Indeed, in France as elsewhere, writers embrace the ‘dark pages’ of history and focus on the figure of the perpetrator – the French historian Denis Peschanski reads this new perspective as a sign of a change in ‘memory mode’. My aim is to integrate findings in translation studies and narrative theory, and to introduce their concepts, with research on literature (not necessarily translated literature even). Since I work with ethically challenging texts voicing the perpetrator’s point of view, I believe this approach can be very useful to explore the ethical positioning of individuals – authors, translators, readers – in relation to these stories and to reveal the polyphonic nature of these texts. I will present the conceptual framework I developed and illustrate my approach with the analysis of one book on the Rwandan genocide.

The book in question is *Une saison de machettes* [Machete Season/A Time for Machetes] written by the French author Jean Hatzfeld. Hatzfeld is known in France as a war reporter who covered the Rwandan genocide in 1994 for the newspaper *Libération*. A few years after his visit to Rwanda, Hatzfeld decided to recast his journalistic work as a literary project, resulting in a trilogy exploring different perspectives and stages in the genocide. For his first book, *Dans le nu de la vie* [Life Laid Bare], Hatzfeld talked to survivors. For the second book, the one I am presenting, he interviewed a gang of killers. For the final book, [The Strategy of Antelopes], he returned to Rwanda to reflect on the Reconciliation policy that condemned survivors and released perpetrators to cohabitation.

When writing the book on the survivors, Hatzfeld says he did not consider talking to the killers. “That would have been immoral”, he believes, “unacceptable in the eyes of the survivors (in the eyes of the readers, too, of course), and uninteresting besides”. Following the publication of [Life Laid Bare], however, readers expressed an interest in the killers’ point of view. Hatzfeld then decided to interview a gang of condemned Hutu killers in prison who agreed to speak about their activities during the massacres. *Une Saison de machetes* presents transcriptions of these conversations.

For Hatzfeld, the killers’ stories raise moral *questions* rather than answers: he admits to scepticism and embarrassment about this project and questions its moral acceptability. At the same time, he feels there is something to learn from these stories. “In some confused way”, he admits, “[the killers] are also probably trying to emphasize, to all of us at the edge of that exterminating whirlwind, an agonizing truth” – although this “agonizing truth” is not incompatible with invention, imagination or lies.
A few words about the conceptual framework I use to analyze this book. First, I consider translation in a broad sense: the perpetrator’s testimony, here, is not a ‘bare’ story. On a communicational level, interaction between the first-person narrator (the killers) and the reader is not immediate. The personal story of the Hutu killers is ‘quoted’, taken up by another narrative instance — Hatzfeld ‘speaks on behalf of’ the killers. Translation, then, is defined as mediation or renarration. I will briefly consider translation ‘in a strict sense’ later on.

Narrative theory is the first component of the theoretical framework. I draw on narrative theory formulated by Mona Baker to disclose the ethical positioning of the mediator in relation to the text he recounts. Baker has underlined that mediators “face a basic ethical choice with every assignment”: they either reproduce the communicated ideas or they dissociate themselves from them. When voicing the perpetrator’s perspective, mediation cannot be innocent or transparent but necessarily involves intervention. The mediator injects the text with his or her own voice by framing it: by producing a moulding surrounding the original narrative in order to present it “within a certain perspective”. So, while re-narrating the killer’s story and maintaining the effect of his words, mediators can try, at the same time, to orient the reader’s understanding and appreciation of the text.

This communicational approach is also very present in Ruth Amossy’s theory, which combines classical rhetorics and traditional French discourse analysis. Discourse, here, is not a theoretical abstraction but a dynamic entity that can be studied in its social and political dimensions. Moreover, by implementing the dialogic principle, Amossy also recognizes the positioning of speakers in relation to surrounding discourse and underpins the thesis that argumentation is an integral part of all discourse. Every utterance is an implicit or explicit answer to the word of the other, so in this sense every speaker tries to at least influence, if not convince, the audience.

I believe that on that account, argumentation theory is complementary to Mona Baker’s narrative theory. And that framing can be considered as the production of a counter discourse – an argumentation structure that opposes and possibly even sabotages the perpetrator’s discourse and therefore somehow ‘justifies’ a morally questionable project.

Considering ‘voice’, following Theo Hermans, as an “index of discursive presence”, I can outline this diagram to illustrate my approach in teasing out the different voices in the ‘relayed’ testimony. A communicational perspective on discourse allows me to discern two separate interactions in the framed
testimony of the Hutu killer, since both the mediator and the perpetrator
address the reader and call upon his or her ethical judgment. Therefore, the
reader is confronted with two argumentations and does not necessarily identify
with the first-person narrator in the story, which is mostly the case.

