Fiction Faces the Facts: Cinematic Retaliation in Two South African Truth and Reconciliation Narratives

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“We felt like we had the power of God—the power to decide who will live and who will die.”—Jeremy Nathan, producer of the South African film *Forgiveness*.

“There has been no acknowledgment of where the film came from or the family that inspired this story... That film’s not about forgiveness; you learn nothing about forgiveness in that film.”—Mark J. Kaplan, producer and director of the South African nonfictional film *Between Joyce and Remembrance*, responding to Nathan.

In the past decade, two films—one an ostensibly factual documentary about atrocity, memory, and loss and the other an ostensibly fictional narrative deeply rooted in South Africa’s traumatic history—were released to general critical acclaim in South Africa and at international film festivals. *Between Joyce and Remembrance* (2003), the documentary produced and directed by Mark J. Kaplan, traces the murder of Congress of South African Students activist Siphiwo Mtimkulu by apartheid security officer Gideon Nieuwoudt as well as a subsequent meeting between the Mtimkulu family and Nieuwoudt during the latter’s attempt to gain amnesty for his crime. *Forgiveness* (2004), a fictional film directed by Ian Gabriel from a script by Greg Latter, tells the story of former security officer Tertius Coetzee’s efforts to reconcile with the Grootboom family after his testimony at South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission.¹ The fictional Coetzee, who was based in part on the real-life Gideon
Nieuwoudt, had murdered the Grootbooms’ son Daniel, also a student activist, after prolonged interrogation and torture.

The two films—particularly during strikingly parallel scenes in which the son/brother of the murdered activist slams a blunt object on the skull of the torturer—provide the occasion for a close reading of the visual construction and social/political ramifications of film narratives ostensibly classified as historical/factual and fictional. The scenes gain particularly deep resonance for such an exploration because of the profound stakes of their telling and because of their place in South Africa’s cultural narrative surrounding its Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In the films, murders are exposed, blood is shed, revenge is exacted, reconciliation is considered—all against the backdrop of South Africa’s apartheid regime and the new nation’s subsequent efforts to assign some narrative meaning to its past and gather hope for its future.

My aims in this study will take several inter-related directions. Firstly, I want to show how the traditional distinctions between history and fiction—even though rightly contested and blurred by post-structural criticism wherein scholars routinely expose the slippage of language-based and culturally produced narrative—remain powerful markers when real names are used, when real blood is shed, and when real people are murdered or wounded.² Secondly, I want to show that while both film narratives obviously are scripted and often artificially constructed, the varying codes we might associate with factual and fictional narratives remain crucial—particularly regulating the boundaries of omniscience and omnipresence: that is, the ability to render interiority and to access scenes as well as the effect of such narrative tactics in building character identification. Thirdly, I want to show how various viewers might rearrange the cultural and artistic codes normally associated with history/nonfiction or fiction, sometimes in direct conflict either with the author and producer. And, finally, I want to suggest a few of the ramifications these sorts of close visual readings pose for public narratives about trauma, memory, and reconciliation.

In differing ways, both films center on the character of Gideon Nieuwoudt, a notorious secret police agent in apartheid South Africa implicated in some of the era’s most horrific political crimes. In 1977 Nieuwoudt helped to torture Steve Biko, the founder of the South African Black Consciousness Movement and author of *I Write
What I Like, who suffered brain damage during his interrogation and subsequently died in police detention. During the following decade Nieuwoudt helped plan a car bombing that killed three black policemen and an informer who threatened to expose police brutality. And amid other atrocities, but most pertinently for the films, Nieuwoudt and a secret police associate also killed two student activists from Port Elizabeth, South Africa—Siphiwo Mtimkulu and Topsy Madaka—and burned their bodies before throwing the remains in the Fish River. Details of these and other crimes Nieuwoudt committed came to light during South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings, conducted between 1996 and 1998 under the auspices of TRC chair Archbishop Desmond Tutu after South Africa’s transformation to a multiracial democracy. The TRC granted amnesty to Nieuwoudt after he admitted his culpability and established that he killed Mtimkulu and Madaka for political motives; he was denied amnesty in several other cases and died of lung cancer in August 2005 while appealing several of his convictions (“Gideon”).

