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Introduction: unruly documentary artivism

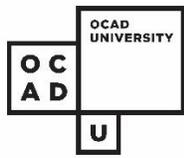
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Artivism

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Introduction: unruly documentary activism

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Documentary filmmakers behaving in an unruly manner are nothing new. Since the earliest examples of nonfiction cinema, filmmakers have been accused of violating or misrepresenting their subjects, and the credibility of their films has often been called into question. In 1922, Robert J. Flaherty's iconic silent film *Nanook of the North* purported to capture the everyday life of an Inuk man, Nanook, and his family; however, as it has been well documented, Nanook's real name was Allakariallak and the woman, portrayed as his wife, was not his actual wife. Furthermore, Nanook was encouraged to use a harpoon, a by-then-abandoned weapon, instead of rifles for a dramatic scene, which was staged by Flaherty to create an 'authentic' record of the vanishing tradition of walrus hunting and which put Allakariallak's life at risk. Another questionable scene depicted Nanook acting as if he was unfamiliar with modern technology such as gramophones, following the instructions of the filmmaker. While these were done in the name of salvage ethnography and its quest for authenticity, they also led to the misrepresentation of the documentary subjects and the Inuit culture of the day.

Representations and misrepresentations are certainly core elements in debates about documentary ethics, and the notion of misrepresentation is often tied to an understanding of the film subjects as exploited, violated, or falsified by the filmmaker. In 1967, Frederick Wiseman's *Titicut Follies* was, for instance, accused of violating the privacy of the patient-inmates at the Bridgewater State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, a correctional institution in Massachusetts, for filming their frequent abuse by the authorities.

It was questions of representation and misrepresentation – following nonfiction cinema's long history of dubious engagements with documentary subjects – that led Alan Rosenthal (1988) to call for a documentary ethics, arguing that ethical considerations were an overlooked issue in the field. For Rosenthal 'the question of ethics is at the root of any consideration of how a documentary works' because filmmakers use and expose people's lives. Therefore, the main question is 'how the filmmaker should treat people in films so as to avoid exploiting them and causing them unnecessary suffering' (Rosenthal 1988, 245). In other words, Rosenthal calls attention to the need for approaching documentary with a new sensibility – one that is marked by a concern and compassion for the filmed subjects rather than for 'targets and self' (Rosenthal 1988, 253).

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Since Rosenthal's writings on ethics in documentary, the field has undergone significant transformations. Documentary filmmaking has, similar to other artistic practices, witnessed an 'ethical turn' (Dews 2002; Bishop 2012) that emphasizes positive collaborative interaction between artists or filmmakers and their subjects. The focus on collaboration has led to a situation in which ethical criteria have become the norm for judging art (Bishop 2012, 23). This emphasis on ethical criteria is also based on a mistrust, seeing in the filmmaker, who might place the emphasis on his/her own vision or a particular political perspective in collaborating with others, a predilection for manipulation or 'political exploitation.' The argument is that filmmakers often use documentary subjects strategically to make a predetermined point, which reflects a political goal that belongs to the filmmaker and not the subjects of the film (Rosenthal 1988, 250).

However, it can be argued that the work of performative filmmakers such as Nick Broomfield, Mads Brügger, Sasha Baron Cohen, Morgan Spurlock, Michael Moore and the Yes Men undermines the ethical turn and its mistrust in the individuality of filmmakers, which is driven by historically validated fears of political exploitation. These filmmakers produce 'satirical documentaries' that are 'politically motivated documentary exposés that are created in a comedic, tongue-in-cheek tone' (Day 2007, 11). Satirical documentaries unsettle the ethical turn and at times create discomfort, because their seemingly overt political motivations are not necessarily aligned with the goals or worldviews of their subjects. As Amber Day argues, 'The vast majority of these films are structured around a first-person narrator/protagonist who places himself in front of the camera as the everyman stand-in for the audience, the one who is willing to explore the issue firsthand and offer his own quirky account of the proceedings' (Day 2011, 11). What is troubling in the domination of documentary's political field by these quirky first-person narrators is they seem on the surface to be mostly uncritical of their stand-in role, appearing self-assured if not narcissistic to those that demand accountability.

