

PERFORMATIVE NON-FICTION FILM
AND THE FUTURE LANDSCAPE OF
DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKING

by

Madison Ally McClintock

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Science and Natural History Filmmaking

MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY
Bozeman, Montana

April 2015

©COPYRIGHT

by

Madison Ally McClintock

2015

All Rights Reserved

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. PERFORMATIVE NON-FICTION FILM	4
3. CASE STUDY ONE: <i>THE ACT OF KILLING</i> (2012)	10
4. CASE STUDY TWO: <i>BOMBAY BEACH</i> (2011)	15
5. CASE STUDY THREE: <i>I'M STILL HERE</i> (2010)	19
6. CINEMA TRUTH & <i>A DECAY OF CONTROL</i> (2015)	22
7. THE TIDES ARE CHANGING	26
8. CONCLUSION.....	27
REFERENCES CITED.....	28

ABSTRACT

American non-fiction filmmaking is currently experiencing a period of expansion. Today, the paradigm shift is focused on inquiries of form and function, with filmmakers pushing against the current boundaries of the genre. Historically, narrative and documentary have been thought of as distinct forms, but there are many films being produced today that fall somewhere in between. Films that are merging style and format from both fiction and non-fiction are referred to as hybrid documentaries or creative non-fiction. As part of this current trend, what I refer to as performative non-fiction is one subgenre that has evolved from the present desire to broaden the non-fiction film form. After identifying the defining characteristics of performative non-fiction films, I explore three case studies, *The Act of Killing* (2012), *Bombay Beach* (2011), and *I'm Still Here* (2010), as well as my own film, *A Decay of Control* (2015), to illustrate how their use of performance is changing the way information is conveyed in the documentary, representing one route of epistemological expansion of the medium.

INTRODUCTION

“Documentaries, long the staid, journalistic brother to the wild imaginings of feature films, are at the point where they’re chafing at form and function, breaking free from straightforward journalism and into something different and wilder” (Rohter 1).

When new methods to approaching documentary arise, it is a result of a desire to find novel ways to represent reality, or it is a reaction to previous non-fiction approaches (Nichols 122). For example, in the past thirty years, filmmakers have been challenging the realist approach to documentary that has long dominated American non-fiction film. Realist approaches are defined by their assumption that photographic representation is objective, as if the camera was a “window into the world” (Ricciardelli 11). Realist documentary films assume the camera will offer a transparent representation of reality and their value is determined by how authentic they are perceived to be. Criticism of this approach is not new; film theorists and filmmakers have long identified the inherent flaws of assuming the camera is an objective representational device.

As a reaction to realist attempts to capture an unbiased reality, filmmakers shifted emphasis towards localized, subjective knowledge, instead acknowledging the complex mix of realities that exist in the world (Nichols 130). These perceived deficiencies in past non-fiction film methods can partly be attributed to the idea that they may no longer effectively represent the current world in a particular moment in time. The realist approach for instance adopts a certain way of seeing and knowing the world that may no longer be relevant in an exponentially digital and media-savvy society, where people are

aware of the limitations of photographic objectivity (Ricciardelli 18). A new form of representation may have a different set of emphases and implications that are more attune to the present state of society (Nichols 101). It is important to note that a new approach is not superior than what preceded and it does not necessarily mark an advancement of the medium. Rather, a new approach represents an epistemological expansion of the documentary film genre.

American non-fiction filmmaking is currently experiencing a period of this expansion. Today, the paradigm shift seems to be focused on inquiries of form and function, with filmmakers pushing against the boundaries of the genre:

“The traditional ‘A-roll, B-roll, talking heads’ paradigm, influenced by journalism, is increasingly being challenged by experiments in which all of the standard features of the traditional documentary — like voice-over, music cues and narrative arcs based on real life — are being mutated or eschewed and devices from the world of fiction embraced” (Rohter 1).

Historically, narrative and documentary have been thought of as distinct forms, but there are many films being produced today that fall somewhere in between. Films that are merging style and format from both fiction and non-fiction are referred to as hybrid documentaries, or “creative non-fiction” (Donnelly 1). Although this is not the first time in documentary history that filmmakers have mixed genres, there is a clear trend toward hybrid documentaries today and they are particularly well-received and critically-acclaimed. For example, Sarah Polley’s *Stories We Tell* (2012) mixes fiction storytelling elements with personal essay style documentary to explore the subjectivity of family histories. The film has a compelling and personal plot at the same time the film’s

metanarrative focuses on self-reflexivity. Polley is more interested in how a story's telling and the ways that truth, people, and selves can be told and represented (Anderst 1).

One way Polley achieves this self-reflexivity is by weaving actual home movies with re-enactments that are meant to look like home movies, giving equal weight to the “true” and “false” types of footage. Late in the film, she then acknowledges her own authorship by including sequences of her directing these re-enacted scenes. Blurring the line between the real and staged footage allowed Polley to draw attention to the implications of storytelling and truth. *Stories We Tell* was a critical success, one of the best-reviewed films of the 2012, although it was denied an Oscar nomination for best documentary because the Academy did not believe it was a documentary. They felt it was deceiving that the re-enactments were not immediately revealed as being constructed (Roston 1, *Impressions*). Hybrid documentaries today are transcending categorization and challenging current definitions at a rate that audiences and film institutions cannot keep up with.