Although the scripts of the nonfictional Between Joyce and Remembrance and the fictional Forgiveness reverberate in many interesting ways, their most crucial parallel moments surround a surprise attack. In Forgiveness, the composite fictional character Tertius Coetzee has been granted amnesty by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission for his murder of student activist Daniel Grootboom, but he remains haunted by the crime and, through the intercession of a priest, comes to Paternoster, South Africa, to meet the Grootboom family. Daniel’s sister and brother, Sannie and Ernest, are particularly hostile to Coetzee’s attempts. “This is the man who killed your son,” Sannie tells her grief-stricken mother. “He put a bullet in Daniel’s head.” When Coetzee haltingly offers, “I understand how you feel,” Ernest explodes in return: “You don’t understand how I feel. You understand nothing, you white piece of shit.”

In a subsequent meeting—conducted as Sannie stalls for time, having convinced three of Daniel’s former comrades to make haste to Paternoster to avenge Daniel’s death—Ernest acts on his hatred for his brother’s killer. Coetzee is being questioned closely by the family about Daniel’s last moments. Did their son falter under hours of electric shock and water torture? Did he speak? “What did my boy say?” asks Daniel’s mother Magda. “He asked me, he said, ‘please, rather just kill me,’” Coetzee responds. The film’s editing cuts to a
reaction shot of Magda and Sannie, then to a medium shot of Coetzee. Suddenly Ernest shouts, indeed virtually roars, as he slams a teakettle into Coetzee’s temple. Chaos erupts.

The fictional scene bears strong similarities and a few significant differences to Mark J. Kaplan’s documentary *Between Joyce and Remembrance*, in which Siphiwo Mtimkulu’s son, Sikhumbuzo, slams a ceramic dog on the cranium of Gideon Nieuwoudt, bloodying the former police agent and fracturing his skull. Kaplan’s earlier version of the documentary, *Where Truth Lies* (1999), also featured the attack scene and had been circulated at film festivals well before *Forgiveness* was shot—thereby raising potential issues of copyright infringement as well as illuminating the theoretical considerations of genre and ideology that inform the present study. The visual construction and editing at the moment of attack are strikingly similar in both scenes. Both directors hold a tight shot on the former security officer as the blunt object strikes his head. The blow drives the policeman’s head downward and toward the camera or viewer. In neither case can the instrument of assault be seen clearly. Both film editors cut from the stricken security officer to the reaction of shocked parents—the fictional Hendrik Grootboom and the nonfictional Joyce and Sipho Mtimkulu. Both show members of the family trying to restrain the attacker. Both feature a lingering scene of blood dripping from the officer’s bloodied temple—the right in the case of the fictional Coetzee and the left in the case of the nonfictional Nieuwoudt. And both scenes are mediated products of what one might term artificial construction—the visual grammar of shot framing, duration, sequence, montage, sound editing, and the like.

Yet subtle differences in the scenes illuminate several generic conventions that are nominally labelled as history and fiction. The first is as profound as it is obvious. Gideon Nieuwoudt’s blood—though cinematically relayed—is real, just as real as was the blood and smoke of Siphiwo Mtimkulu, the activist whom Nieuwoudt conspired to murder and whose corpse he immolated. Tertius Coetzee, as well as Daniel Grootboom and his brother Ernest, are the products of a script writer’s imagination, no matter how lavishly writer Greg Latter may have borrowed from Kaplan’s documentary. The blood is staged; the actors walk away when the scene ends. As Jeremy Nathan’s head quote to this essay illustrates, fictional creators do retain something of the power of a god over the lives and deaths of their characters. They
have time to write, to rewrite, to plan, to set up camera angles, to shoot and re-shoot. They choose the names their characters bear and, in the case of visual narrative, choose the actors to play them.

Documentary writers and filmmakers, particularly those who disclose real names, have far fewer of these choices available to them even though they retain some markers of narrative indeterminacy. Edited and retrospectively constructed though it may be, Kaplan’s narrative of the Mtimkulu family and Gideon Nieuwoudt must compete with some sense of an actual Mtimkulu or Nieuwoudt who casts a shadow on the ostensibly real world outside the direct realm of the nonfictional author or director. Moreover, an unscripted attack (as opposed to a scripted attack such as in Forgiveness or the elaborately staged and therefore entirely predictable “nonfictional” conflict that one might see in a tightly scripted reality television show or in any one of dozens of Jerry Springer free-for-alls) catches its producer as well as its consumer by surprise. The sense that something violent has happened and that no one was prepared will offer a powerful emotional jolt to many viewers. For all the blurring of history and fiction in today’s overwhelmingly mediated world, the power of sudden real-life trauma retains a strong power to shock—be it the first hijacked plane plunging into the north tower of the World Trade Center captured solely by the French documentary producers Jules and Gedeon Naudet, the amateur video footage of a tsunami plunging toward a Thai beach resort, a traffic camera’s capture of the human toll of a Japanese earthquake, or any number of brutal murders or disasters caught by surveillance video cameras and readily available on YouTube or other media. The documentary viewer confronting ostensibly unscripted trauma may thereby experience, albeit voyeuristically, an illicit thrill engendered by the face of death.