Satirical strategies in politically motivated documentary filmmaking are often indicative of what we, in this volume, will call 'unruly documentary activism.' They are linked to activism because they serve a political agenda, combine activism and art (hence the term 'artivism') since they often draw from performance-based practices and are unruly because they do not adhere to the requirements of the ethical turn. Satirical documentaries often pursue their goals without concern of possible misrepresentations or even violations of their filmed subjects. Yet as this volume highlights, our interest in unruly documentary activism is not limited to such films. There are numerous ways in which manifestations of dissent/defiance of political or moral codes combine esthetic strategies and activism. There are also numerous ways of being unruly; filmmakers can break the law, engage in anarchic culture-jamming practices, misrepresent/violate their victims, or challenge common understanding of ethical behavior.

In this special issue, we investigate various forms of unruly documentary activism without dismissing these practices as unethical and/or irrelevant. Of concern to us is not only the ethical transgressions and limitations of unruly documentary activism, but also the strategies it has at its service, its geographically and culturally diverse iterations and potential. In the following we will (1) conceptualize unruly documentary activism as tied to processes of mediatization (Hjarvard 2008; Castells 2009; Lievrouw 2012; Hepp 2012; Reestorff 2013); (2) elaborate on how

documentary ethics are framed in relation to matters of representation; (3) address how post-humanitarianism challenges traditional notions of ethics and results in the emergence of ‘the ironic spectator’ (Chouliaraki 2013); and (4) introduce the articles in the special issue and their take on the theme.

Mediatized activism

Political dissent is often portrayed as ultimately aiming for the seizure of political power. Yet as John Holloway and Joss Hands contend, this approach is too narrow because it remains within a state-oriented understanding of power. Holloway argues that if the aim is to obtain power over others, i.e. obtain state power, then political activism is not necessarily a struggle for freedom or social upheaval; therefore, genuine political dissent must, drawing from Albert Camus’ (1953) articulation of rebellion, aim at solidarity: changing the world without seeking to take power. As Camus suggests, ‘Man must rebel, but rebellion must respect the limits that it discovers in itself. The limit is solidarity itself: man’s solidarity is founded upon rebellion, and the rebellion can only be justified by solidarity.’ Activist documentary has also been historically defined along the lines of filmmaking ‘committed’ to solidarity building by scholars like Thomas Waugh, who claimed in 1984 that although documentary filmmakers persistently aspire to changing the world and that people who want to change the world keep making documentaries, their commitment to political causes should be understood as ‘a declaration of solidarity with the goal of radical socio-political transformation’ (2011, 6).

The cases of unruly documentary activists that we investigate in this special issue similarly invoke political motivations that are based on forging connections (through not just ruly but unruly alliances) and building solidarity. Yet their disruptive tactics highlight the fact that the question of how activism and social change work, when they are detached from institutionalized politics, is not easily resolved through merely an appeal to the collective or collaborative. Their work tug at the boundaries of what constitutes meaningful political dissent. In distinguishing between politics and the political, Chantal Mouffe argues: ‘By “the political,” I refer to the dimension of antagonism which I take to be constitutive of human societies; while by “politics,” I refer to the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organizing human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political’ (Mouffe 2005, 95–96). The unruly documentary activist works within the realm of ‘the political’ or that ambiguous, yet constitutive dimension of antagonism; however, this does not mean that they do not brush upon or outright seek to influence politics. Influence is sought through dissent, resistance and in some cases even rebellion. In his study of digital forms of activism, Joss Hands defines these three terms and indicates that while dissent ‘is the expression of dissatisfaction with the state of affairs, which [might belong to the individual yet] always entails an appeal to others’ (Hands 2011, 4) resistance ‘suggests a more stubborn approach. One can conceive of resistance taking place when acts readily cross the boundary into defiance of authority or perceived injustice. This may well be backed up by the use of force whether implicit or explicit’ (Hands 2011, 4). The boundary between resistance and rebellion can be more difficult to draw, but the latter is never an isolated act; it involves a mobilization that is ‘multiple, collective, collaborative,’ facilitated by technological configurations (Hands 2011, 14).

It can be said that unruly documentary activism is mostly expressions of dissent and to some extent resistance. Yet the practices related to it are often situated in a highly media and technology-saturated field in which the films and practices of audiovisual documentation as well as sharing of information serve as appeals for action. The unruly documentary films are often explicitly designed to appeal to a broader media sphere. This is related to the process of mediatization (Hjarvard 2008; Hepp 2012) in which societal structures as well as artistic practices change their form and modes of operation according to the logic of media. They adapt ‘symbols or mechanisms created by the media’ (Hjarvard 2008, 31) in order to gain a voice and visibility in the public sphere. In relation to the satirical documentaries, the mediatization is successful in that the ‘satirical media texts have become a part (and a preoccupation) of mainstream political coverage, thereby making satirists legitimate players in serious political dialogue’ (Day 2011, 1). Many of the unruly documentary practices move from expressions of dissent to resistance (or even rebellion) when they enter the mediatized field in which they nurture ‘the creating of oppositional political communities, or counterpublics, which are anchored by the films but then sustained by books, websites, interviews, and other media appearances’ (Day 2011, 99).

