'The Act of Killing' Film Essay

Introduction:

Joshua Oppenheimer directed the film "The Act of Killing" with Christine Cynn and an anonymous Indonesian. The Act of Killing got released on June 28, 2013. The documentary focuses on the criminals behind the mass murders in Indonesia from 1965–1966. Nearly a million victims were massacred during the genocide due to their association with the local communist group.

The Act of Killing is an ethically challenging documentary film that looks at a nation where death squad leaders are revered as heroes. It addresses a complex subject that combines murder, reenactments, and the construction of imaginary worlds. Using dialogic theory, the filmmakers examine the interrelationships of different voices.

Over the course of its more than seven-year development, the movie incorporated a number of registers, sources, and cinematic subgenres. The film includes documentary footage of today's militarised protesters, interviews with the criminals/gangsters and their political allies, scenes of torture and interrogation reenacted, fantasy scenes, quotes from noir, musicals, and westerns, as well as scenes where the actors talk about the footage they just shot. Undoubtedly a unique picture, The Act of Killing warrants a separate appraisal.

Summary:

Historical context summary

Early in the 1960s, the largest party of its sort outside of the Communist bloc was the Indonesian communist party (Partai Komunis Indonesia, PKI), which had more than 3 million members and more than 18 million supporters. Under the Suharto regime, however, the military and communist forces were in a very precarious equilibrium. The so-called 30th September movement, a group with alleged ties to the political left, murdered six army generals in the fall of 1965, but their effort to overthrow the government and install a revolutionary council eventually failed. Suharto took advantage of his coup d'état on October 1, 1965, and immediately started a campaign against communists, claiming them of being the driving force behind the killings despite the fact that the identities of the true killers and their ultimate goals are still unknown to this day.

Film summary

The protagonist is Anwar Congo, a grade-four dropout, movie gangster, and founder member of the Pancasila Youth paramilitary group that carried out executions in 1965. At the time of the shooting, Congo was 72 years old. Anwar's filming partner, Herman Koto, was a gangster and paramilitary leader. The Pancasila Youth were under the leadership of Yapto Soerjosoemarno. The local paramilitary leader, Safit Pardede, also appears in Anwar's documentary. In 1965, Sunardi served as the killing squad's commander. Adi Zulkadry was

one of the 1965 executioners, and Suryono, Anwar's neighbour, plays a communist in Anwar's documentary.

Millions of Indonesians were slaughtered in the middle of the 1960s. During this time, the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) was the third-largest political force globally. Death squads engaged in both repression and mass executions throughout this reign. The Communist Party of Indonesia was banned following the massacre.

The documentary "The Act of Killing" emphasises the responsibility that society and killers share. By including both the voices of the criminals and the victims, it creates compelling confrontations. In addition, it calls into question the morality of murderers as well as how the media shapes our perception of the world.

Joshua Oppenheimer, the director of "The Act of Killing," conducted in-depth interviews with the victims' family members, survivors, and perpetrators of the Sumatra killings. He also went to Java and Bali. Genocide and Genre, a project of the British Arts and Humanities Research Council, provided funding for his study.

Although the film's subject matter is controversial, it is a very important film. It provides a new understanding of the Indonesian genocide. The film won several awards, including Best Documentary at the Bafta Awards and Best Documentary at the Berlin International Film Festival. It has also been screened in hundreds of Indonesian cities.

The documentary is based on the story of Anwar Congo, a former member of the death squads, as well as his friends. Their reenactments of the killings are mixed with details of the real events. The documentary is a powerful example of how film can be used to achieve social change.

Many people have commented about the film on blogs and social media. They suggest that the film does not adequately address the psychological impact of the killings.

Analysis:

American-British film director Joshua Lincoln Oppenheimer is known for his Oscar-nominated films, The Act of Killing (2013), which focused on the perpetrators, and The Look of Silence (2014), which was more attentive to the viewpoints of the victims and survivors. Joshua is based in Copenhagen, Denmark. Oppenheimer received a MacArthur fellowship in 2014 and was a Marshall Scholar in 1997.

Shalahuddin Siregar, a documentary filmmaker, argues that the ethical transgressions of "The Look of Silence" undermine the film's quest for justice. She recommends alternative methods of filmmaking.