As part of this current trend of hybrid documentaries, what I refer to as “performative non-fiction” is one subgenre that has evolved from this present desire to broaden the documentary film form to depict both the reality of appearances and of the mind. After identifying the defining characteristics of performative non-fiction, I explore three case studies, *The Act of Killing* (2012), *Bombay Beach* (2011), and *I'm Still Here* (2010), as well as my own film, *A Decay of Control* (2015), to illustrate how their use of performance is changing the way information is conveyed in documentary, representing one route of epistemological expansion of the medium.

THE PERFORMATIVE NON-FICTION FILM

Unlike realist approaches of representation like the observational documentary mode that seek to hide the filmmaking process, performative non-fiction films find new meaning and value by embracing their own inauthenticity. All filmmaking, fiction and non-fiction alike, alters the reality it attempts to represent (Nichols 6). The moment someone steps in front of the camera, their behavior and personality change to varying degrees, they begin to *perform*. Thus the documentary process unavoidably misrepresents or distorts what we accept as reality. Film theorist Stella Bruzzi argues that we should not attempt to hide the inherent instability of documentary and rather acknowledge the inevitable presence of performance:

“...whether built around the intrusive presence of the filmmaker or self-conscious performances by its subjects – is the enactment of the notion that a documentary only comes into being as it is performed, that although its factual basis (or document) can pre-date any recording or representation of it, the film itself is necessarily performative, because it is given meaning by the interaction between performance and reality” (Bruzzi. 154).

In this regard, the performative non-fiction film is self-reflexive. It is occupied with a new understanding of documentary “truth” that acknowledges film construction and its inherent artificiality.

As with all other documentary film approaches, the performative non-fiction film attempts to represent reality, but it is not concerned with hiding the subjective construction of filmmaking. The performative non-fiction film that I am referring to in this paper is an expanded form of Bill Nichol’s “performative documentary mode.”

Therefore it includes, but not exclusively, the defining characteristics of Nichol's mode. According to Nichols, "the performative documentary underscores the complexity of our knowledge of the world by emphasizing its subjective and affective dimensions" (131). It endorses a definition of knowledge that emphasizes the importance of the personal experience. It engages with the notion that subjective knowledge can help us understand more general or universal ideas.

For example, Janet Merewether's *Jabe Babe: A Heightened Life* (2005) (Jabe Babe) eloquently illustrates what it is like to live with a life-threatening genetic disorder. The film explores the life of Jabe Babe, a 31-year-old woman towering over six feet tall diagnosed with Marfan Syndrome. In the opening sequence of the film, we pan through a series of smiling children landing on the mid-section of Jabe Babe, the camera quickly tilts up and we see her dressed like a school child and she says, "I was always the tallest and always in the back row" (Jabe Babe). The juxtaposition of her amongst the children exaggerates and dramatizes Jabe Babe's feeling of being awkward and self-conscious as a child, setting up her story and some of the main themes of the film. Merewether's keen understanding of cinematic language and openness to utilize both non-fiction and fiction techniques allows her to paint a vivid picture of Jabe Babe and her unique experience living with a serious genetic disorder. It underlines the strength of personal knowledge to create a linkage between the subject and the viewer, leading to a more intimate understanding of more universal ideas like coping with a terminal illness.

Performative non-fiction films feature real people performing as themselves. They may work conceptually or by design to encourage their subjects, and the way the subject

performs says something implicit about them as a person. This approach in some cases gives subjects the space to direct themselves, turning the film process into a collaboration rather than a director/performer binary relationship. For instance, the performative elements in *Jabe Babe*, gave Jabe Babe more room to express herself and therefore it helped Merewether communicate implicit dimensions that cannot be easily conveyed through traditional interview. Thus, conscious decisions are made with the usage of performance, as opposed to performance simply being a reaction to the presence of the camera. In contrast, The Maysles brothers' film *Grey Gardens* (1975) features subjects that alter their personality or perform for the camera. The Maysles are known for their direct cinema technique in which they try to hide the filmmaking process and their influence on their subject's behavior. The film does introduce some self-reflexive elements, the filmmakers are present in the film briefly, but it is still largely presented with the idea that they took a "fly-on-the-wall" approach. They believed this method gave their film more authenticity, when in fact, it is censoring the artifice that is intrinsic to filmmaking. As a result, *Grey Gardens* is not considered a performative non-fiction film.

Similarly, reality television shows such as *The Real World* or *The Real Housewives* are not considered performative non-fiction series because the characters also act or alter themselves for the camera. Producers more often script scenarios, cast actors, and interact with subjects and then present the show as if it were real life. Reality TV often gives the visage that it is "authentic" rather than acknowledging that they are frequently scripted.

On the other end of the spectrum, fiction dramas that use performance to illustrate non-fiction topics, are also not performative non-fiction films. Nonetheless these “docudramas” can function like documentaries and raise awareness about real societal issues. *The Laramie Project* (2002) for instance is a docudrama based on a play of the same name, which documents the societal impacts of the murder of Matthew Shepard in 1998 in Laramie, Wyoming. The film is scripted and features paid actors, although its examination of homophobia in the United States was integral to the foundations of the modern gay rights movement. The role of performance in docudrama “attempts to draw the audience into the reality of the situation being dramatized, to authenticate fictionalization” whereas performative non-fiction films do the exact opposite: they use performance within non-fiction to acknowledge the impossibility of representing reality authentically (Bruzzi 150).