Documentary ethics

As we mentioned earlier, the ethics of documentary filmmaking is heavily debated. Slavoj Žižek argues that there is an inherent trap or deadlock in documentary in that its attempts at getting intimately close to its subjects often becomes troubling, appearing as exploitation or ‘pornographic obscenity.’ (Žižek 2006, 31). The appeal to documentary ethics stems from a desire to counter such criticism. Bill Nichols has, for instance, suggested the need for ‘An open-ended or situated ethical standard – one rooted in the concrete contingencies of time and place – [which] places the onus for determining the ethics of a given film onto the community of filmmakers, distributors and exhibitors, critics, scholars and audiences that has shared a vested interest in the form and future of documentary’ (Nichols 2006). This ethics requires an examination of the hierarchical relationship between the filmmaker, the subjects of the film and the audience. Nichols relates the hierarchy to the questions of access to the means of representation. Ethical standards are framed in relation to self-representation and voice: ‘Do subjects have the means to represent themselves? Do they have alternative access to the media apart from that provided by a given filmmaker?’ If the subjects themselves do not have access to representation, Nichols argues, ‘the filmmaker’s ethical obligation to avoid misrepresentation, exploitation and abuse rises correspondingly’ (Nichols 2006). This contextual formulation is valuable because it does not simply understand ethics as a strict code, which distinguishes between right and wrong. Ethics often responds to complex dilemmas and as Rushworth Kidder (1995) and Sherry Baker (2009) have argued, these dilemmas frequently present themselves in paradigms in which it is not easy to determine where the ethical obligation lies: ‘(1) truth versus loyalty; (2) individual versus community; (3) short-term versus long-term; (4) justice versus mercy’ (Baker 2009, 119). These are the classical tensions in dilemma paradigms and it is not pre-given which side is right. The questions of ethical representation thus become further complicated when it is measured against such gray areas.

Post-humanitarianism

As indicated above, ethical representations are difficult to carry out because the subjects of representation are often situated in the midst of dilemma paradigms that render it difficult to identify where and in relation to whom the ethical obligations are most compelling. However, a rising distrust in ethics and universal truths has complicated the issue even further. In many cases of documentary activism the audience 'occupies the position of someone to whom a *proposal of commitment* is made' (Boltanski 1999, 149). On the other hand, the problematization of universal truths has led to a compassion fatigue and a reluctance to accept 'common humanity' as motivation for actions (Chouliaraki 2013). In other words, the proposal of commitment might be met with suspicion and the proposal to act might simply be rejected. The compassion fatigue is also related to a politics of pity, which has been flourishing in attempts to make ethical representations. Luc Boltanski distinguishes between a politics of justice based on a common understanding of fairness and a politics of pity that creates distinctions between those who suffer and those who do not. In the politics of pity those who do not suffer are situated as 'lucky' observers of those who do in a 'spectacle of suffering' (Boltanski 1999, 3–4). A politics of pity is not necessarily productive in calling for commitment because it situates the sufferer as passive and the one who observes the suffering as obliged to act. This not only undermines the agency of the sufferer but also potentially results in despair. The unruly documentary forms that this journal issue explores attempt to counter the compassion fatigue by abandoning the recognizable politics of pity. Their proposal of commitment is often less evident because the audience is not situated as observers that are expected to simply help those who suffer.

The problem faced by traditional notions of documentary ethics is a transformation of emotionality. In the context of development studies, Lillie Chouliaraki has argued that a new emotionality has occurred since the 1970s; the compassion fatigue has resulted in a 'move from an ethics of *pity* to an ethics of *irony*' and from an 'other-oriented morality to a self-oriented morality' (Chouliaraki 2013, 3). The ethics of irony is based on an ironic spectator that is characterized by a self-conscious suspicion of claims to truth. According to Chouliaraki, development aid has been institutionalized, an increasing technologization of communication has emerged and, most importantly, grand narratives of solidarity are on retreat (Chouliaraki 2013, 6–9). The retreat of grand narratives indicates that people are increasingly refusing to engage in their capacity for judgments and do not believe in general appeals to humanity. This is evident in a shift from 'a disposition that is oriented towards the distant other, acknowledging the human vulnerability as a cause for our actions, to a disposition that is oriented towards the self, acknowledging consumerism as a key motivation for our humanitarian engagements' (Chouliaraki 2013, 173). Our moral encounter with human vulnerability is becoming attached to market logics in 'a neoliberal conception of public morality' (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005).

