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## How do film festivals work? A conversation with Joshua Oppenheimer

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## How do film festivals work?: A conversation with Joshua Oppenheimer

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Few documentary filmmakers have been as widely discussed in recent years as Joshua Oppenheimer. He burst onto the scene in 2012 with *The Act of Killing*, one of the more powerful feature-length debuts of any genre in recent memory. The documentary is about politically-motivated, state-sponsored killings in the 1960s in Indonesia and the residue of this violence in the present day. This first feature film of Oppenheimer's caused controversy for its intimate depiction of carefree murderers and also its lurid, hallucinogenic use of reenactment as a way to inhabit the space between nonfiction and fiction. One of the many chilling and memorable scenes in the film features a smiling Anwar Congo, former leader of a notorious death squad, dancing a celebratory jig on the site where he massacred thousands of innocent people with impunity. The final shot of the film features Congo on that same site, heaving uncontrollably and choking on his inability to vomit up his guilt.

The aesthetic achievement of this film would seem undeniable – though aesthetics are a function of ethics, and many critics dismantled Oppenheimer's work for what they felt to be an irresponsible and perhaps dangerous endeavor. Some were put off by what seemed to be misleading editing patterns – as if cinema is not an art form of misdirection and reduction, particularly the documentary. We are long past the halcyon days when we could put our faith in Godard's maxim of cinema as truth 24 frames per second. The simplest and broadest critique leveled at the film was that the victims were missing from the picture. However, this is not entirely accurate, as on more than one occasion in the film we see those that suffered and continue to suffer under the reign of bloody tyrants. Oppenheimer addressed this perceived shortcoming with his follow-up effort *The Look of*

*Silence* (2014), which he says is not only a companion piece to *The Act of Killing* but that the two works actually form an indissoluble whole. The director finds his moral center in *The Look of Silence* with a quiet family man whose brother was among the victims, and who undertakes a quest to confront those responsible for his death.

At first glance *The Look of Silence* would seem to be a *mea culpa*. However, the truth is that Oppenheimer had already amassed the footage for his second film during the shooting of the first, as it would have been impossible to return to the scene of the crimes for a follow-up after he blew the lid on the ideological morass surrounding the present-day Indonesian political leaders. Of course, Indonesia has no global monopoly on ethical slippage and murderous state-building, and we know that the United States was complicit as an enabler of violent action in the country in the mid-1960s against those who were conveniently labeled ‘communists’. *The Look of Silence* can also be said to inhabit this space between the waking nightmare that is *The Act of Killing* and the trials of everyday reality, where eyes are slowly being adjusted to a clearer picture. Indeed, the protagonist of *The Look of Silence*, Adi Rukun, works as a travelling optometrist. The recurring motif of the film is Rukun checking the eyesight of those who committed the most egregious of sins, offering them visible evidence of their wrongdoing in as subtle a way as possible so as not to endanger his life or the lives of his family. This act of looking, this faltering vision, becomes not only a great metaphor for cinema itself but also a self-reflexive signifier for the audience encountering unknown atrocities, perhaps for the first time. As Harun Farocki famously stated in his film *Inextinguishable Fire* (1969), about another U.S.-enabled Southeast Asian massacre in the 1960s, ‘if we show you pictures ... you will close your eyes. First you will close your eyes to the pictures, then you will close your eyes to the memory, then you will close your eyes to the facts, then you will close your eyes to the entire context.’

Both of these documentaries have been widely distributed on the festival circuit, and Oppenheimer has made a mission out of traveling around the world to as many festivals as possible where his films are shown. Leaving the ethics and aesthetics of his films aside for the moment, I sat down for lunch with Oppenheimer in Belgrade (Serbia) in May 2015 for a discussion that touches on his early years as a film student, the hybrid turn in contemporary documentary cinema, and the politics and practice of film festival organization.

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**de Cuir:** You studied filmmaking at Harvard University and Dušan Makavejev was your professor. His work presents an interesting example of anti-traditional forms of documentary filmmaking. What sort of influence did he have on you?

**Oppenheimer:** His influence was so deep, so profound. I made my first film, *The Entire History of the Louisiana Purchase* (1998), when I was Dušan's student. In this film you can see the link to Dušan's work very clearly. Dušan is the pioneer of the space between nonfiction and fiction. His wildness, his bravery, his brilliance. He's the reason why I became a filmmaker. Now he and I are close friends. He is like family. Remember when I was in Belgrade two years ago with *The Act of Killing* (2012), and he told this absurd story about me coming to his house in the middle of the night and throwing pebbles at the window? Nonsense. Never happened!

**de Cuir:** He's the pioneer of the space between nonfiction and fiction!

**Oppenheimer:** It's called bullshit!

**de Cuir:** Can we speak of a documentary continuum at Harvard, from Robert Gardner to Makavejev to the Sensory Ethnography Lab to your work? Is there a lineage we can trace?

