Lucien van Liere

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ABSTRACT

In The Act of Killing (Joshua Oppenheimer, GB/DK/NO/ 2012), Joshua Oppenheimer searches for humanity by assessing the rituals, routines and words of former perpetrators who participated in the 1965/66 genocide in Medan, Indonesia. This article puts The Act of Killing in the context of Oppenheimer's writings on film and violence and explores how his film negotiates humanity by working with a missionary paradigm of expressive guilt that serves not only the director but also a critical audience to give a happy ending.

KEYWORDS

Perpetrators, re-enactment, Indonesian genocide 1965/66, Joshua Oppenheimer, ghosts, archaeological performance

BIOGRAPHY

Lucien van Liere is Associate Professor at Utrecht University, where he teaches religious studies in the Faculty of Humanities. His academic work explores the relationship between religion, representation and violence. He has published on subjects ranging from the Ambon civil war to the place of Islam in secular politics and the future of religious studies.

PRELUDE AND QUESTION

For Joshua Oppenheimer cinema is a means and an object of research.[1] Moviemaking, he asserts, can be understood as a research tool and a research method. In his movie The Act of Killing, which is about the perpetrators of the mass

1 Oppenheimer 2009.

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killings in Indonesia in 1965/66, the filmmaker becomes a therapeutic researcher looking for answers to questions about humanity, responsibility and authenticity. Through his encouragement of former killers to make a movie about the Indonesian purges, the protagonists become mediators of their own truths, with Oppenheimer, and behind him a global public, as moral researchers.

For Oppenheimer, the movie addresses a general issue about what happens if killers are not convicted, when a state of "impunity" – a term he repeatedly mentions – suggests the killings were justified and subjects collective memory to a strategy of forgetting. What Oppenheimer expects to see and hear (his amazement about what happened in Indonesia), what he wishes former killers to express (regret, confrontation) and how he understands the link between a violent past and an adjured present expressed in the gestures, rituals and routines of his protagonists form a soteriological perspective on humanity.

My object of study is The Act of Killing, along with Oppenheimer's effort to restore the humanity of the killers through re-enactment and confrontation. I will argue that Oppenheimer believes in a humanity that reveals itself in revulsion at killing. This belief not only leads to the decision to follow former death-squad leader Anwar Congo on his way to "regret", but also opens up the missionary plot of the movie. The director sees the absent victims still present as "ghosts", haunting through the silence, grammar and routines of the killers. The unease created by their presence leads Congo to a "conversion" in front of the camera. For Oppenheimer, an act of killing seems to be a violation of the sacredness of human life. Such an act demands remorse. The discovery of humanity in The Act of Killing is related to this conversion of Congo. The other killers, however, like Adi Zulkadry, do not show any remorse in the film. In following Congo, a clear decision seems to have been made, reflecting a missionary trajectory that leads to an expression of regret as a confession of guilt. Impressive gangster Koto and intellectual former killer Zulkadry drop out of the movie towards the end. Oppenheimer's film circulates around representations of the banality of killing with impunity and concludes with the conversion of the sinner as an answer to historical pessimism.

CONCISE HISTORIC TABLEAUX

Although Oppenheimer chooses to neglect the historical frame within which the killings happened and the creation of the killers' impunity (covered in only a few lines at the beginning of the film), a snapshot of the historical background can explain the atrocity-silencing situation in which Oppenheimer found his subjects. The absence of a clear historical context lives up to one of the goals of the movie, namely to understand these killings not only in light of Indonesian politics in particular, but also as a wide-ranging reflection on human nature in general.

During the night of 30 September/1 October 1965, soldiers belonging to the Tjakrabirawa Regiment, Sukarno's elite guards in Jakarta, staged a military coup.[2] The putschists took control of the national radio and announced they had prevented a coup against the president. That night six generals were taken from their homes and executed. Other departments within the military under the leadership of General Suharto, relatively unknown at the time, quickly gained control of the city and the radio waves. The coup is generally referred to as the *Gerakan 30 September* (The 30 September Movement, or the G30S).

Because of the chaos in the days immediately following the coup, the Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI – Communist Party of Indonesia) had trouble choosing sides, and partly as a result of the clumsy response of the PKI, the central committee of the party was blamed for orchestrating the coup. In the years before the coup, the PKI had been a vociferous presence in Indonesian public space and its growing political influence over President Sukarno had been viewed with distrust. A number of influential generals in the Indonesian military had seen the PKI as a real political threat. In parts of the country (East Java, for example) where a strong PKI had clashed with local leaders and landlords over land reform, tension involving branches of the PKI was tangible. The PKI proved too reluctant to condemn the coup, with some regional PKI departments even openly supporting the takeover and seizing control locally.