In more concrete terms, one can see how the foreknowledge (and indeed foreordaining) of events in fictional discourse allows the producers of Forgiveness to foreshadow the violence within the scene in which the fictional Ernest strikes Coetzee. Although director Ian Gabriel and his cinematographer Giulio Biccari on first glance present the attack as shocking and unplanned, an opaque reading of the visual moment reveals that it was carefully prepared for and entirely predictable. Observant viewers, particularly in subsequent screenings, will remark how the director manipulates camera focus to show how Ernest’s fist clenches and unclenches in the background of the medium-
range shot of Coetzee as the officer responds to the questions of the murder victim’s mother. Beyond Ernest’s foreshadowing tension, the blurring of a tight shot of Coetzee as he plunges forward in the moment of attack conveys the sense that the cinematographer was caught by surprise when, in fact, the camera’s focus is manipulated and blurred, skilfully and deliberately, to create the illusion of surprise above the underlying grammar of tight directorial control.

By contrast, though he knew that the confrontation scene he was shooting would crackle with pent-up anger and grief, Kaplan could not have forecast the specific moment of violence—neither whether, when, nor in what manner it might explode. He was directing the two-camera scene in the close quarters of the Mtjikulu home, generally training one camera on Nieuwoudt and the other primarily on Joyce and Sipho Mtjikulu or on Siphiwo’s half-brother, Ndiphiwe Giyose, who strongly challenges Nieuwoudt’s truthfulness as the discussion unfolds (Kaplan interview). Without warning, the porcelain dog explodes into a tight shot on Nieuwoudt’s head—visible only as an orange blur and the white shards of the dog’s unpainted interior. Although he knew the scene was powerful and potentially explosive, Kaplan had no way of knowing that the son would physically attack Nieuwoudt and thus could not precisely prefigure the son’s growing tension in the attack scene’s visual present, as Gabriel rather easily managed to do in his fictional scene. The son is seen only after the attack in a microsecond blur as he heads out the door. Of course, once the violence has exploded and Kaplan knows the son’s crucial importance to the documentary he ultimately will produce, Kaplan certainly can build the significance of the son retrospectively through editing and sequencing decisions—even though at first viewing, one might not yet fully understand the significance of that sequencing.

For example, somewhat earlier in the documentary Kaplan shows scenes of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearing of September 25-26, 1997, wherein Nieuwoudt testified to his role in Siphiwo Mtjikulu’s murder. Although Kaplan does not include all the testimony, the official transcript of the hearing reveals that Siphiwo’s son actually would have heard the following testimony about his father’s murder:

Q: [Security police officer Jansie van Rensburg] shot the one person [Mtjikulu], you shot the other [Madaka]?
Nieuwoudt: That is so, Mr. Chairperson.
Q: Afterwards the bodies were placed on some wooden stumps, diesel was put on and they were set alight?
Nieuwoudt: That is correct.
Q: During the course of the evening, on several occasions you had to keep the fire going and put on more wood?
Nieuwoudt: That is so.
Q: After about six hours their bodies were nearly ash?
Nieuwoudt: That is correct, Mr. Chairperson.
Q: The next morning, did you gather the remains and throw these into the Fish River?
Nieuwoudt: That is correct.
Q: The vehicle which you had with you—Madaka’s vehicle, was then taken to Tella Bridge near to the Lesotho border and it was left there, is that correct?
Nieuwoudt: That is so, Mr. Chairperson.
Q: Was the purpose of that to create the impression that these persons had left the country?
Nieuwoudt: That is correct.

(TRC Case No. 3820/96)

In the documentary, Kaplan’s voiceover reveals that the son’s name, Sikhumbuzo, means “remembrance” while close-up visual shots from the hearing reveal how deeply Sikhumbuzo was affected by the testimony concerning his father’s disappearance. “I’m not the same as before,” Sikhumbuzo tells an interviewer, in words whose deepest significance becomes clear only in retrospect when Sikhumbuzo attacks Nieuwoudt. Similarly, though Sikhumbuzo rushed from the house after striking the officer, Kaplan positions a subsequent interview with Sikhumbuzo in his documentary only moments after the attack, partly as a voiceover while Gideon Nieuwoudt’s bloodied face is yet visible. “He keep on lying to us, lying to us,” Sikhumbuzo says. “That’s why I do something, to show that I’m angry. And I don’t think I will forgive him. He’s sitting there by his house, enjoying himself with his kids, you see. What about us here?”