In the performative non-fiction film, the performance is not simply left to the film subjects. Often times the filmmaker creates him or herself as a character in his or her own film. Although the film in itself should be an indicator of the filmmaker’s opinion, when they are actually present in the film, the viewer can draw further conclusions about the ideas the filmmaker is trying to convey: “[the filmmaker] is freed to openly discuss his or her perspective in regards to the film being made, rhetoric and argumentation return to the documentary film as the filmmaker clearly asserts a message...” (Bruzzi 160). The filmmaker’s physical (or verbal) presence in the film reinforces the notion that a documentary is a conversation between the creator and its audience. This technique allows for a clearer dialogue between the filmmaker and their audience.

Michael Moore is probably the most famous filmmaker working with this method today. Moore is known for his overt interventionist tactics, interrogating his subjects and staging grandiose performances to support his arguments. In his film *Sicko* (2007), which is a critical examination of the American healthcare system, he stages an elaborate performance to illustrate the difficulty of getting affordable healthcare in the United States. Moore takes a group of 9/11 rescue workers by boat to the entrance of the Guantanamo Bay detainment camp and requests access by megaphone demanding that the 9/11 victims receive treatment as good as that received by the detainees. Moore's presence and overt displays in his films are undoubtedly exaggerated, but his performance and conceptual approaches, although artificial, help communicate the ideas he wants to resonate within the viewer.

Lastly, like other hybrid films, the performative non-fiction film uses aesthetic and storytelling techniques that blur the line between documentary and narrative. They adopt the notion that documentary filmmaking is storytelling, not just visual journalism, and that they can have the same immersive and transformational qualities of a well-constructed fiction film (Rohter 1). Therefore the performative non-fiction filmmaker is freed from being trapped within a particular genre, opening them up to seemingly endless techniques to communicate ideas.

In summary, the performative non-fiction film can be categorized by a combination of the following attributes: self-reflexivity, emphasizing the subjective experience (or localized knowledge) rather than universal knowledge of the world, has real people performing as themselves, uses performance consciously to communicate

more implicit ideas like psychological or emotional dimensions of the human experience, and blends fiction and non-fiction film techniques to tell their stories. Both *Jabe Babe: A Heightened Life* and *Sicko*, as well as the performative non-fiction films *The Act of Killing*, *Bombay Beach* and *I'm Still Here*, which will be discussed next, embody all or a combination of these qualities.

CASE STUDY ONE: *THE ACT OF KILLING* (2012)

Joshua Oppenheimer's 2012 *The Act of Killing* (AOK) uses performance as a conceptual approach to force former Indonesian death-squad killers to face suppressed memories of genocide. In 1965, the Indonesian government was overthrown by a military coup. Anyone opposed to the new military dictatorship could be accused of being communist. Within a year, over one million "communists" were murdered. The army government recruited civilians (or paramilitaries), to carry out these killings. Since the massacres in 1965-66, the Indonesian government has "celebrated 'the extermination of the communists' as a patriotic struggle, and celebrated the paramilitaries as its heroes, rewarding them with power and privilege" (The Look of Silence). Four decades later, these men continue to occupy key positions of power and persecute anyone who stands in their way. Joshua Oppenheimer went to Indonesia to make a film exposing the nature of this regime under which Indonesians were living but were too afraid to acknowledge (qtd. in Behlil 29). He began talking to the killers directly and noticed they would "show off" and be seemingly proud of the killings. None of them were testifying, but instead *performing* or boasting. In disbelief, he at first did not know what to make of their performance. So, he chose to make it a part of his methodology:

"I had to understand what these men were doing by boasting, and the easiest way to do it was to just let them do it - give them a space to let them stage their own boasting and see how they discuss it amongst themselves and what reactions this generates in them. That way, I could understand how they wanted to be seen, how they see each other and how, ultimately, they see themselves" (qtd. in Behlil 28).

To uncover the purpose of their boasting, he gave the perpetrators the space to discuss and express their experiences however they wanted. For instance, Anwar Congo, the main character and the forty-first killer Oppenheimer interviewed, had a particular affinity to Hollywood cinema. So Congo seemed to assume that Oppenheimer needed dramatized re-enactments to show what happened. This led to several elaborate re-creations of the massacres, using props, costumes, and extras inspired by film genres like musical, fantasy, and film noir. These dramatized scenes are intercut throughout the film's interviews and observational segments. As a viewer, it is a disturbing and extremely surreal realization that these are real men recounting their own past atrocities. At one point in the film, Congo suggests: "Why do people watch films about Nazis...we can do that too, but never before has a film shown strangling and killing like ours does, because we did it in real life!" (AOK). The perpetrators' initial eagerness to re-enact their role in the massacres emphasizes their unwillingness to accept that they committed murderous crimes.