When the communist newspaper *Harian Rakjat* published a cartoon in favour of the coup, many anti-communists took their chance and blamed the whole party.[3] Rumours about the sexual torture of generals carried out by *Gerwani*, the women's organisation allied to the PKI, spread rapidly. A massive anti-communist hate campaign was launched and was enthusiastically received, especially by Indonesia's many religious youth groups like ANSOR, the youth organisation of the Muslim Nahdlatul Ulama on East Java and the Pemuda Pancasila, a nationalist movement in North Sumatra, where Oppenheimer would find his killers forty years later.[4] A ban on communist news media followed, while the population was whipped up against communists and communist sympathisers. As rumours proliferated, tension increased. Communists were depicted as malevolent.[5]

Many people participated in the mass killings that followed, as perpetrators, bystanders and accusers. With the military as facilitators, the killings were predominantly carried out by civilians who were members of youth groups and paramilitary groups. The vehemence of the victorious killers correlated with the paralysis of their many victims in an example of the process described by Randall Collins

2 Anderson 2012, 270.
3 Hughes 1967, 77.
4 Anderson 2012, 273.
5 See Collins 2008, 118.

as "asymmetrical entrainment".[6] Its use of civilians as killers was viewed as one of the main successes of the early New Order regime. General Sarwo Edhi, who was responsible for "pacifying" Central and Eastern Java, explained: "We decided to encourage the anti-communist civilians to help with the job. In Solo we gathered the youth, the nationalist groups, the religious organizations. We gave them two or three days' training, then sent them out to kill the Communists."[7] Hughes noted hardly a year after the killings that these civilians had killed with "fanatical relish".[8]

Estimates of the number of people killed varies between 300,000 and 2 million.[9] After the genocide, communism was portrayed as a great threat to Muslim, Hindu and Christian communities, taking up the atheist feature of classic communism that had never characterised the PKI. Tales of black lists found in communist homes circulated and continued to inflame anti-communist sentiment long after the genocide.

SILENCE

During and after the atrocities, the government organised systematic discrimination against family members, with the children of murdered or imprisoned PKI members excluded from schooling. In this way the next generation was discouraged from writing about the genocide, a strategy manifest in The Act of Killing (see figure 1). "Communist" became a term of abuse and being a communist was officially prohibited. The government set the terms by which the atrocities were to be remembered by emphasising that the killings had prevented a genocide of the Indonesian population being carried out by the communists. With many people having had a role in the killings, as perpetrators or bystanders, few people in Indonesia were prepared to raise their voices in favour of the victims. The genocide took place at the height of the Cold War, which explains the lack of international pressure. Other than China, countries were reluctant to take the side of the Indonesian communists.[10] Mass graves were many and became uncanny, haunted places.[11]

Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI

To model collective memory around the atrocities, Suharto's New Order regime sponsored a movie about the killings. In 1984, Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI

6 Collins 2008, 103.
7 Hughes 1967, 151.
8 Hughes 1967, 151; see Collins 2008, 119.
9 Cribb 1990, 12.
10 Mehr 2009.
11 See Sukanta 2014, 24.

(Treachery of G30S/PKI, Arifin C. Noer, ID 1984) was screened in Indonesian cinemas. The movie was a docudrama that became obligatorily educational material for primary and secondary schools and was understood as the central bonding narrative of New Order Indonesia. A clear effort to establish a collective memory, the movie contained ghastly portrayals of the communists as evil, sadistic and sexist torturers, while Suharto was depicted as a calm and strong leader. In The Act of Killing, Congo recalls that the movie was indeed obligatory viewing and was traumatic for younger children. Yet although he realises the movie was made to demonise the communists, he makes clear that it felt somehow good to have killed the horrid people in the movie.[12] Even for a killer like Congo, the movie seems to have distorted memories of the atrocities.