Interviews such as these, as well as those with Siphiwo’s
mother Joyce and his daughter Aluta, build viewer empathy with their point of view. The family’s efforts to solve the mystery of Siphiwo Mtimkulu’s disappearance gain power and poignancy as they relay their pain and anger to the documentary’s director and the viewer. By contrast, the conventions of realistic fictional cinema normally rule out this sort of direct camera address—though it can sometimes be accomplished by voiceover or even in rare moments by the fictional character’s turning to address the camera directly, as in Stephen Frears’ adaptation of the Nick Hornby novel *High Fidelity*. Though director Ian Gabriel does not resort to that sort of technique in his fictional film, what he does accomplish is the subtle identification of the viewer with Tertius Coetzee’s point of view by privileging the security officer’s interiority over that of other characters in the dialogue.

Careful observers will notice that immediately before the attack, while he is on camera talking to the fictional Grootboom family, Coetzee’s voice is heard during the dialogue before the actor’s lips start to move. For example, we hear Coetzee say, “He didn’t say a word that whole night” before his lips sound out the next sentence: “He said nothing.” Moments later we hear his voice—“We would go in there and”—before the lips continue the sentence: “we would take turns.” Finally, just before the surprise attack, we hear the voice, “He spoke for the first time,” before the voice and lips work together to produce: “He spoke. I was in there with him . . .” The line then ends with Coetzee’s voice, but no lip movement: “. . . alone with him.” If the former security officer’s lips are not moving, it stands to reason that the film viewer can only hear Coetzee if the viewer is privy to Coetzee’s thoughts during the interrogation. As no other character is granted this sort of special discursive relationship to the viewer, Coetzee’s interiority nudges the viewer’s interiority during this critical moment of the film. Therefore, despite their outward political or social proclivities, many viewers thus may be forced by the film’s narrative strategy to identify subjectively with an apartheid torturer, given the film’s underlying visual and aural grammar.

One such recalcitrant viewer is Kaplan, who besides being upset at the fictional film’s borrowing his own documentary’s attack scene, complains that the director of *Forgiveness* has attempted to build sympathy with Coetzee without providing a plausible rationale or back story. “In the documentary our empathy lies with the victims [the Mtimkulu family] even though one of them, a teenager, is driven
to violence,” Kaplan charges in a paper he delivered at a Stellenbosch University symposium exploring the theoretical ramifications of factual and fictional discourse. “It matters not a jot whether the main character of the film is Gideon Nieuwoudt or a mythological figure that bears resemblance to any and all perpetrators. What does matter is that the film bends over backwards to illustrate how sensitive this erstwhile perpetrator has become” (“Reconstructing”). Of Kaplan’s own film, the late University of Melbourne historian David Philips demonstrates that Between Joyce and Remembrance maintains viewer identification squarely with the son of the activist victim. “I freely confess to feeling some sense of vicarious pleasure that Nieuwoudt was at least required to serve some prison time, and that Siphiwo’s son could exact some form of physical retaliation for what he had done to Siphiwo,” Philips writes. “Fracturing Nieuwoudt’s skull was a crude way of dealing with the complex realities of a society in transition, but there may be times when such crude physical action offers more emotional satisfaction to the victim’s family than that rather arid, abstract idea of ‘reconciliation’” (“The Student” 225).