Let’s get back to Hatzfeld. He is clearly very uneasy with the ethical implications
of his decision to interview the killers and clearly positions himself against his
interlocutors. He organizes the text so that the killers’ testimony is framed,
using the literary form to explicitly comment on the perpetrators’ stories. As
author-narrator, Hatzfeld is indeed very present in the text. Not only does he
contextualize the killers’ testimonies, he counters their perspectives, corrects
their stories and reveals inaccuracies.

To this end, Hatzfeld creates the image of a ‘picture frame’ based on a strict
demarcation of inside and outside, suggesting that his own framing activity
takes places outside the perpetrators’ discourse. The frame is easily discernible
to the reader since it is made graphic in two ways. Firstly the author’s discourse
is visually separated from the killers’: it is allocated to distinct chapters, and the
book alternates between chapters containing the transcribed conversations
with the perpetrators and chapters written by Hatzfeld. I copied part of the
(table of contents). Secondly, the distance between the author and the killers is
reinforced in the use of language. Hatzfeld’s annotations are written in a highly
literary and almost rhetorical ‘Hexagonal’ French – the French language as
spoken in France by ‘native’ speakers – while the killers speak Rwandan French
– a more graphic and poetic version of French.

Hatzfeld is aware that his comments influence the killers’ discourse, but he
nevertheless considers their testimony to be transparent, and insists on a
rigorous distinction between his own voice and the voices of the men he
interviews. Hatzfeld wants his readers to be able to ‘hear’ the perpetrators’
‘voice’. Despite the author’s statements about his literary approach, the
volume has an obvious documentary aspect, which is brought out in the
paratexts. Hatzfeld underscores the authenticity of the interviews by adding
maps of Rwanda, a chronology of the events of 1994 and biographies and
photographs of the killers. The documentary character of the work is
emphasized in the English volumes. In the UK, the book is referred to as a
“chilling reportage”. In the American publication, the subtitle “A Report by Jean
Hatzfeld” is added, presenting the book as a “frontline reportage”. According to
O Magazine, quoted on the back cover, the reader can hear “the voices of the
men, many of whom speak in a kind of chilling, breathtaking poetry”. I will
come back to the “chilling”, but these descriptions all suggest that Hatzfeld’s volume offers an unprocessed testimony of the Rwandan killers.

In the end, however, the perpetrators’ discourse is infused with meaning by this framing activity, and reveals itself, not as a transparent given, but as a polyphonic construction. The killers’ voices become permeated by the author’s voice through transcription and editing. Firstly, Hatzfeld organizes the collected material from the interviews into eighteen ‘thematic’ units, each dedicated to a specific aspect of the genocide. This particular organization not only creates the illusion of a group discussion, which is not consistent with the interview procedure outlined elsewhere, it also bears no correspondence to the original chronology of the conversations. Fragments of interviews are meshed together in thematic chapters, while the telling and seemingly ironic titles manipulate the reader’s interpretation of the text, for example, ‘Taste and distaste’ (suggesting that some perpetrators took pleasure in killing), ‘Rejoicing in the village’ (where the author comments on the looting after the killing), ‘Field work’ (where killers compare cutting vegetables and ‘cutting’ people) and ‘Bargaining for forgiveness’ (implying that feelings of remorse cannot be sincere).

Moreover, the chapters rendering the voices of the perpetrators do not reflect the original dialogues as you can see on the copy, but reproduce the men’s words in a streaming monologue. What is missing in this narrative is the role the author played in shaping the killers’ responses. It is not clear to what extent their words are also a product of Hatzfeld’s own hand – the questions he asked, the wording he used. This is a striking feature as readers are addressed directly by the killers, who are able to produce a torrent of words without pausing for breath. Hatzfeld himself describes the men’s voices as repellently calm and monotone, as if they did not understand the monstrosity of their crimes.

A further mediating element was involved. In Hatzfeld’s original French version, the interviews were, in some cases, undertaken with the help of an interpreter. Hatzfeld reveals that the killers expressed themselves either in Rwandan French or in Kinyarwanda, the mother tongue of the majority of the people, and that his translator, ironically his name is Innocent, translated Kinyarwanda into Rwandan French during the interviews and later also helped to create the transcriptions.

Now, Hatzfeld adheres to a rather naïve conception of translation when he claims that Innocent translated the killers’ words “so faithfully and so well” that it was impossible to distinguish between those stories translated from Kinyarwanda to Rwandan French, and the untranslated stories delivered
directly in Rwandan French – between the translated language and the original. His comments suggest that an effective illusion has been achieved: the translation does not appear as a translation but “seems ‘natural,’ i.e., not translated”. Innocent’s voice is certainly present in the text, but not audible for the reader, and Hatzfeld fails to indicate which conversations needed to be translated and which didn’t.