The regime was very successful in its efforts to construct a collective memory about the G30S. A few years into the post–New Order era (Suharto "stepped down" in May 1998), *Tempo Magazine* conducted a poll of 1,101 secondary school students in Indonesia's bigger cities. To the question of where they had learned about the G30S, 90 per cent responded "film".[13] For many, the film had been the primal gate to knowledge about the G30S. The movie shows blood flowing from the heroic generals. Oppenheimer and Michael Uwemedimo analysed the film in an article in which they explored the meaning of the extreme violence: "The film graphically demonstrates the way in which New Order history at once conjures the PKI as a spectral power and condenses that power in spectacular images of violence, so as to claim that power for the shadowy techniques of state terror. The spectral subsists in the spectacle."[14] Indeed, the generals depicted as victims in Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI mimic the alleged communist victims of the G30S. Congo remembers his killings in light of the film, and claims that he went much further with his victims than is shown in the movie.[15] There is, however, no hint at the mass killings, which makes the blood in the film a twisted reference to the killing machines. The victims of G30S remain unnamed, but – as Oppenheimer and Uwemedimo rightfully observe – the massacres haunt the movie. The film, they assert, "exists almost wholly to justify the massacres and the regime founded upon them".[16]

With collective memory intended as bonding memory, the narrative of the communist threat linked Indonesians to their past. General Suharto and his response to the imminent threat became the foundational myth of the nation. Being anti-communist meant being a good Muslim or good Christian, with the

12 Cf. scene 00:37:25 in The Act of Killing (Joshua Oppenheimer, GB/DK/NO/ 2012, dir. cut).
13 Heryanto 2012, 225.
14 Oppenheimer/Uwemedimo 2012, 290.
15 Cf. scene 00:37:30 in The Act of Killing (Joshua Oppenheimer, GB/DK/NO/ 2012, dir. cut).
16 Oppenheimer/Uwemedimo 2012, 290.

communists depicted as atheists. Only since Suharto stepped down have careful efforts been made to understand what happened at academic,[17] artistic[18] and social[19] levels.

SCREENING THE GENOCIDE IN THE POST-SUHARTO ERA

In post-1965 movies, allusions to the atrocities are rare, even absent. Narratives that ran counter to PENGKHIANATAN G30S/PKI were dangerous to tell. Since the collapse of the New Order regime in 1998, however, the atrocities have been themes in some Indonesian drama-movies and documentaries. Some of these films narrate stories that are carefully situated against the background of the 1965 coup and the subsequent purge, but without addressing the mass killings directly.

GIE (Riri Riza, ID 2005) follows Soe Hok Gie, an independent and critical student. The PKI is represented by Gie's friend Tan, who is seduced by the party not knowing what awaits him. Although Gie urges his friend to relinquish his ties with the PKI, Tan does not listen. Another example is the intense movie PUISI TAK TERKUBURKAN (UNBURIED POETRY; released in English as A POET: UNCONCEALED POETRY, Garin Nugroho, ID 2000). The film was nominated for the Silver Screen Award for Best Asian Feature Film and won the Silver Leopard Video Award in the year 2000 at the Locarno International Film Festival. This movie shows the experience of Ibrahim Kadir, played by Kadir himself, as a prisoner falsely accused of being a communist. His fellow inmates are communists who are executed one by one. The movie is a tense way of witnessing and – in the end – challenging the violence of the New Order regime.

Other undertakings are the work of Putu Oka Sukanta from the *Lembaga Kreativitas Kemanusiaan* (Organisation for Human Creativity, LKK). Sukanta, who was imprisoned on account of his membership of an organisation allied to the PKI, has made an enormous effort to give the victims of the G30S and their children a voice, but, as Ariel Heryanto observes, the films made by the LKK have had limited impact owing to their subject matter, the people in the movie (most are elderly) and the style of delivery.[20] Among the very small number of movies addressing the violence directly are PUTIH ABU-ABU: MASA LALU PEREMPUAN (GREY WHITE: WOMEN'S PAST, Syarikat, ID 2006) and the documentary movie MASS GRAVE (Lexy Rambadeta, ID 2002). The former film was made by secondary-school students and contains six short movies of interviews with

17 Luhulima 2006; Ling 2010; see also: Hughes 2002; Roosa 2006.
18 Latief 2000.
19 Anderson 2012, 274.
20 Heryanto 2012, 228.

people opining about the G30S.[21] Heryanto notes that the movie was produced by Syarikat, a Yogyakarta-based NGO related to the Nahdlatul Ulama. Because Nahdlatul Ulama organisations participated in the killings, this production can be seen as "one of the first initiatives by the Muslim communities with culpability in the 1965–66 killings to foster reconciliation", Heryanto writes.[22] Mass Grave is one of the first documentary movies on the G30S to include original material and footage of strong anti-communist sentiments.[23] The movie contains interviews with victims, survivors and witnesses and shows how the reburial of relatives killed during the purge meets resistance from local Muslim organisations in Temanggung. Most of these movies challenge the violence itself, but not the powers that drove the purges nor the people that took up, in some regions so enthusiastically, the acts of killing.