**Oppenheimer:** I don't know. Robert Gardner was very supportive of my work when I was there. He gave me a grant to make prints of my graduation film. This was so it could go to film festivals. You needed a film print at that time to go to festivals. The film used many different formats. It used 35mm archival footage, 16mm, Super 8, video. Robert Gardner had a poetic approach to nonfiction film, as in *Forest of Bliss* (1986). The Sensory Ethnography Lab came much later. I admire Lucien's [Castaing-Taylor] and Verena's [Paravel] *Leviathan* (2012) and I very much admire *Sweetgrass* (2009). Harvard is a place that nurtures exciting things, but I don't know if I can draw a line of continuity, because I was not there in the years between these different phenomena.

**de Cuir:** So *The Act of Killing* wasn't your festival debut? You had already been on the festival trail with your graduation film?

**Oppenheimer:** Yes, but it was a short film, so I didn't travel to so many places. It premiered in Telluride and then went to other festivals, but I didn't go to many of them. I did go to St. Petersburg and to Chicago. It won a prize in Chicago [Gold Hugo for Best Experimental Short Film]. *The Act of Killing* was really my first film, and my first documentary as such. *The Entire History of the Louisiana Purchase* was more of an experimental hybrid.

**de Cuir:** Some people would say that about *The Act of Killing*.

**Oppenheimer:** Yes, well, it is, but the narrative in my earlier film was actually fiction. In the same way you wouldn't say that *WR: Mysteries of the Organism* (Makavejev, 1971) is a documentary.

**de Cuir:** Let's go back to Telluride, because you also premiered *The Act of Killing* there. Telluride is not necessarily known as an important stop on the festival trail for documentary films. Or is it?

**Oppenheimer:** Well, it's too small to be an important stop as such. They only show 20 films, and they have to be North American premieres. *The Look of Silence* (2014) also had its North American premiere there [its world premiere was in Venice a few days earlier]. There are always a handful of documentaries in Telluride. It's not a documentary festival like, say, True/False.

**de Cuir:** Did you have a secret premiere in Telluride? Did they announce it in advance?

**Oppenheimer:** In Telluride they don't announce the program until the day the festival begins. True/False is modeled after Telluride, but they announce their program in advance. They have what are called 'secret screenings'. The journalists are asked not to report on them, but there's not many journalists at True/False anyway. People are even discouraged from referring to the titles of the secret screenings in conversation. You're supposed to say 'I love secret screening red', or 'you must see secret screening green'.

**de Cuir:** What do you think about this new wave of documentary film festivals and series that are highlighting the hybrid style, the split between true and false?

**Oppenheimer:** True/False, CPH:DOX ...

**de Cuir:** Art of the Real recently started in New York City and they position themselves as hybrid-focused.

**Oppenheimer:** Is that Thom Powers [documentary programmer, Toronto International Film Festival]?

**de Cuir:** I think the Lincoln Center is doing it. Anyway, they're interested in this artistic style, the not-so-simple split between fiction and nonfiction.

**Oppenheimer:** It's very healthy. Among the biggest threats documentary faces is a decline in serious investigative journalism. One of the nice things about documentarians is that we're engaged with the world. We're drawn to important problems and issues. If there are no journalists around those issues documentarians are often willing to step up and fill the gap. I don't blame documentarians, but it's sometimes at the expense of our art. It

creates a preconception in audiences that documentary is a form of advocacy journalism. These kinds of festivals we're talking about are important for supporting work that has a harder time, works that don't benefit from an advocacy model. That in turn helps shape audience tastes. Then they think documentary is something more interesting, more complicated than simply advocacy journalism.

**de Cuir:** Is the festival audience the only audience for documentary films? How important is it for documentaries to have this festival audience?

**Oppenheimer:** I think documentaries have a life beyond festivals. Many of the greatest films don't get picked up for theatrical distribution. That's a pity. That has to do with the challenges exhibitors face. But the films make their way onto online platforms, they become available in other ways, and that's important. I receive messages through Facebook from people in Ecuador, where my film has never had a public screening, saying they've seen my film. It's widely-available in pirate video stores. So we are not making any money from the film in Ecuador but I'm delighted Ecuadorians can see the film. I want to say something else about True/False. I think this is really one of the greatest film festivals in the world. It's in a town of 100,000 people [Columbia, Missouri] and they sell 60,000 tickets. That's amazing. And it isn't a festival audience that's going.

**de Cuir:** It's a college town [the University of Missouri is located in Columbia].

**Oppenheimer:** But it's not the college community that goes. Students don't go.

**de Cuir:** They don't?

**Oppenheimer:** No. The university staff and their families go, but that is far from the majority of the audience. This year the festival gave a prize to Adi Rukun [the protagonist of *The Look of Silence*]. It's the only prize in the documentary world for the subject of a film [the True Life Fund]. They raised the money for this prize through the community. I went to speak at all of Columbia's high schools. There are three in the city. I went to speak at a mega church. The day I went, the Sunday at the festival, it was half empty because the pastors had encouraged everyone to go see films at True/False instead of coming to church. This is not a normal festival audience. And this is not meant to be critical of any other festival. I've been to world capitals for premieres of my films. I've been in venues with a capacity of 800 people and had only 300 audience members. At True/False every screening is

at capacity. Sold out. And my screenings were all in theatres seating over 1,000 people. That's very special.