Although for Congo, performing in the re-enactments forces him to confront his dark past, leading him to feel remorse for his actions. In one of the re-enactments, Congo plays the victim and the moment of his own strangulation he is literally put into a catatonic state where they have to stop filming altogether. At the end of the film, Congo revisits the rooftop site where he personally killed hundreds of people. Earlier in the film he shows us the site, but he is cheery, even dancing at one point. The second time around, Congo begins to describe the relevance of the site but then starts hyperventilating and dry heaving until he eventually has to get up and leave. Oppenheimer and his crew are

persistent, lingering on these moments that show Congo experiencing some semblance of remorse and catharsis.

This method of using performance as a means to confront their dark past did not resonate with all of the perpetrators Oppenheimer worked with. Considering Congo's affinity to film, he believes Congo coped with his actions in 1965 by using cinema to distance himself from the horror of murder. Congo thought he could use cinema once more to escape his nightmares by participating in the *The Act of Killing*. Unfortunately he realizes his participation in the film provokes him to face his personal horrors, rather than suppress them:

“[Congo] is haunted by a miasmic horror, by memories that defy language, memories of the unspeakable, the unimaginable...Cinema, and the frame provided by making this film, was a safe space for him. [But] in the end, he realizes that this is impossible, and he chokes on the rising terror that comes with the realization that he will never escape the horror of what he has done. He will never be able to tame it with storytelling, with fiction, or with fantasy” (qtd. in Behlil 27).

Performing for the camera and then reflecting on his performance provoked Congo to confront his most indigestible truths. Oppenheimer shows Congo clips of the re-enactments and previous interviews throughout the film to allow him to directly react to his own performance. While watching the scene where he broke down playing a victim, Congo comments on how he actually felt like one of the victims. Oppenheimer replies by saying that the actual victims felt far worse, they knew they were being killed whereas for him this was just a movie. Congo begins to cry, explaining that he had tortured many people and that he could not handle it all coming back to him again

(AOK). In other words, Congo cannot admit what he did was wrong because he is afraid of what that truth would mean to him psychologically. Maintaining a visage, telling himself a lie is the only way he can look at himself in the mirror everyday. *The Act of Killing's* self-referential process of performance breaks Congo's suspension of disbelief that he has maintained for years to survive.

Lastly, by focusing on Congo's personal experience with the massacres rather than simply presenting a didactic historical account of it, Oppenheimer manages to draw attention to the universal flaws inherent to all economically-developed societies. For example, the film opens with the Voltaire quote: "It is forbidden to kill. Therefore, all murders are punished. Unless they kill in large numbers and to the sound of trumpets" (AOK). The killers have never been punished. The Indonesian society seems to be in a trance of justification about the massacres, therefore the killers' crimes have been perpetually validated for decades. Oppenheimer argues that justifying violence in exchange for progress and prosperity is universal in all societies. By letting us into Congo's life, Oppenheimer underscores the complexity of our knowledge of the world. His viewers are confronted with the disturbing reality that we are all closer to the perpetrators than we would like to admit (qtd. in Behlil 31).

The Act of Killing is a performative non-fiction film for its use of performance to dig out deeply buried emotions in its subjects, its emphasis on the subjective experience, its use of real people, and its blending of fiction and non-fiction forms. Unfortunately the film has been scrutinized for its authenticity, many question if Congo is being truthful and if he did make a transformation to feeling remorse for his crimes. Some believe he

was acting for Oppenheimer the whole time. The film exists in an inherently real and fantastical limbo and its power derives from this ambiguity, whether or not it is performance or reality is almost beyond the point.

CASE STUDY TWO: *BOMBAY BEACH* (2011)

Alma Har'el's *Bombay Beach* (2011) is a beautiful and raw depiction of three individuals living in the small town of Bombay Beach situated on the Salton Sea. In the 1950s and 60s Bombay Beach was a bustling resort town that attracted southern California's elite. Although today it is a bleached, rusted, abandoned wasteland (Morton 1). The Salton Sea was accidentally created in the 1905 when the Colorado River flooded its levees and filled the Salton Sink desert valley. The Salton Sea became a resort destination in the decades after, but in the 1970s ecological degradation plagued the area. The sea was polluted with pesticides by neighboring farms and it became saltier than the Pacific Ocean, killing off fish and other aquatic life. Today, only rusting boats, boarded-up hotels, and cracked, empty swimming pools are reminders of Bombay Beach's better days. Although the town resembles a post-apocalyptic landscape with no grocery stores or amenities, about 250 people still live there.

Har'el uses choreographed dance performance to paint a vivid portrait of people living in poverty and isolation in United States. Har'el follows the lives of three Bombay Beach residents, Benny Parrish, CeeJay Thompson, and Red. Benny Parrish is a young boy diagnosed with bi-polar disorder that has been prescribed to take several medications including lithium. Benny's condition and incredible imagination bring both happiness and difficulties for him and his family. CeeJay Thompson is a black teenager and talented football player who moved to Bombay Beach to avoid getting caught up in deadly gang culture in Los Angeles. Red is an elderly man that lives on cigarettes and whisky in the

Slab City RV Park. Despite his unconventional lifestyle, he has an incredible zest for life and profound wisdom to share. These three characters make up the “triptych of American manhood in its decisive moments” (Holden 1).

