a state of deadlock.

Reflections on performance and engagement

To reflect on the empirical research, the interviews with audiences of *The Act of Killing* and *The Look of Silence* show intense affective relationships between the filmmaker, the subjective style and contentious subject matter, and this has an impact on audience engagement. The films aim to provoke, and an intense, raw form of engagement exerts pressure on people's understanding of the performance of memory and violence within the films and as it relates to their political and lived realities. Viewers are reacting to the perpetrators' restaging of their violent actions, and unofficial memories of the genocide by victims denied recognition by the perpetrators and their families. The shock of the performances and the moral ambiguity of the films create intense forms of visceral, moral and critical engagement; it draws audiences into reflections on the past and present in countries that are remembering war, or directly involved in violent conflict.

Oppenheimer (2014) notes: 'There is a way in which the performance of power is always a palimpsest of real power.' What we have found in the empirical material is that the performance of power and impunity within both films affords different modes of engagement depending on the political and social context of audiences. Scandinavian audiences struggle with the style and subject matter, coming to a position of moral awareness about the importance of understanding, amnesty and reconciliation; the films are resources for Swedish and Danish audiences to perform as self-reflexive citizens in democratic societies. Japanese audiences embrace the strong style of the films and ambiguous moral tone, but resist Western perspectives on reconciliation, or the value of remembering atrocities; the films signal the risks associated with memories of war and serves to remind young and older generations about the act of forgetting as a means of survival. Colombian audiences struggle with the performance style and subject matter of the films, finding the enactments and search for justice too close to home with current conflicts over the long running war between the government, right wing militia and left wing guerrillas; the films are a reminder of injustice and impunity, a surreal world that reflects a living nightmare for these young citizens struggling for peace. Thus, the symbolic power of the films and what they mean to audiences shifts in different reception contexts.

In Benedict Anderson's analysis of *The Act of Killing* he argues that 'impunity is fundamentally a performative state, achieved through a reiteration of explicitly or

implicitly boastful performances by the perpetrators of past violence before different audiences' (ten Brink and Oppenheimer, 2012: 10). In our analysis, we see how different audiences react to the broader issues of impunity and amnesty that the films invoke. The very process of making visible violence and suffering through performance creates a visceral response; in the films we see this through the reactions of perpetrators and victims to the performance of power and impunity, reactions that include nausea, nightmares, and despair; these reactions are mirrored by viewers who feel sickness and disgust, questioning the act of watching, sometimes pausing to process difficult feelings brought about by the films. It says something that Colombian viewers called *The Act of Killing* a 'what the fuck doc', encapsulating the shocking images and the resonance of the film in diverse layers of conflict surrounding the peace negotiations. These viewers were moved to participate in civic action, protesting against ongoing war, and human rights abuse.

Our research focuses on the 'different audiences' that Anderson notes, exploring how intense engagement with these performances in turn shapes new or conflicting knowledge about impunity. Just as Taylor (2003) suggests, embodied and performed acts of the perpetrators and victims in the films generate a broader repertoire of knowledge amongst audiences. This knowledge touches on the genre knowledge of documentary audiences, such as what performance does to the claims of authenticity in documentary itself, and it suggests how performed acts generate a situated knowledge for audiences themselves, a knowledge which is unsettling and differs according to a specific regional understanding of political struggle. In such a way, we see how the act of watching these documentaries is so challenging that it provokes audiences to become engaged not only with the aesthetics and subject matter, and the subjectivity of the filmmaker, but also the subjective positions of viewers themselves.

Research note

The research in this article is connected to a larger project on media experiences, funded by the Marianne and Marcus Wallenberg Foundation in Sweden (2013-16). This broader project examined how producers create experiences and how audiences actually engage with these experiences. A range of qualitative methods placed listening and respect for producer and audience practices at the heart of the research,

using cultural sociology to examine how culture is made and remade by producers and audiences – see mediaexperiences.blogg.lu.se. Recruitment took place through word of mouth, using snowball sampling. The interview guides were semi-structured, using themes such as morality, memory, and social context, to explore the ways people engaged with these documentaries. Our viewers were mainly art house cinema goers, with occupations ranging from student, to social worker, nurse, actor, artist, journalism, business manager, advertising, and design, with the majority in a middle class social category. There was a gender balance of males and females across the sample (26 females and 26 males), aged 21 to 60 years old. Viewers had watched the films on DVD, or via catch up services for public service channels (Channel 4 in the UK, and SVT and DR in Sweden and Denmark), and also by attending film festivals or special screenings in Europe, Japan and Colombia. Interviews of around an hour took place in face to face meetings, and via telephone and Skype conducted by XXXX. There are production interviews with the filmmaker and producer, conducted by XXXX.

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Endnotes

ⁱ At the film launch, a well known Japanese celebrity Madam Dewi (2014) was invited to speak, alongside the director and a film critic, about her experience of living as the third widow of Suharto in Japan, and the complicity of the Japanese government in the Indonesian genocide; the Japanese Prime Minister Sato financially assisted the perpetrators in Indonesia. Despite this press launch and public interest, mainstream media cut her political comments, later appearing in alternative social media (Matsushita 2014).

ⁱⁱ The campaign was mired in political in-fighting; misinformation was spread through mainstream media, social media and other web platforms by the opposition (Mora 2016, Semana 2016). For example, it was said during the No campaign that the new peace agreement would give ex-militants a salary of 1.800,000 Colombian pesos when it was really an aid of 620,000 pesos that would assist ex-militants while they return to education and the work market; fears were stoked by evangelical Christian churches that the peace treaty promoted homosexuality on the basis of words on gender equality in a specific section of the treaty (Cosoy 2016).

ⁱⁱⁱ For example, the small rural town of Bojaya became a symbol of rural citizens and their desire for peace; in a church containing over 300 civilians seeking refuge from the fighting, 79 people were killed when a gas cylinder was launched into a church; 96% of Bojaya's population voted yes to the peace treaty.