**de Cuir:** If you were building the ideal documentary film festival what would it look like?

**Oppenheimer:** True/False is a model. Some of the bigger festivals do a really beautiful job. Berlin and Toronto do a great job of selling out every documentary they bring in. *The Act of Killing* was in the [Berlinale] Panorama and it won an audience award there – something I never imagined possible for a film so dark, and that's a testament to the way they build their audience. These are peoples' festivals. The festivals that move me the most are the ones that show work in challenging environments. I think festivals that are bringing documentaries to places that they normally would not go, those are the ones to study. You'll learn from those festivals. True/False is one of those. You learn what it takes to excite a community for a kind of expression they've never seen before.

**de Cuir:** What about the ancillary events at many documentary film festivals?

**Oppenheimer:** We need to re-think some of the things that festivals do. Like pitching forums. Is this a good idea? Maybe it was a good idea before Skype and online links, when it was expensive to travel and meet all the commissioning editors. But many of the commissioning editors have almost no money to give to films. In light of this, pitching forums should reconsider their rules. They should only invite commissioning editors who are in a position to, say, commit at least \$35,000 three times over the course of the forum. And there should be no public debate after a pitch. Like a film festival jury, there should be discretion so that potentially important, magical films are not killed by commissioning editors who butcher a project publicly – even though they only have a couple thousand dollars to commit! I think the Sheffield Doc/Fest model of private meetings is probably better for everybody. That said, a certain number of panel seats, perhaps a third, should be reserved for commissioning editors who have less money but are voted by filmmakers as instrumental for building support for difficult projects. The vote could be open to those whose projects have been accepted to the forum and to those who participated in the previous two years.

**de Cuir:** Is the economic model of festivals compatible with the economic model of documentary production, distribution, and exhibition? Is there something that should be improved?

**Oppenheimer:** When you're on the festival circuit, if you don't have a film that's winning lots of prizes you're not being paid. And you can't work on anything else. That's a problem. At True/False I wandered into my room and there was an envelope on my desk with my name on it. I opened it and there was a check for \$500. I thought it was a mistake, but it turned out this was the director's payment. Not only do they fly everyone there, they pay everyone to be there. I know that's not possible in many countries. That's a problem. Certainly the ecological economy of festivals is disastrous. I mean, flying all those people in. I don't think it matters so much to audiences if they get a Q&A by Skype or in person.

**de Cuir:** Skype isn't always dependable though. It fails.

**Oppenheimer:** And flights get cancelled. Facetime and Google Hangout seem more reliable. Every film festival could get access to a laptop. Every filmmaker can get access too. You would save thousands of dollars on flights, thousands on hotels, thousands on food and hospitality, and your carbon footprint would be much lower. And the filmmakers can continue to work on other things. You can even do master classes that way. It's not either/or. You can bring in fewer guests.

**de Cuir:** Have you ever rejected an invitation to a film festival? What would be a reason for doing such a thing?

**Oppenheimer:** A festival in Iran invited my film and I was careful about it. I called Mohsen Makhmalbaf and asked him, because I respect him very much. He said I should show the film there because a cultural boycott would merely serve to deprive people of the chance to think through the necessary issues the film raises. I accepted that invitation. Sometimes I've had to reject invitations that would preclude a more influential premiere elsewhere. I rejected an invite from a very prestigious festival because they wanted to program *The Act of Killing* as a midnight movie. It was at the beginning of the film's life and I didn't want it to be pigeonholed as a cult movie. It is wild, but the wildness is deadly serious. It probably should not be seen as Anwar Congo watched movies back in 1965 – stoned at midnight.

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Oppenheimer has maintained a relatively low profile since this interview was recorded in May 2015. His most recent notable appearance was as a member of the international jury of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Venice Film Festival in 2016. He and his colleagues awarded the Golden Lion for Best Film to *The Woman Who Left* by Lav Diaz, a Filipino filmmaker quickly ascending the ranks of



international auteurs making an impact on the festival circuit. Of course the Philippines borders Indonesia, and Diaz' newest feature deals with the power and privilege of the elite and the violence imbricated in their existence. These factors bring it close to the sensibility of Oppenheimer and his capital achievements in documentary cinema.

I continued my lunch with Oppenheimer with a discussion of film festival studies as a burgeoning academic discipline. He was first skeptical of the concept, in fact admitting that he had never heard of it prior to our talk. Upon further contemplation he thought it could be an important practical field, particularly as to how festivals interact with local politics, culture, and economics. Indeed these are important paths forward for film festival studies. Regarding documentary studies, the classical debates surrounding ethics and hybridized aesthetics are more relevant now than ever. Oppenheimer's significant interventions into those debates loom large as accomplishments to be reckoned with in the future development of international documentary cinema.

Greg de Cuir Jr (University of Arts Belgrade)