Considering her background in dance and directing music videos, Har’el chose to develop her three characters by using modern dance. After filming for several months with each subject and developing a trusting relationship with them, she collaborated with each to create personalized dance sequences. For example, whereas Benny and his siblings do a group piece that illustrates his feelings of isolation, CeeJay performs a fun and affectionate dance with his girlfriend alluding to the universal experience of young love, and lastly Red dances merrily and tenderly with the women of his RV park, speaking to his unrelenting love of life despite living on the fringe of society. These idiosyncratic dances are intimate and revealing: the three characters are untrained dancers and actors, performing as themselves for the camera.

The subjects’ dances allow them to reveal implicit details about themselves and the realities of living in Bombay Beach. For example, in Benny’s dance, his four siblings stand across from him in the street and perform teasing gestures at him. They then do partner dances together while Benny sits on the sidelines watching enviously. The dances are playful but telling. They create a space for the characters to both express themselves in a creative way and ease the anxiety of being a film subject. Although this approach may not be suited for all documentary subjects and topics, Har’el believes it is an untapped resource for expressing emotions in film that can be difficult to reveal in a traditional interview (qtd. in “Interview”).

Rather than simply making a film that catalogues the historical events of the Salton Sea, *Bombay Beach* gives a sense of place by focusing on the individuals scraping by in its remains today. The audience learns about the Salton Sea's environmental degradation through Benny and his brother poking at dead fish on the seashore and as they play in the skeletons of beached boats. We are exposed to what it means to live in the harsh, isolated desert as the Slab City RV Park has communal meals or when Red sells cigarettes individually for a quarter. Har'el's combination of choreographed dance and thoughtful observational documentary captures the subjective experience of people and a place that are both often overlooked. Her style encourages audiences to suspend their expectations for a story about people living on the fringe of society, to not simply associate the main characters with pity or failure but rather consider a different lens. The use of performative elements helps the audience to better understand the realities of the people in *Bombay Beach* and therefore sympathize with them. She presents a glimpse that eloquently shows her subjects' intimate relationships and their day-to-day struggles and successes that all humans, at a basic level, can relate to. By constructing this poetic connection between her film subjects and their experiences living in the isolated *Bombay Beach*, Har'el manages to suggest bigger ideas about what it means to be on the margin of Western society.

In summary, *Bombay Beach* is a performative non-fiction for its use of real people performing as themselves, its emphasis on the subjective experience of living on the fringe of modern society, and its use of both fiction and non-fiction tropes by using choreographed dance and re-enactment mixed with observational documentary. The

successful marriage of dance and documentary techniques in this film represents the emergence of new possibilities for other non-fiction filmmakers.

CASE STUDY THREE: *I'M STILL HERE* (2010)

I'm Still Here (2010) is the result of a two-year performance art piece by critically acclaimed actor Joaquin Phoenix. Phoenix's brother-in-law and actor Casey Affleck directed the film that follows Phoenix from his announcement of retiring from acting through his transition into the music industry as a hip-hop artist. Filming began in 2009, and throughout the year-and-half-production period Phoenix stayed in character for all public appearances. Phoenix portrays *himself* as a celebrity that has gone off the deep end: acting selfish and entitled, doing drugs and ordering prostitutes on camera, and making a fool of himself in the public. Although many suspected that *I'm Still Here* was a mockumentary, it was not officially disclosed until after the film's release that all the events had been staged. Before the disclosure, film critic Roger Ebert wrote a review as if it was a genuine documentary:

"A mind is a terrible thing to waste. The tragedy of Joaquin Phoenix's self-destruction has been made into "I'm Still Here," a sad and painful documentary that serves little useful purpose other than to pound another nail into the coffin...It documents a train wreck. A luxury train. One carrying Phoenix, his several personal assistants, his agent, his publicist, and apparently not one single friend who isn't on salary. A train that flies off the tracks and tumbles into the abyss" (Ebert 1).

Throughout the filming period, the media and public believed Phoenix was sincere. Phoenix's performance was so convincing that he duped even the most acute film critics and public figures.

I'm Still Here is self-reflexive, it uses Phoenix's performance to discuss popular culture's obsession with "celebrity" and its inadequate grasp on reality. For example, his

most famous, disastrous public appearance was on the David Letterman show in January 2009 where he showed up disheveled and incoherent, unable to carry a meaningful conversation. The film includes the media's reaction to this appearance and others, as well as Phoenix watching himself being scrutinized and bullied in the media. Affleck commented that the media played its part extremely well, highlighting the very ideas he was trying to convey with the film: media and consumers create celebrities, build myths around them and then take perverse joy in voyeuristically watching them fall apart and fail (qtd. in Cieply, *More From*). Time and again society perpetuates this obsession with the collapse of celebrity, some notable examples being with actress Lindsay Lohan and famous pop star Britney Spears. Both of them became famous as children and were "created as a virgin to be deflowered before us, for our amusement and titillation" (Grigoriadis 1). Mimicking the collapses of Lohan and Spears, Phoenix attempts to personify the destructive power of the crucible of fame.

The film flirts with reality, using real situations as a playground for Phoenix to perform in. For instance, in the final scene, Phoenix is performing at a club in Miami to promote the launch of his faux hip-hop album. During his performance the crowd starts booing him off stage and eventually Phoenix gets into a fistfight with an audience member. After fighting for a while, security guards pull him off; he stumbles backstage and vomits profusely. Everything in this scene is real. The crowd is real, the fight is real, and so is the purging. Phoenix was extremely brave and thorough, acting as a fictional version of himself and submitting to real life criticism to illustrate a profound point.