Re-enactment

The Act of Killing (2013) is a meta-narrative investigation of a dreadful massacre. Specifically, the film examines the Indonesian political purge of 1965–1966, of "counter-performance," in which the military targeted suspected communists.

This documentary uses an innovative blend of fictional and documentary narrative strategies. It is based on a complex intertwining of the re-enactment of genocide and a meta-narrative of the banality of evil.

By creating an empathetic experience for the viewer, the film demonstrates the persistence of trauma. Moreover, it also challenges the spectator's norms of viewing films. As a result, the film demonstrates the power of art to influence and shape the course of violent acts.

While the film fails to offer a moral evaluation of the perpetrator's actions, it does challenge the audience's understanding of the cinematic genres of fiction and documentary. Additionally, the film makes use of a variety of textual references to cinematic genres. In doing so, it provides an opportunity to understand the psychology of an evil person.

The film also introduces a novel concept of temporality. Instead of merely showing the past, the filmmakers create a real-time reenactment of the killings in which they took part. They do so by filming a scene within the film.

The film also introduces the concept of "counter-performance." It is meant to be a defamiliarization of the spectral power of traumatic history.

A key component of the film is its doubling of cameras. Filmmakers use a camera to record interviews with gangsters, while another camera is used to record the gangsters' cameras. The film is then edited together into one final product.

Ultimately, the film is an important document in the philosophy of moral evil. It demonstrates the possibility of exploring the documentary genre as a whole while contributing to further research on re-enactments. Among other things, it reassesses the rights of memory and the rights of victims. Furthermore, it provides viewers with an encounter with unspeakable moral evil.

Finally, the film demonstrates that a reenactment of genocide can be considered a confession.

Performativity

In Joshua Oppenheimer's 2013 documentary, "The Act of Killing," the audience is presented with a performative reenactment of the execution of thousands of communists in Indonesia during the 1960s. It is a provocative film that questions the nature of documentary films as well as the politics of memory.

The Act of Killing was produced over ten years and contains more than 1,200 hours of interviews. The filmmaker's aim was to uncover ugly truths that were hidden under surreal

performances of violence. However, the film's most powerful insights come from places where agendas diverge.

While the film offers a gruesome account of the atrocities, it also poses an ethical challenge to audiences all over the world. This article attempts to interrogate the political aesthetics of "The Act of Killing" by exploring the ways in which the film uses cinematic, textual, and semiotic strategies.

Oppenheimer is an elderly filmmaker and psychoanalyst. He has authored several academic titles and appeared on television programs such as "The Daily Show" with John Oliver.

The Act of Killing is an evocative and haunting documentary. It reimagines a history of violence while highlighting the paradoxical behavior of perpetrators. Often, the same scene is split by the insertion of images shot in different years or in different locations. These visual techniques are meant to be effective but complicate the narrative.

Anwar Congo, one of the film's protagonists, was a leader of an Indonesian death squad. He was personally responsible for hundreds of killings. When asked by a moderator if he was afraid of reprisals from the relatives of those killed, he replied, "When they raise their heads, we wipe them out."

While the film is disturbing, it is an important contribution to understanding the construction of national and transnational cultural memories. Moreover, it can be read as a political response to the stagnant democratisation process in Indonesia. Nevertheless, it remains too committed to academic theories about the political power of performance.

The act of killing's most striking feature is its unusual reenactment. A number of reenactments are shot live rather than in a rehearsal setting.

A metaphysical inquiry into the human conscience

A documentary film called The Act of Killing sheds light on a terrible moment in history: the Indonesian genocide in the mid-60s. The documentary, by director Joshua Oppenheimer, reveals shocking admiration for death squads. But how does it affect social change? It has been screened in many countries and has won several awards.

"The Act of Killing" takes a different perspective from most films. It tells the story of a murder from the perspective of the killers rather than from that of the victims. This is the first documentary to do this. Instead of taking the victims' side, the film explores the mechanics of storytelling and how self-deception plays a role in violent acts.

It also raises questions regarding the ethics of the killers and their actions. In particular, there is an ongoing debate over whether they should be prosecuted for their crimes. Whether it is a political issue or simply a matter of personal conscience, the film argues that these perpetrators should be held responsible for their actions.