In other parts of the fictional Forgiveness, Coetzee’s point of view is established in a more conventional way. What the conventions of realistic fictional direction normally substitute for direct address is subjective camera positioned from the point of view of a character—a technique that film directors know will build viewer identification with that character because the viewer literally sees events through his or her eyes. The resulting “masterly” point of view established by subjective camera and its underlying ideology often has been exposed in film studies; what has been much less studied is a related phenomenon that we might term fictional omnipresence—that is, the ability not only to position the camera in any character’s point of view, but to intrude in any scene it wishes without having to account for how the camera got there or how it might affect the scene itself. Most viewers grant that power to a fictional filmmaker as surely as most readers grant the power of a fictional novelist or storyteller to access any particular scene (omnipresence) or to read any mind (omniscience). By contrast, documentary directors always risk affecting, changing, even shattering the very scenes they wish to document simply by their presence—even as nonfiction writers or reporters generally must account for how their characters’ thoughts are relayed or whether the reporters might influence events while they ostensibly cover them.
A ready example of this often-unnoticed narrative convention is shown by the way that character subjectivity is established by a mirror scene within each film. In the fictional *Forgiveness*, after the first disastrous meeting with the Grootboom family during which he was called a “murdering bastard” and a “white piece of shit,” a lone and obviously suffering Tertius Coetzee trains his haggard eyes (or at least the heavy-lidded, deeply sunken eyes of veteran South African actor Arnold Vosloo) toward a mirror as the camera (and thus the viewer) eavesdrops over the torturer’s shoulder. “What did you expect, you murdering bastard?” he chides himself—thus securing for the viewer both an unconditional confession of the crime as well as the privilege of witnessing this private confession at intimate range. The mirror scene thus underscores many moments during which Coetzee’s subjectivity frames the film’s visual grammar as surely as his unspoken voice had framed its auditory grammar in the attack scene. Though the film’s script may be quite critical of Coetzee’s violent past, its underlying grammar thus builds consistent viewer identification with his character either through subjective camera or the auditory relay of thoughts—a technique that some viewers have found unsettling because they do not otherwise wish to identify with Coetzee. And because the film is part of a fictional discourse, viewers normally do not question how the camera gained access to Coetzee’s private moment in the bathroom mirror or whether he might have staged the moment simply because he knew a camera was trained over his shoulder. Nor do most viewers question how we can hear Coetzee if his lips do not move. Such questions might seem natural were the film a nonfictional documentary, but are rarely, if ever, raised in a critique of fictional cinema. Yet, by witnessing many intimate scenes as only Coetzee could witness them or by our ability to hear his thoughts, the viewer in some senses must adopt Coetzee’s subjectivity as part of the film’s underlying discourse.

As it happens, Kaplan’s pre-existing documentary also features a scene in which the security police officer’s face is framed by a mirror. But the documentary director subtly places the mirror scene within the subjectivity of the activist victim rather than within the mind of the apartheid officer, as in the fictional *Forgiveness*. In the documentary, Kaplan establishes subjectivity for slain activist Siphiwo Mtikulu by staging re-enactments of an affidavit that the then 22-year-old Siphiwo had filed following an initial detention and
torture by Nieuwoudt and before he ultimately was kidnapped and killed. In many of the documentary’s crucial scenes, Kaplan produces visuals to match Siphiwo’s memories, thus establishing Siphiwo’s state of mind and interiority as authoritative in the film’s visuals. In one of these moments, Nieuwoudt’s face appears in a car’s rear-view mirror as he and the Mtimkulu family separately travel to the farm used by the security police during the interrogation and murder of Siphiwo Mtimkulu. At first, because it is presented in stark, sepia tones, the mirror scene appears to be a reconstruction—a technique that Kaplan discloses early in the film and assures the viewer is based directly on a Siphiwo’s sworn affidavit. The careful viewer thus is startled when Nieuwoudt’s actual face is shown in the car mirror (from the point of view of the car’s back seat where Mtimkulu would have been sitting following his kidnapping) during a scene that adopts the visual grammar of a reconstruction of Siphiwo’s interiority. The scene suggests to such a viewer either that Nieuwoudt cooperated in the Siphiwo reconstructions or that a stand-in double was used.

“I’ve been asked by some people who the actor was,” Kaplan said in an interview about his film, assuring a questioner that the scene depicts the actual Nieuwoudt in the time of the documentary’s filming and contains no “reconstruction” tagline that would identify it as originating in Siphiwo’s subjectivity. Still, Kaplan’s adoption of the sepia-toned visual grammar and his deliberate blurring of the documentary’s visual conventions in this instance capture the mirrored face of Nieuwoudt squarely outside the subjectivity of Nieuwoudt’s character—unlike the mirror scene in the fictional Forgiveness that establishes the security officer’s own subjectivity. The mirror scene in the nonfiction film therefore serves to alienate viewers shocked by Nieuwoudt’s cruelty and to further distance him from them, rather than building viewer identification with a fictional former apartheid officer through a mirrored confession, as in the Forgiveness.