Even after the film's release many viewers were not able to distinguish the true intention of the film. Many critics were fixated on whether it was the real Joaquin Phoenix behaving this way or if he was acting, rather than debating the film's metanarrative about obsession and celebrity. In this regard they were successful at getting their point across because people were too focused on Phoenix's destruction. Both Affleck and Phoenix were surprised by the public's overall gullibility, even with Phoenix's over-the-top antics and the film's production company name that appeared large in the end credits: "They are Going to Kill Us Productions" (qtd. in Cieply 1, *Documentary?*).

Although many argue *I'm Still Here* is a mockumentary, it is more akin to performance art or a social experiment in an observational documentary style. I consider *I'm Still Here* a performative non-fiction film because Joaquin Phoenix acts as a fictionalized version of *himself* in real-life scenarios and it is self-reflexive: the film's success relied on the incorporation of the media's real-time reaction to Phoenix's performance throughout filming. It is a conceptual approach similar to that used in *The Act of Killing* that leaves the audience wondering where the acting stops and reality begins. *I'm Still Here* has not been given the credit it deserves as a self-referential experiment that forces audiences to engage with questions about celebrity and reality, as well as making them realize they are an active participant in that very criticism.

CINEMA TRUTH & A *DECAY OF CONTROL*

“Facts, per se, do not constitute truth” (Herzog qtd. in Vice).

A Decay of Control (Control), is a 20-minute hybrid documentary that contemplates new research about the parasitic disease Toxoplasmosis and its potential influence on human behavior and neurological disorders like Schizophrenia. Although the effects of the parasite on human behavior have been proven, its implications are understated or do not appear to be a cause for widespread panic. *A Decay of Control* aims to sensationalize these scientific findings and use them as an allegory of how film influences public consciousness. Famous Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov wrote in his 1924 book The Birth of the Kino-Eye that “the cinema eye is cinema truth.” Meaning in film, only what the camera “sees” exists, and the spectator, lacking alternative perspectives, naively takes the images for reality (Resina 68). All films, narrative and documentary alike, are carefully crafted and constructed:

“The only difference between...non-fiction and fiction film is that the former has a tendency to play down this cauldron of art and creativity as a means of authenticating a form of objective reality, whereas the latter would highlight its orchestration of skill and craft as a means of authenticating its inherent imaginative and creative interpretation of subject matter” (Harding).

All filmmakers must make calculated creative choices to shape the message they want to convey to their audiences, how they decide to acknowledge their construction is what often divides narrative and documentary. With this notion in mind, *A Decay of Control* challenges its audience to not simply trust the camera’s “eye” but think critically

about the information presented and question its accuracy. This method will ideally cultivate a dialogue about the strength *or* limitations of the documentary form to be a reliable authority on subject matter.

Drawing from the methods of *The Act of Killing* (2012), *Bombay Beach* (2011) and *I'm Still Here* (2010), *Control* thoughtfully uses performative non-fiction techniques as a means to call attention to the fabrication inherent in all filmmaking. For example, the film employs an actor playing a scientist in scripted scenarios (Warhheit), a narrator, and an actual person performing as herself (Missy). The purpose of using these methods is to manipulate the three major ways filmmakers established authority and authenticity in science documentaries. Traditional expository documentaries are overly didactic and adopt either a voice-of-god or voice-of-authority commentary while observational films champion unobtrusive filming techniques that allow the subject to represent themselves to the audience (Nichols 120). I use an actor playing a German scientist so that I could first introduce him as a reliable authority on toxoplasmosis and then as the film unfolds, his performance and poor accent make the viewer question if they can trust him. Secondly, the omniscient narrator at first seems normal; they introduce ideas and help the scientist explain some of the complicated science. Although about half way through the film, the narrator becomes a character of its own, speaking for the scientist and questioning the validity of Missy's claims. Additionally, I gave Missy, the *real* person portrayed in the observational segments, acting direction. In the first act, Missy is presented as if she is a *true* documentary subject. Her scenes include some long takes of her talking straight to the camera to give the impression it is real observational

documentary. Although later in the film there are segments in which the apparatus is included (Missy verifying direction with the producer) and scenes where she interacts with the narrator. In her last scene, I consciously disrupt the trend of long takes and use jump cuts throughout her entire last interview. This subversion of non-fiction techniques for depicting reality and truth is intended to be self-reflexive. My hope is that my audience catches on to the manipulation at work and questions the film's authenticity.