The film is one of the most powerful documentaries to ever hit the screen. It was nominated for an Oscar in 2014 and won at the Berlin International Film Festival. It has been screened in dozens of countries. Although it won't solve all of the world's problems, it does make us think.

Joshua Oppenheimer's film focuses on the perpetrators of the Indonesian genocide in the mid-60s, but it also raises questions about the moral responsibilities of journalists, politicians, and citizens. One of the most disturbing aspects of the film is the lack of an apology by its protagonists.

It was not an easy documentary to make. There were many moral dilemmas for the characters, and even the most empathetic among them were left doubting whether they had committed a sin. But the film is a vital piece of work. Despite its harrowing portrayal, it can humanise the killers and make them a part of our lives.

Even if it hasn't been a success in its own country, it has positively impacted other countries. Using film as a way to humanize the horrors of the genocide in Indonesia is an important step toward social change.

The official history of Indonesia is riddled with fabrications and prejudices towards communists that are presented as truths. One of the reasons so many students have not been critical of the nation's past is that the Indonesian educational system is still, in large part, characterised by an authoritarian heritage. It's hardly unexpected that the film made the audience angry and frustrated. Many people believed that the political elite had deceived them.

Their emotions were focused on both the spectacle on TV and the Indonesian power system. The murderers, who are aficionados of Hollywood musicals and film noir gangster flicks, decide to recreate their crimes by contrasting brutality and murder with dancing and vibrant colours. The movie turns ridiculous as well as frightening. It's entertaining, but with a morbid undertone. In fact, several viewers from countries other than Indonesia have laughed out loud at the film's utter silliness, which is a very different response from the Indonesian audience.

An audience member who attended the screening expressed his rage at Oppenheimer for allowing the murderers to go unchecked: "An alternative title of the film would be A Celebration of Killing." He said, “It is a series of festive occasions in which people are celebrating what they did in the past. And what they did in the past was kill other people. And that is not funny for us here, who more or less know what was going on. Maybe in other countries people don't know much about what happened here in the 1960s. For me, the documentary is about people celebrating the killing of others. That leads us to examine the banalities of evil.”

Another audience member questioned the movie's "happy ending," in which the primary actor, Anwar, a death-squad leader, seemed to feel regret for his crimes. The Act of Killing's happy ending, he said, didn't accurately reflect the situation in Indonesia since no one has

been held accountable for the deaths that occurred in 1965–1966. The viewer questioned whether Anwar was maybe playing for the camera and also believed that most viewers liked a satisfactory conclusion.

The man said, "Ever since Anwar was young, he wanted to feature in a movie," and he added that "movies are in his blood, and all of a sudden there is a film crew from abroad giving him a chance for it. Maybe his guilt is really true, but I think he is acting."

The screening room became silent as a result of this opinion, and the remark sparked conjecture regarding the protagonist's possible remorse about paying a poor homage to his beloved Hollywood. He was influenced by James Dean, John Wayne, Victor Mature, and Marlon Brando for his murderous methods and attire.

The many "killing genres"

In comparison to other film genres, The Act of Killing more frequently violates the rules of the macro-genre of documentaries and factual films (Austin and De Jong, 2008; Nichols, 2005; Rosen, 2001). It does this by posing a question regarding how the genre may affect the rewriting of reality as well as how it might revive certain remains of it.

The 'genres' of killing

The Act of Killing plays with film genres, but it also, and more importantly, plays with the conventions of the macro-genre of documentaries and nonfiction films (Austin and De Jong, 2008; Nichols, 2005; Rosen, 2001). It achieves this by raising concerns about the ways in which the genre as a whole may participate in the rewriting of a nation's cultural memory and history, in addition to the ways in which it might restore traces of truth.

A mixed imagination of violence

As a result, the movie is a deft juxtaposition of several cinematic styles that the perpetrators themselves have remembered, such as Hollywood gangster films from the 1960s. Anwar and his accomplice were real "movie gangsters," but prior to the killings, they were just regular thugs who dominated the black market for movie tickets and operated out of movie theatres. They enjoyed movies but also used them to fuel their imaginations. In order to replicate the movie stars they viewed as role models, they exploited the money they amassed throughout the genocide—often by blackmailing the victims before they killed them—to purchase posh gangster-style clothing, hats, cars, and alcohol. Furthermore, this genre supplied more than just a "style"; it also offered suggestions for methods of murder. Anwar Congo appreciated and loved these films so much that he "copied" their rapid and efficient method of using a metal wire to dispatch his victims. This is seen in one of the opening scenes of the movie, as Anwar reenacts the murder of "communists" by using a sharp metal wire to sever their throats from behind. The abandoned little detention facility is situated just in front of a movie theatre that once featured American films. Anwar refers to this location as the "blood office."