WORKING TOWARDS THE FILM

With a large anonymous Indonesian crew and docu-masters Werner Herzog[24] and Errol Morris[25] as its executive producers, The Act of Killing is an effort to make suffering visible through the boastful memories of killers who were active during the Indonesian genocide of 1965/66 in Medan. The film shows former killers challenged to make a movie about how they killed their victims. With the reenactment set in a context of impunity the movie shows how the gentle-going protagonist Anwar Congo is confronted by his memory through role-play. Two years later, Oppenheimer made a follow-up film, The Look of Silence (Joshua Oppenheimer, ID/DK 2014), about victims confronting the killers of their families while these killers are still in power. For this later movie, Oppenheimer followed Adi Rukun, an optometrist who confronts the men who killed his brother. Both films provoke their audiences with the uncanny or, using Oppenheimer's term, with the "ghosts" of history.

The Act of Killing is not Oppenheimer's first project on the Indonesian genocide of 1965/66. In 2003 together with Christine Cynn he produced The Globalization Tapes (ID 2003), directed with a large local crew. Part of the film was shot at a plantation on Sumatra by the plantation workers themselves. The movie portrays the lines between world capital on the one hand and inhuman sacrifices made by workers on the other, but a second interpretative trajectory considers the local history of the G30S and its aftermath, with former killer Shar-

21 Heryanto 2014, 96.

22 Heryanto 2012, 229.

23 Heryanto 2014, 102–103.

24 Cf. From One Second to the Next (Werner Herzog, USA 2016); Lo and Behold: Reveries of the Connected World (Werner Herzog, USA 2013).

25 Cf. The Fog of War (Errol Morris, USA 2003).

man Sinaga and with workers discussing what happened and why. At one point the camera's focus is on Sinaga as he recounts how he tortured people while his wife laughs and encourages him in the background. Sinaga enthusiastically boasts about how he killed, narrating grisly details while the camera moves to a young girl (Sinaga's granddaughter?) sitting at the table. In a close-up, the girl looks back, somewhat shocked or amazed (00:25:52) and while the suggestion is made that her amazement might be because of Sinaga's horrific story, the girl is looking straight into the camera, which might be the reason for her surprised face. The producers seem to have been seeking to contrast the killing narrative of Sinaga and the innocence of a subsequent generation that has grown up with the G30S genocide normalised. The discussions of the workers, who share a local context with Sinaga and killers like him – they are probably referring to Sinaga when they speak about "the old man" – focus less on Sinaga's crimes than on the causes of the killings: the massacre was because of businessmen, they recall (00:25:36), and the killer Sinaga is obviously not a businessman.

METHODOLOGY

In 2004 Oppenheimer defended his PhD thesis at the University of the Arts London.[26] His thesis shows a fascination similar that which lies behind The Act of Killing. Based on interviews he conducted in Indonesia, his thesis comprises more than 100 hours of video. These interviews contain "revelatory primary research" into the Indonesian genocide, the author claims.[27] Oppenheimer describes his project as a new model for film-making which he terms "archaeological performance". With this approach, he desires to go "beyond" the more interview-based approaches of works such as Shoah (Claude Lanzmann, FR 1985) or Hôtel Terminus: The Life and Times of Klaus Barbie (Marcel Ophüls, BRD/FR/USA 1988). Archaeological performance covers a form of movie-making in which a buried historical event is restaged with historical actors. Oppenheimer recorded, "this method opens a process of simultaneous *historical excavation* (working down through strata), and *histrionic reconstruction* (adding layers of stylised performance and recounting). An 'archaeological performance' entails successively working with, and working through, the gestures, routines, and rituals that were the motor of the massacres."[28]

This description of archaeological performance has a focus on gestures, routines and rituals related to the killings. In Oppenheimer's description, the method works "with" and "through" these phenomena, as if the filmmaker is