In addition to “sabotaging” my own authorities, the beginning of *Control* is dedicated to setting itself up as a valid documentary about the parasitic disease Toxoplasmosis, but as it progresses, there are visual *hints* that reveal the film's overall construction and subtext. I included a variety of editorial *hints* to hopefully accommodate audiences that may notice some and not others. For instance, the scientist's name is Eric “Warheit,” which means “Truth” in German. Also, in one of Warheit's later interviews, there is a shot of his bookshelf in which one book is in focus: *Getting Away With It*. In the same scene, the camera focuses on a photo of Albert Eisenstein on the desk with the quote: “The important thing is to never stop questioning” (Control). Additionally, the progression of the “symptom vignettes” that introduce Missy's scenes become more outrageous as the film unfolds. The last vignette is the only one that is not factually true, and it is intended to directly undermine Missy's trustworthiness in the next scene: “*T. gondii* may diminish logic and reasoning in humans. Infected subjects may appear delusional and therefore unreliable” (Control). Lastly, there are two “collages” that bookend the film that are meant to over-sensationalize the role of cats in transmitting the parasite to human hosts. There are excessive juxtapositions of images of household cats

with news headlines and hoarding television shows accompanied by disturbing sound bites and dramatic music. This heavy-handed technique is meant to represent the strength of film as an audio-visual medium to, in normal cases, subtly influence its audiences. All of these methods are meant to draw attention to the film's implicit themes.

Aside from the last symptom vignette, all of the research presented in the film is factual. Although at this point in time, the research is still relatively new and not well known by the public. In this sense it was the perfect topic to manipulate to get audiences thinking about the construction inherent in all the documentaries they watch.

Documentary has long been accepted as a reliable form of edification, although the filmmaking process is subjective and wrought with biases. Like the possibility of a parasite controlling someone's mind, viewers should be more cautious and critical of what they are watching: "who's really running the show?" (*Control*).

I found using performative non-fiction elements were ideal for my concept because like other hybrid documentary styles it lingers between existing film genres, adopting any technique that suits its objective. In particular, manipulating the performance of my characters was an ideal way to subvert traditional documentary authoritative tropes. *Control* is not afraid of its own artifice; in fact, it capitalizes on it to drive home its core message. Although the caveat being that audiences may be too pre-occupied with discerning between whether or not what they are watching is authentic and miss the subtext all together. This may vary with viewers but I hope my targeted audience, critical thinkers, artists, filmmakers and those attracted to absurdities, will embrace the film's allegorical message.

THE TIDES ARE CHANGING

As a response to filmmakers making successful creative non-fiction or hybrid films, grant institutions are also shifting their focus to support these more experimental endeavors. In the past, the narrow scope of grant guidelines has dictated the trajectory of what films get made. Although Tabitha Jackson, the new Director of the Sundance Documentary Film Program (SDFP), one of the field's most important funders, has announced that she plans to push the program toward more innovation and experimentation. Past directors of the program focused on films that emphasized human rights and social justice subjects but Jackson intends to add artistry and cinematic excellence as another important pillar to the program's mission. In her keynote speech at the DOC NYC film festival in 2014, Jackson discussed how the program plans to cultivate innovation: "...the weight of expectation can be an oppressive, constraining thing... [Sundance is] committing to create an initiative that is all about artistic experimentation – backing people rather than their projects and giving them space to fail" (qtd. in Curtis-Cambell). This initiative frees filmmakers to try new approaches without having to fulfill the expectations of conservative funding boards. Although grants are now considered relatively traditional in relation to crowdfunding and other alternative funding opportunities, this shift in the SDFP's focus reinforces the apparent changes happening in non-fiction filmmaking.

CONCLUSION

“Honesty and trickery may be strange bedfellows, but we posit that both magic and documentary deploy artifice and misdirection to illuminate a new reality” (True/False Film Festival).

Performative non-fiction film is not the only solution to feed the demand for more innovative non-fiction film. There are and will be other approaches that are more suitable for different subjects and filmmakers. What makes it work for me and the other performative non-fiction filmmakers discussed in this paper, is ultimately the mode’s self-consciousness and emphasis on its own artifice. It uses performance as a tool to create new meaning in real life subjects. It hovers proudly in this absurd space between reality and fantasy, challenging the conventions of truth seeking in film. Humans have a fascination with blurring the boundaries of reality and the questions it forces them to confront (Burningham qtd. in Krulwich). What if this film is not what it appears to be? What if what I am seeing is not real, then what is?

The Act of Killing, *Bombay Beach*, *I’m Still Here* and what I attempted with my own film, *A Decay of Control*, represent non-fiction film in a stage of development, reflecting back on itself and its own nature. They call to action a new dialogue in cinema language, suggesting different ways to communicate ideas to audiences. These performative non-fiction films and their epistemological expansion of documentary, challenge viewers to be thoughtful participants in the creation of new meaning in film, and question how it influences their own assumptions about the world.