This documentary and the entirety of Oppenheimer's project examine the semiotic role played by visuals in how political violence is not only seen, and subsequently remembered, but also in how it is actually executed, and, as with the scenario cited above, practised. This is done by highlighting how Anwar's own act of murder is "stolen" from black-and-white Hollywood movies. How do the offenders' and survivors' respective worldviews come to be formed? The documentary pushes the viewer to consider the limitations, or possibly the potential, of its own pictures and the performance they give as another type of textual proof for the reconstruction of a history of communal violence that should serve the present as well as its future developments by pushing us to observe the fictitious "birth" of the real act of killing, as Anwar rehearses it repeatedly in order to be recorded. However, insofar as this history threatens to recur, the re-enactment is a preview, despite the fact that their murder is being reenacted live

The Act of Killing is not the first documentary to achieve this, but it must be acknowledged as the actual force of cinematic images has been at the centre of the works of many filmmakers of "post-traumatic cinema" (Hirsch, 2004), including Claude Lanzmann and Rithy Panh, to whom Oppenheimer (2013) himself has repeatedly referred in his writings. As was to be expected, both Lanzmann's Shoah and Panh's S21—the Khmer Rouge Killing Machine—show us either a Holocaust survivor (the iconic barbershop segment in Shoah) or a group of perpetrators (the former guards of the S-21 jail) reenacting what they did, but with some significant variances. In a fictitious barbershop, Abraham Bomba, a former barber, tells the story of the Holocaust while trimming the hair of a client. Abraham Bomba describes how he was compelled to trim the hair of women and children shortly before they entered the gas chamber. Instead, in the now-vacant rooms of S-21, the Khmer Rouge offenders repeated their abusive questioning methods and methods of treating the captives badly. Their re-enactments, however, are not rehearsals that, as we see in The Act of Killing, result in counter-performances capable of exposing the cinematic and cultural legacy of violent imagery along with any potential consequences these images and their cinematic genres may have for actual acts of violence. As Oppenheimer puts it, "One consequence of picturing the horror of genocide as necessarily transcending the cinematic picture is to disregard the meaning of that image in genocide itself". Additionally, this is a legacy that originates from the same West whose kind of capitalism was introduced to Indonesia and flourished in part as a result of the genocide.

Anwar Congo and his accomplice Hermann still refer to themselves as "movie theatre gangsters" today. Both were hired to assassinate the communists, who, in turn, were the ones who opposed the distribution of "American capitalist pictures," as Congo complains in the documentary. They mimicked and continue to emulate the brutality envisioned by Hollywood and enacted by eternal heroes, but they also blended it with their own culture and the ways it transforms Western genres into gory Gothic horror comics and cheesy melodramas. Due to the blurring of the lines between the genres of the heroic war picture, the gangster movie, and the horror and splatter film in today's cinema market, performances as a consequence are partially based on earlier imagery and Indonesian culture and partly on fantasies that were not accessible 50 years ago.

In addition to this blending of genres, the documentary also catches our attention with scenes that reference musical theatre and kitschy melodramas from Indonesia, which are included at the beginning and conclusion of the movie practically as opening and closing images. The melodic scenes are intended to represent the afterlife of the victims, whom the perpetrators—Congo and Herman in particular—believe to have sent directly to heaven, with torture and killing paradoxically turning into an act of "salvation" that they re-perform as victims. This is how the actor and "producers" of the play see it. It is Congo who sings and dances next to a waterfall, surrounded by young female dancers wearing traditional attire, playing the previously dead victim now contently enjoying his own paradise. As gratitude for "having sent them to paradise," one of these young women places a golden medal on Anwar's body. As Anderson so brilliantly puts it, "with the gloomy glittery attire of a well-off, middle-aged transvestite in a TV competition... there is a kind of hopelessness at work" in the same sequence, the huge and overweight Herman is shown doing an awkward dance while dressed as a communist lady. As a result, the entire documentary is transformed into an expanded intertextual parody that exposes the offenders' conflicted and unsettling imagination as well as their vocabulary of violence and dreams of salvation (without atonement).