Beyond the ideological ramifications of omniscience in fictional and nominally historical visual narratives, the two films also illustrate some of the ways that fictional omnipresence contrasts the more limited range that factual or documentary narrative can achieve. Though the nonfictional Between Joyce and Remembrance foregrounds many emotionally charged scenes, the documentary filmmaker always risks affecting the very scenes he shoots. The attack scene in the documentary provides a dramatic example. Indeed, Kaplan recalls that
the wounded Nieuwoudt subsequently "wondered—not seriously—if he had been set up" (Kaplan, "Interview") for Sikhumbuzo Mtimkulu to strike him on camera. Perhaps to make it clear that the attack was not premeditated, Kaplan's documentary only moments after the attack splices a subsequent interview in which Sikhumbuzo says, "It was not my plan to do it. I didn't plan it. . . . It just happened." Whether the attack would have happened if no camera had been present is impossible to say. The cameras indeed may have helped to prompt the violent reaction. Conversely, they may have served to prevent an even more violent reaction. Whatever their effect on her grandson, Joyce Mtimkulu seems perpetually aware of the camera during the scene—even in moments of direct emotional confrontation with Nieuwoudt. Her litany of protest against him ("I was suffering, crying all over, shaking all over the townships") reveals a performative quality that seems to rise to the documented moment. Even in a scene where Joyce perhaps most loses herself in the raw emotion of a moment—when she meets white South African activist Di Bishop, who had supported the Mtimkulu family and whose husband was killed in a car crash also suspected to be the work of security police agents—Kaplan recalls: "She was conscious of what she was doing." Although Kaplan says his camera operator maintained as much physical distance as possible when shooting the scene between the two women, he adds that the operator was "freaked out" by the emotional intimacy of the reunion, though he kept his camera rolling (Kaplan, "Interview").

So far, I have tried to show that while both fictional and nonfictional filmmakers can plan and stage scenes meticulously, the sudden surprises of real life are less easily managed in real time. I have contrasted the power of real blood and real death to staged moments that leave no lasting lacerations. And I have tried to show how documentary filmmakers and writers must account for interiority and always risk affecting the very scenes they wish to document, while fictional directors and writers normally are granted permission to be anywhere and reveal anyone's mind they like. These considerations of access, impact, and reaction in historical documentary—traces of the implications of building stories around the lives of characters who cannot be contained neatly by a fictional text—simply do not confront fictional directors and writers in the same way, even though both narrative conventions, as we have seen, allow for many occasions of subtle and not-so-subtle directorial manipulation. Yet, I do not
want to insist on any essential or fixed boundary between the two forms; indeed, some of the most intriguing film narratives—visual or written—blur boundaries and defy easy classification. Moreover, the power to signify a narrative as fiction or nonfiction only partly lies with its creator. Viewers and readers will have their say, as will the subjects of documentary nonfiction who might disagree with a documentary depiction and label it fanciful or worse.

Mark Kaplan’s own reading of *Forgiveness*, particularly the character of Tertius Coetzee, provides a ready example. Because he identifies the subsequent fictional film so closely with his own documentary, Kaplan in essence refuses to grant the safe status of fiction to *Forgiveness* and instead reads it as a failed attempt to render the mind and character of a particular security police torturer. An exchange that I witnessed between Kaplan and *Forgiveness* director Ian Gabriel during a public panel discussion at the Cape Town World Cinema Festival not long after *Forgiveness* was released makes this clear. “I have real problems with the main character,” Kaplan told Gabriel, arguing that the lack of a background story that made Coetzee’s criminality graphically clear instead builds viewer sympathy toward this relic of apartheid power and glosses over the violence of actual security police officers. In response, Gabriel asserted fiction’s traditional right to elide facts to get at a deeper truth and rejected the putative link between Nieuwoudt and Coetzee. “[Tertius Coetzee] is not Gideon Nieuwoudt,” responded Gabriel. “He’s constructed. He’s a fictional character. . . . The character is a mélange of seven or eight apartheid cops.”

Undoubtedly, one reason why Kaplan finds it so hard to grant Gabriel and writer Greg Latter the ability to build a composite characterization from the nonfictonal Nieuwoudt to the fictional Coetzee is that the documentary director remains deeply implicated by the material presence of Nieuwoudt in his own film. Kaplan told me that he was directing the shooting from a spot at Nieuwoudt’s feet when Sikhumbuzo Mtimkulu attacked his father’s torturer. “I had the [camera] two shot in my monitor,” Kaplan recalls, “when suddenly all hell broke loose. It was madness.” Once he regained some control of the situation and had terminated the shooting, Kaplan had a moment to catch his breath. “In the mirror I saw that I had his [Nieuwoudt’s] blood on my shirt” (Kaplan, “Interview”), he says. Elsewhere, Kaplan writes of Nieuwoudt’s material presence: “What struck me and the
rest of the crew was how remote and placid he seemed, though every now and then there was something very unnerving in his gaze. Truly the man has extraordinary, snake-like eyes” (“Reconstructing”).