REFERENCES CITED

- (AOK) *The Act of Killing*. Screenplay: Joshua Oppenheimer. Dir. Joshua Oppenheimer. Per. Anwar Congo. Final Cut for Real, 2012. Film.
- Anderst, Leah. "Memory's Chorus: *Stories We Tell* and Sarah Polley's Theory of Autobiography." 1 Dec. 2013. Web. 25 Mar. 2015.
- Behlil, Melis. "The Act of Killing: An Interview Joshua Oppenheimer." *Cineaste*, Summer (2013): 26-31.
- Bombay Beach*. Screenplay by Alma Har'el. Dir. Alma Har'el Perf. Community of the Salton Sea. Focus Features, 2011. Film.
- Bruzzi, Stella. *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*. New York: Routledge, 2000. Print.
- Cieply, Micheal. "Documentary? Better Call It Performance Art." *The New York Times*. 16 Sept. 2010. Web. 1 Jan. 2015.
- Cieply, Micheal. "More From Casey Affleck on 'I'm Still Here'" *The New York Times*. 16 Sept. 2010. Web. 1 Jan. 2015.
- (Control) *A Decay of Control*. Screenplay: Madison McClintock. Dir. Madison McClintock. Per. Christian McDaniel. Nestbox Collective, 2015. Film.
- Curtis-Campbell, Suzanne. "Championing Documentary as an Empathy Machine: Tabitha Jackson Joins the Sundance Institute." *Documentary Magazine*. International Documentary Association. 3 Dec. 2014. Web. 6 Dec. 2014.
- Daston, Lorraine and Galison. *Objectivity*. New York: Zone Books, 2007. Print.
- Donnelly, Elisabeth. "Is Documentary Film Entering Its 'Creative Non-Fiction' Phase?" *Flavorwire*. 18 Mar. 2014. Web. 28 Mar. 2015.
- Ebert, Roger. "I'm Still Here Review." *Roger Ebert*. 7 Sept. 2010. Web. 30 Jan. 2015.
- Grey Gardens*. Screenplay by Albert and David Maysles. Dir. Albert and David Maysles. Per. Edith Beale Sr. and Edith Beale. Portrait Films, 1975. Film.
- Grigoriadis, Vanessa. "The Tragedy of Britney Spears." *Rolling Stone*. 21 Feb. 2008. Web. 6 Feb. 2015.

- Harding, Ryan. "Fact, Fiction, and The Thin Blue Line." *Ryan Harding*. 2014. Web. 20 Feb. 2015.
- Haraway, Donna. "Situated Knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective." *Feminist Studies*, 14.3 (1988): 575-599.
- Holden, Stephen. "*Bombay Beach*, Documenting Faded Glory – Review." *The New York Times*. 13 Oct. 2011. Web. 14 Nov. 2014.
- I'm Still Here*. Screenplay by Casey Affleck and Joaquin Phoenix. Dir. Casey Affleck. Per. Joaquin Phoenix. They Are Going to Kill Us Productions, 2010. Film.
- "Interview with Alma Har'el at the Berlinale 2011." *Astronaut Magazine*. 2 May 2011. Web. 4 Dec. 2014.
- Irvine, Martin. "The Po-Mo Page: Postmodern to Post-modern." *Georgetown University*. n.p. n.d. Web. 29 Nov. 2013.
- "Jabe Babe: A Heightened Life." *Go Girl Productions*. n.p. n.d. Web. 1 Nov. 2013.
- Jabe Babe: A Heightened Life*. Screenplay by Janet Merewether. Dir. Janet Merewether. Per. Jabe Babe. Go Girl Productions, 2005. Film.
- Krulwich, Robert. Interview with Bruce Burningham. *Radiolab*. New York: National Public Radio, 9 Mar. 2015. Audio.
- Morton, Ella. "Salton Sea: From Relaxing Resort to Skeleton-Filled Wasteland." *Slate*. 4. Feb. 2014. Web. 1 Feb. 2015.
- Nichols, Bill. *Introduction to Documentary*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001. Print.
- Resina, Joan. "Historical Discourse and the Propaganda Film: Reporting the Revolution in Barcelona." *New Literary History*. 29.1 (1998) 67-84.
- Ricciardelli, Lucia. *American Documentary Filmmaking in the Digital Age: Depictions of War in Burns, Moore, and Morris*. New York: Routledge, 2015. Print.
- Rohter, Larry. "What's Real Gets More Creative: 'The Missing Picture' and Other Films Rethink Documentaries." *The New York Times* 14 Mar. 2014. Web. 20 Mar. 2015.
- Roston, Tom. "Establishing the Hybrid Documentary Canon." *PBS POV*. American Documentary, Inc. 7 Oct. 2013. Web. 28 Oct. 2013.

- Roston, Tom. "Impressions on the 2014 Oscar Best Documentary Nominees and Snubs." *PBS POV*. American Documentary, Inc. 16 Jan. 2014. Web. 30 Mar. 2014.
- Sicko*. Screenplay by Michael Moore. Dir. Michael Moore. Per. Michael Moore. Lionsgate, 2007. Film.
- Stam, Robert. *Film Theory: An Introduction*. New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000. Print.
- Svetvilas, Chuleenan. "Hybrid Reality: When Documentary and Fiction Breed to create a Better Truth." *Documentary Magazine*. International Documentary Association. 1 June 2004. Web. 6 Jan. 2015.
- The Laramie Project*. Screenplay by Moisés Kaufman. Dir. Moisés Kaufman. Per. Nestor Carbonell, Christina Ricci, Dylan Baker, and Terry Kinney. Home Box Office, 2002. Film.
- "The Look of Silence" *Final Cut for Real*. n.p. n.d. Web. 6 Oct. 2014. 8 Jan. 2015.
- "True/False Film Festival" *True/False Film Festival*. n.p. n.d. Web. 13 Mar. 2014. 20 Feb. 2015.
- Vertov, Dziga. *Kino-Eye and the Writings of Dziga Vertov*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1985. Print.
- Vice. "Werner Herzog and Errol Morris Talk about 'The Act of Killing'." 17 Jun. 2013. Web. 4 Dec. 2014.