Strategies of estrangement, acts of presence: The gaze of the film

But regardless of the genre they choose, the criminals are by no means talented performers. The repeated pauses are brought on by their bad acting, or by their continuous grinning and laughing, in the pitiful musical scene that has been re-edited in saturated colours as well as during the interrogations and acts of torture they recreate. The editing of The Act of Killing chooses to highlight all of these awkward shots and pauses, which results in an odd rhythm, montage of the movie that dwells on the perpetrators' gaffes and awkwardness, on their lack of skill as actors and as filmmakers (since they are made to appear as co-directors of the film-within-the-film). Oppenheimer does not at all try to genuinely direct them; instead, he lets them perform while filming their numerous rehearsals. Nevertheless, he is present, watching and documenting, and his camera "witnesses" the offenders' repeated acts of dull and senseless brutality or their tenuous beliefs in heaven and hell. To return to Oppenheimer's theory of the iterability of performances, the overall impression is that of a theatricality constrained by a citational logic (the way they killed, and the way they rewarded themselves) that is suspended between a specific history- this is what we did, and an actual present- this is what what we are doing, to investigate what has been done.

In documentary films, montage is a technique used to "clarify" the meaning of several sequences by putting them together in a type of "cause and effect" order (Breschand, 2002; Nichols, 2005). Thus, The Act of Killing's citational logic transforms into a potent meaning-making technique that forces us, as viewers, to consider what and who made that history possible. The narrative established by the film is also fractured and purposefully nonsensical due to the genre references, translations, and juxtapositions: the same scenario is frequently divided by the insertion of photos taken in various locations, with various subjects, and occasionally, even in several years. The narrative of the film-within-the-film, much alone

the timeline of the entire work, is difficult for spectators to follow, and we are also uncertain of the time period in which certain sequences were shot- which present is being filmed? As well as who the major characters are.

Conclusion:

The Act of Killing, as it was and is, leaves viewers with a pervasive feeling of alienation and estrangement that makes them consider their own position. The Act of Killing, the movie that it was and still is, creates a pervading feeling of alienation and dislocation that makes the viewer consider their own position. In Oppenheimer's film, this displacement plays the part of a moral sanction since it replicates the senselessness of the act of killing itself in the visual act. In general, a moral judgement serves as the essential interpretive framework for the facts, placing them into context and establishing the moral system that allows the observers to interpret them in the "right" way. This is difficult with The Act of Killing because it lacks a similar value frame and is replaced by a different kind of frame instead, one that is not a moral judgement but rather a sequence of allusions to other film genres and to the cinematic technique itself.

A multitude of linguistic references to other film genres act as a variety of framing devices, shifting the viewer's point of view, rather than an explicit moral assessment, to put the voice of the offender into perspective. What exactly do we see? The viewers are severely confused and challenged in their typical viewing and understanding of a movie using a well-established system of genres, associated narrative structures, and inscribed viewers. The narrative is disjointed, the temporality is shifted, the storyline is unclear, and there is constant overlap between reality and the fictitious reenactment. We are forced to examine and uncover an aesthetic vision that defines not only the past but also the very nature of the criminals, the immorality of what they did, and their impunity because of the genre juxtaposition, absence of linear narrative and temporality, and consequently the subtle shifts in rhythm and pace in the montage. The film they thought was going to be theirs never materialised, but it served the goal of a documentary that offers the audience a powerful aesthetic and political act of displaying that, as Annette Hill et al. (2018) have argued, creates an ethical issue for viewers around the world, requiring them in becoming involved with both the Indonesian genocide and the possibilities of expressing violence and documenting genocides more broadly. The Act of Killing, which was intended to serve as a political-aesthetic response to the lack of a public memory and the existence of a national narrative supported by bias and fabrications portrayed as facts, has now also been seen by millions of Indonesians through an underground network of distributors and social platforms, despite the government's and other anti-communist organisations' continued attempts to block its dissemination.

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