Kaplan’s encounter with Nieuwoudt’s blood and serpentine materiality creates a bodily presence that hovers over and outside the text in a way that simply is missing from the fictional character of Tertius Coetzee in *Forgiveness*. The underlying point I want to make here is not to privilege nonfictional film over fictional film as somehow more “truthful,” but to consider the power that the material body, even though contained and scripted, brings to the representation and the way it might disrupt generic boundaries. A related example might be cited from a memoir about the former apartheid death squad officer Eugene de Kock, also identified by scholar David Philips as one of the historical sources for the fictional Tertius Coetzee in *Forgiveness*. South African psychologist Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela in her book, *A Human Being Died That Night: A South African Story of Forgiveness*, recalls making physical contact with de Kock during an interview in the C-Max section of Pretoria Central Prison. Herself a member of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Gobodo-Madikizela reports the scene in which the torturer acknowledges his crimes: “‘I wish I could say, ‘Here are your husbands,’ [de Kock] said, stretching out his arms as if bearing an invisible body, his hands trembling, mouth quivering, ‘but unfortunately, I have to live with it’” (32). Before she knew it, Gobodo-Madikizela had reached out to touch the apartheid torturer de Kock: “I touched his shaking hand, surprising myself. But it was clenched, cold and rigid, as if he were holding back, as if he were holding on to some withering but still vital form of his old self. This made me recoil” (32). As is Kaplan when he discovers Gideon Nieuwoudt’s blood on his shirt, Gobodo-Madikizela is haunted by her encounter with the torturer. Later that day, as she drives back toward Johannesburg from de Kock’s prison, Gobodo-Madikizela feels “a great sense of anxiety and despair” and breaks into sobs (33). Early the next morning, as she awakens, “it dawned on me that I couldn’t lift my right forearm. I immediately ‘knew’ why. It was the same hand with which I had reached out to offer consolation to de Kock, and now it had completely gone numb” (40).

In this manner, some viewers implicated by the history of real secret police torturers simply will refuse to grant *Forgiveness* some safe fictional realm wherein Tertius Coetzee can work out his guilt
in imagined reconciliation. Although the fictional Coetzee remains a composite entity created by the producer and director of *Forgiveness*, his presence cannot be contained completely by standard boundaries of genre precisely because he is a composite of secret police torturers Gideon Nieuwoudt, Eugene de Kock, Dirk Coetzee, Jeffrey Benzein, and others (Phillips, “Looking” 313). Thus his “confession” in the fictional film becomes deeply problematic. Gobodo-Madikizela’s work again provides a plausible explanation. Her theory of reconciliation and forgiveness, worked out in detail over the course of *A Human Being Died Last Night*, is that the victim of the atrocity (or his or her loved ones) is the sole agent who can initiate a process of reconciliation that might lead to some moment of genuine forgiveness. “One simply has to guard against prescribing forgiveness, for to do so cheapens the process,” says Gobodo-Madikizela. “That first step taken, even to consider meeting a person responsible for terrible wrongs, is the victim’s to take” (97). Eugene de Kock’s apparent recognition that his crimes had specific material results, as well as his decision to respond to the offers of forgiveness proffered by the families of his victims, Gobodo-Madikizela says, provides a pathway toward reconciliation, toward de Kock’s ability to rejoin the human race. But the victims of his crimes must hold the key to that transaction as surely as de Kock and Nieuwoudt once held the key to their loved ones’ destinies. Only actual victims have that power—not someone standing in for them or depicting them in a film or imagining their thoughts. “A human being [not an imaginative character] died that night in the murder operation,” Gobodo-Madikizela writes of de Kock’s ultimate confession. “This reality seemed to hang between us. At that moment I thought I saw a man finally acknowledging the debt he owed to his conscience” (51).