Ethical transgressions

Through distancing themselves from a politics of pity, the documentary works that we study in this issue actively confront the ethical dilemmas embedded in documentary representations and calls for compassion. Their confrontations are handled in an unruly manner in which the films often deliberately transgress or

displace the dilemma paradoxes related to ethical representations. This does not necessarily mean that the films are merely giving in to ‘moral temptations’ (Baker 2009); instead, they do explore the potentials of ethical transgression. The core focus of this issue is thus how documentary films, understood through the lenses of activism, can simultaneously have political agency and radically challenge the expectation that ‘activism’ comply with certain moral codes. The emphasis is on performative and mediatized esthetic practices, in which the artist, performer, filmmaker, etc. ‘misbehaves,’ i.e. transgresses the law or the codes for ethical behavior or representation. Thus we investigate activist practices that adopt or share, in a certain sense, the disruptive, bullying, or unlawful behavior of twenty-first century dissidents such as the *hooligan*, the culture-jammer, the hacktivist, or the street artist.

The reception of this kind of unruly ‘activism’ is difficult and it seems to necessitate that the relation between art and politics is rethought. Art criticism – understood in the broadest sense of the word – reaches an impasse when confronted with unruly documentary activism. The critical tradition, which Peter Dews and Claire Bishop have coined ‘the ethical turn’ (Dews 2002; Bishop 2012), tends to hail collaborative projects since they are viewed as synonymous with a critical stance against neoliberalism whereas artistic individualism gets a bad reputation for being tainted by neoliberalism, reducing its critical potential. The focus on collaboration has made ethical criteria the norm for judging art and created a disavowed relationship to the esthetic, since the esthetic and the visual are associated with individualism. Jacques Rancière has efficiently challenged this ethical turn, by stating that there is no direct cause–effect relationship between the intention realized in art and the capacity for political subjectivation. Critical art is conflated with ‘the pedagogical logics of representational mediation and ethical immediacy’ (Rancière 2010, 142). Thus if we follow the logic of Rancière and Bishop, art criticism needs to realize that ‘there is no straight path from the viewing of a spectacle to an understanding of the state of the world, and none from intellectual awareness to political action’ (Rancière 2010, 143). This implies a call for a new critical approach: one that does not operate according to the assumption of a direct cause–effect relation between ethical documentary representations and meaningful political action but rather, one that abandons or at least rethinks the ethical approach by reevaluating the relation between politics, individual expressions of resistance and visual esthetics.

It is easy to simply dismiss unruly forms of activism – engaging in practices like bullying, culture jamming and hooliganism – as unethical, disruptive or narcissistic and accuse them of merely reproducing inequality rather than producing collaborative utopian spaces. Yet in this dossier we ask: when there is no direct cause–effect relation between activism, ethical representations and institutional politics, why the need to maintain that artistic practices must be pedagogical role models?

Unruly documentary activism

In her article ‘Unruly Activism and the Participatory Documentary Ecology of *The Act of Killing*’ Camilla Møhring Reestorff studies *The Act of Killing* (2012) as an unruly activist intervention in the contemporary social imaginary pertaining to the 1965 military coup and genocide in Indonesia. The article argues that the film is best

understood as staging the ethical dilemma related to representing the Indonesian genocide (how to tell the story of an atrocity without reexposing its victims to the violence) by situating it in a complex participatory documentary ecosystem, in which different participants have conflicting goals. According to Reestorff, the film establishes genocide as a ‘difficult heritage,’ – a contested heritage that provides an awkward ground for public reconciliation – through the combined effect of the reenactments, the killers’ attempts to remain victors, and the idiosyncrasies of the documentary ecosystem that presents conflicting interests. The reenactments, on the other hand, are understood as generating affective conflicts, countering the rhythms of the killers’ past with rhythms of the present. Ultimately, the article claims that the unruly activist strategy of *The Act of Killing* emerges in the assemblage of multiple participants and multiple affective rhythms that call for a reinvention of a ‘pro-empathic identification’ (Protevi 2009) with the unrepresentable victims.