The final voices of mediation are the English and Dutch translators. The translation of Hatzfeld’s book into these languages introduces further shifts that affect the configuration of the different voices and therefore the working of the frame. I should note that the English translation (which is the same in both the UK and US edition) was made by Linda Coverdale, who was awarded the 2006 Scott Moncrieff Prize. The preface by Susan Sontage was translated and integrated in the Dutch text.

I will focus here on the translation of the picture frame I spoke about. The presence of Rwandan French and ‘Hexagonal’ French in Une Saison de machettes, and particularly the contrast between them, was an essential strategy used by Hatzfeld to distinguish his voice from those of the perpetrators. The translators also use a number of strategies that serve, in some cases, to maintain the picture frame. A few quick examples to prove my point: in the first quotation, the English translator leaves the unconventional combination of détestable and problème unaltered, speaking of a ‘hateful problem’. In the second example, the visual aspect of the Rwandan French metaphorical expression s’attarder derrière les questions, is also preserved. In contrast, the linguistic variations of French are missing from the Dutch translation. In Dutch the ‘hateful’ problem Alphonse discusses becomes a ‘big’ problem (een groot probleem), and in the second example the translator opts once more for an idiomatic phrase: the men have to start killing ‘without asking questions’ (zonder je iets af te vragen).

Interestingly, these excerpts do not corroborate Venuti’s thesis that English-language translation is dominated by the ideology of ‘fluency’. Quite the contrary, the evocative and somewhat plastic language of the Hutu killers is rendered in marked English, and the specific syntax of Rwandan French is often preserved. In the Dutch text, readers will not ‘hear’ two distinct voices, since both the killers and the author speak the same idiomatic Dutch. The translator produces a fluent and easily readable text, and erases the ethical significance of the linguistic and stylistic variations of the French original. It is not clear why this strategy was adopted, but the result is evident: the text becomes stylistically ‘flat’.
In both the English and Dutch translations, however, the illusion of a ‘consonant’ and ‘coincident’ translation is shattered in places where the translator’s voice explicitly manifests itself and becomes ‘audible’ for the reader. Unlike the French version where Innocent’s voice is formally absent from the written transcriptions, in the English and Dutch texts there are a number of instances where the translator’s voice emerges as an individual discursive presence. Theo Hermans explains that this voice can be caught in cases of “performative self-contradiction” where the translator’s traditional self-denial “runs into obvious, textually traceable contradictions”. In this way, the translated text calls attention to the very act of translation. I will focus on “cases of self-reflexiveness and self-referentiality involving the medium of communication itself”, cases in which a translator intervenes in order to assure a smooth communication with the reading public and sensitizes the reader to the language motif.

At one moment, Hatzfeld notes that the killers deflect issues of responsibility by using an ‘evasive’ vocabulary. Instead of referring to the word ‘genocide’, they correlate their crimes to the ‘wars’ of previous generations. Likewise, the killers designate their victims in a way that downplays the significance of their own actions.

In the translated texts, the translators intervene in order to clarify or mimic how this is achieved in French. In English, the subtle difference between rescapé and survivant does not exist, so the translator adds a footnote to elucidate these terms for an English-speaking audience. The translation difficulty creates an awkward formulation in the actual text, where the narrator confirms that the killers never use the word ‘survivor’ but prefer words like... ‘survivor’. At this stage, readers realize that the voices in the text are not only Hatzfeld’s and the killers’ but the translators’ as well.

In the Dutch text, in contrast, the translator tries to reproduce the French lexical distinction by exploiting the original meaning of rescapé: a person who has been saved (gered). The text nevertheless lacks coherence: gered iemand (a person who has been saved) does not specifically refer to a catastrophe on a bigger scale, as rescapé does, and, as a consequence, the translation does not connote the men’s refusal to come to terms with the events.

So I have been arguing that writers who mediate the perpetrators’ discourse can resort to strategies that allow them to dissociate themselves from the position of the killer and inject the discourse with their own voice, thereby
actively ‘framing’ the narrative and producing a counter discourse which ‘compensates’ for their decision to give the perpetrators a platform. With *Une Saison de machettes*, Hatzfeld offers a visual ‘picture frame’ that provides a discursive outside from where he can safely comment on the perpetrators’ discourse without jeopardizing its value as an ‘authentic’ testimony. However, I believe Hatzfeld mismanages certain linguistic aspects of his project, including his unquestioned belief in Innocent’s ‘innocent’ and ‘faithful’ translations. The writing process, involving transcription, editing and several translations, gives rise to a highly constructed and polyphonic text. The intermingling of voices in this book should on no account devalue Hatzfeld’s project. The ‘framing’ activity, in my opinion, even underscores an ethical responsibility for writers who address the question of war and violence through literature and, moreover, communicate the voice of a perpetrator.