Many viewers of Mark Kaplan’s *Between Joyce and Remembrance* simply do not believe that Niewoudt attempted to reconcile with the Mtimkulu family in good faith. “What Niewoudt failed to see,” observes David Schalkwyk, a South African literary specialist in apartheid prison discourse, “is that apologies and confessions of this kind have to be unconditional; forgiveness needs to be sought without qualification” (32). Ultimately, Schalkwyk concludes that Niewoudt in both his TRC testimony and Kaplan’s film “refus[es] to be accountable for the horrendous spirit of his murder” (32). Elsewhere, South African legal scholar Mark Sanders concludes that Niewoudt and other perpetrators in the Mtimkulu murder were
crafty and evasive, hardly the prerequisites for forgiveness. “Had the witnesses supplied a version of how and where Siphiwo Mtimkulu died, although his bones could not be produced, their testimony might have been . . . an act of condolence” (Ambiguities 48). Given this sort of analysis, any viewer such as Kaplan who cannot separate the historical presence of a man such as Nieuwoudt from his fictional characterization as Tertius Coetzee in Forgiveness will remain unconvinced by the latter film, despite its title. “Forgiveness is a personal act,” Kaplan writes of Forgiveness. “True forgiveness cannot be demanded, expected or enacted on behalf of others. And it would appear that the feature film Forgiveness is doing all these things” (“Reconstructing”).

If it is true that a tangible victim of the violence must initiate the restorative encounter—and if the viewer of Forgiveness cannot forget that both the Grootbooms and Coetzee are the imaginative products of the film’s producers, director, and writer rather than actual perpetrators and victims—it would stand to reason that such viewers might conclude that the film’s impetus toward forgiveness and reconciliation manifestly does not meet Gobodo-Madikizela’s standard. These viewers see the film as encouraging identification with a perpetrator, refusing to take personal responsibility for apartheid, and abusing the concept of forgiveness for the benefit of the perpetrator. For these viewers, reconciliation in Forgiveness is never instigated by a tangible source directly harmed by the crimes of apartheid but instead by a film director and his producer. Moreover, the interiority of the perpetrator is foregrounded in the film rather than that of his victims. Even though director Ian Gabriel may make an articulate case for the universality of the fictional character who becomes Tertius Coetzee, some viewers simply will refuse to accept the director’s invitation to read the film as a plausible fiction whose creators enjoy the power of gods to initiate and grant forgiveness or to decide who will live or who will die. A close reading of Forgiveness against its nonfictional predecessor, Between Joyce and Remembrance, thereby reveals that the underlying practices and ideologies of historical documentary and fiction—though often ignored or even rightly blurred within contemporary narrative analysis—retain real, even implicating power when traumatic historical events are retold or re-imagined in visual narrative form. Such are the moments when the occasionally arid desert of narrative theory springs forth with the living lessons of human understanding.
Notes

1 *Forgiveness* was a relatively popular and widely distributed film during the Southern Hemisphere winter of 2004, the nation’s 10th anniversary of post-apartheid democracy. Although far fewer people saw Kaplan’s *Between Joyce and Remembrance* in theaters, several versions of the documentary aired on South African national television leading up to and during the 10th anniversary year, attracting many viewers in that format. Other fictional films about the Truth and Reconciliation commission released in South Africa during the 10th anniversary year were *Red Dust* (2004), directed by Tom Hooper from the Gillian Slovo novel, and *In My Country* (2004), directed by John Boorman and loosely based on Antjie Krog’s compelling TRC memoir, *Country of My Skull*. The latter films premiered at the Cape Town World Cinema Festival in 2004, which occasioned a panel discussion that produced the head quotes to this essay. For a very helpful analysis of the three fictional films, see Philips (“Looking”).

2 See White, particularly 58-82, for a foundational discussion of this issue; see Rosenstone 45-79 for specific theoretical considerations regarding film histories.

3 For the most pertinent historical details of Nieuwoudt’s murder of Mtimkulu and Madaka, see the official online records of the TRC amnesty hearing of 25-26 September 1997 (Truth and Reconciliation Commission); for excellent abstracts and analyses of the case, see Philips, “The Student,” 219-25 and Sanders (“Remembering”) 66-80.

4 Though it lies somewhat beyond the scope of this essay, Sanders’s *Ambiguities of Witnessing* analyzes the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as a national narrative with all the complexity of sophisticated literary discourse. Pertinent for this essay’s discussion is Sanders’s analysis, particularly in 87-113, of how “forgiveness became a defining concept for the commission, despite never having been part of its legal mandate” (94). Sanders concludes that a discourse and counter-discourse on forgiveness surrounded the TRC. “[T]here were perpetrators who apologized, and asked for forgiveness, and sometimes victims forgave or said that they were willing to do so under certain conditions; at the same time, there were those who would not ask for forgiveness, ones who were unforgiving, and those who criticized the expectation that victims ought to forgive” (94). A similar discourse and counter-discourse rather obviously underlies many of the critical viewer reactions to the two films considered in this study.
Works Cited