In ‘Saying things without appearing to have said them: Politics and protest in Jafar Panahi’s *This Is Not a Film* (2011)’ Trent Griffiths considers how *This Is Not a Film* (2011) represents an activist intervention in the landscape of Iranian censorship, working as both a form of personal testimony and political protest in the act of its making. The (not)film was made while Panahi was under house arrest and banned from filmmaking and has been smuggled out of Iran for release at the 2011 Cannes Film Festival. Turning the camera on himself and focusing on the everyday consequences of living as an artist in an authoritarian society, Panahi self-reflexively considers what constitutes a filmmaker and what defines a film, exploiting the blurred line between his presence in the frame as a (censored) author and as a (political) subject. Considered through the lens of Hamid Naficy’s analysis of contemporary Iranian films as ‘saying things without appearing to have said them,’ the article argues that Panahi defies the law in order to enact both a testimony of his specific experience of censorship and a protest against the terms of his sentence, forcefully linking personal experience and social politics through the act of filmmaking.

In ‘Rebels without Regret: Documentary Activism in the Digital Age’ Selmin Kara takes up the implications of the blurring of art and politics in two documentary contexts: Ai Weiwei’s art-activism in China through Alison Klayman’s award-winning film *Never Sorry* and of the Gezi protests in Turkey. Drawing parallels between the self-proclaimed hooliganism of Ai Weiwei and the Turkish protesters, who co-opted the label that the government used to incriminate them and turned it into a tool for resistance, Kara argues that hooliganism is just another incarnation of unruly documentary activism, which has become prevalent in an era of digitally mediated, global social justice movements. As an interpretive framework for understanding how documentary hooliganism operates, she proposes Tony D. Sampson theory of virality and its application of Dawkins’s neo-Darwinian memetic thought contagion model to the way ideas and political gestures spread in the twenty-first century. Hooliganism, like viruses or memetic thoughts, has a self-spreading tendency; its anarchic affect is contagious and creates volatile yet powerful social encounters. Therefore, the article claims that the foregrounding of hooliganism, which is itself a phenomenon that describes ‘affective contagious encounters’ among anonymous crowds, in the activist practices of Ai Weiwei and Turkish protesters point to the potential of unruly forms of documentation to influence and inspire self-organized mobilization.

Tianqi Yu also studies Ai Weiwei. In her article ‘Camera activism in contemporary PRC: Provocative documentation, first person confrontation, and collective force in Ai Weiwei’s *Lao Ma Ti Hua*’ she focuses on *Lao Ma Ti Hua* (a.k.a. *Disturbing the Peace*, 2009) that concerns the aftermath of Sichuan Earthquake in 2009 and the ‘Public Citizen Investigation Project.’ The ‘Public Citizen Investigation Project’ gathered volunteers to explore the substandard ‘tofu construction’ of school buildings that took thousands of children’s lives when they collapsed in the earthquake. In August 2009, Ai’s group went to Chengdu court to support another independent investigator, writer and environmentalist Tan Zuoren who was prosecuted for subversion of state power. The night before the trial, secret security agents beat Ai and the group was stopped from going to the court. The film records the group searching for an official explanation from the authorities. While acknowledging the power of the film in constructing a collective political subjectivity, the article focuses on the impact of proactive, activist documentation of the realities that one witnesses on engaging with others/other follower-viewers, who are also equipped with cameras. Under the theoretical framework of participatory culture, the term *camera activism* is proposed to understand the camera-enabled participant as a form of sociopolitical intervention. The article argues that some of Ai’s unruly actions, as a charismatic celebrity, overshadow the complexity of Chinese resistance, thereby neglecting to fully recognize the collective forces, which support Ai. Nevertheless, it is suggested that the unruly ‘camera activism’ has the potential to reshape the political landscape in the twenty-first century China. The cinematic highlighting of the ‘I’ – confronting and eye-witnessing what happens through the utilization of digital technologies – renders ‘camera activism’ an important part of China’s iGeneration cinema culture.

Finally, Ilona Hongisto and Toni Pape study a case of unruly documentary activism, in which the intentional aspect of activism is less evident. In their article ‘Unexpected activism: The fabulatory function in *Kumaré*’ they address activism in Vikram Gandhi’s *Kumaré: The True Story of a False Prophet* (2011). The documentary tells the story of the fake guru Kumaré (played by Gandhi) who sets out to prove that spiritual leaders are illusions and that the power of self-transformation lies within the individual. The article argues that it is Gandhi’s intention of revealing the illusory quality of representation in religion that forms the more conventional activist arc of the documentary. The documentary’s self-help narrative is, however, challenged by the filmmaking process that creates an unexpected relational field extending well beyond Gandhi’s intentions. The article elaborates on unintentional relationality through the notion of fabulation and argues for an ethics that foregrounds collective creativity and questions individualistic self-transformation.

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