26 Oppenheimer 2004.
27 Oppenheimer 2004, 5; 10.
28 Oppenheimer 2004, 79.

digging into discursive memories and revealing a past hidden in the present. Archaeological performance assumes that memories have historical layers. Oppenheimer wants to "work down" through these layers by "working up" what he calls "histrionic stagings". This method of working down and up at the same time can lead to the deconstruction of "scripts, clichés and generic codes that inflect the historical performances being excavated".[29] Everyday language is insufficient to express this movement up and down, to reveal the subject's link to the past. With the killers still in power, victims, survivors and killers speak about what happened in a fashioned language that reveals the modalities of the dominant power structures. In footage on the killings near Snake River in North Sumatra, two former killers speak about the murders as routine. In an article on this material published in 2012, Oppenheimer and Uwemedimo observe sharply that these killers, Amir Hasan Nasution and Inong Syah, explained the routine of the killings, not particular killings: "Even the performances that seem most graphic appear not to be rendered as singular explications of specific events, but rather … as rehearsal of *genres* whose register is the graphic".[30] It is as if the many victims have imploded into a single ritual routine. Oppenheimer's work wants to break through this routine. By "deconstructing" gestures and language, this "method" breaks through this singular mode of talking about the killings by making them more visible. Filmmaking is thus a method of research while at the same time an object of research.

THE IDIOM OF GHOSTS

Oppenheimer walks a speculative path in adapting a language of spectres, ghosts and powers. This is, he claims, the language with which the participants in the movie articulate the archaeological performance of their history in the interviews:

> In the villages of Serdang-Bedagai Regency where the films are being made, extermination and the dead are inevitably thought through the idiom of ghosts, and explored through spirit possession (kemasukkan) and the calling of ghosts through a spirit medium (panggil roh). The prominence of spectrality and ghosts, as discursive register, evidences the hold exerted by the dead on the speech of the living. The language of ghosts figures the spectral not merely as a discursive construction but as a populated realm, and it is precisely this fact that allows us, in this writing, to trace the interaction between the massacres as spectre, on the one hand, and the quotidian, on the other; between *spectral forces* and actual force.[31]

29 Oppenheimer 2004, 244.
30 Oppenheimer/Uwemedimo 2012, 293 [italicized in original text].
31 Oppenheimer 2004, 46.

In a contradictory sense, because they were killed the dead are not dead. In Oppenheimer's view, the ghosts create relationships, not entities, that pop up in the discursive registers of the killers. But while for Oppenheimer these ghosts haunt through these discursive registers, for many Indonesians these ghosts are as real as the space they inhabit and they cause fear. "Haunted grounds" related to the G30S can be found all over Java, Bali and parts of Sumatra. People still consider these places haunted. In a collection of victim and perpetrator narratives, Sukanta writes, "Many people do not dare to plant things on these grounds. Sometimes people living nearby hear screams in the middle of the night in these places".[32]

The link between past and present is mediated by the relationship with ghosts. In The Act of Killing, Zulkadry does not doubt the ghostly existence of the murdered communists (*sekarang yang tinggal roh* – what is left of them are ghosts).[33] Oppenheimer takes up this language about ghosts as revelatory and as related to the missing community. He notes that *dukuns* are afraid of communicating with the ghosts of the 1965/66 victims.[34] These ghosts have become hungry as a result of the attitude of Suharto's New Order regime that requires that the dead are not mentioned and not given names, that no reference is made to the killings and that the children of communists are not allowed to learn to read and write. Hence the deep fear, even among the younger generation, of a resurgence by the communists.[35]

While Oppenheimer was working on his PhD project, in April 2004 world media covered the Abu Ghraib affair. In the "Director's Statement" of The Act of Killing, he reports being confronted by the photos of Abu Ghraib. He was struck by pictures of American soldiers smiling at the photographer while posing before their humiliated victims, with smiles on their faces and giving a thumbs-up, as if expecting approval from the (American?) public. Oppenheimer writes that the most unsettling thing about these pictures is "not the violence they document, but rather what they suggest to us about how their participants wanted, in that moment, to be seen. And how they thought, in that moment, they would want to remember".[36] In an interview with Henry Barnes on the impact of The Act of Killing in the United States, Oppenheimer notes about Abu Ghraib: "I made this film in pace with this evolving nightmare in the US in which torture was being not just condoned, but celebrated."[37] What Oppenheimer wants to show using the metaphor of ghosts is not limited to the Indonesian context but draws upon social and political consequences of indifference towards acts of violence.

32 Sukanta 2014, 24.
33 Cf. scene 00:48:22 in The Act of Killing (Joshua Oppenheimer, GB/DK/NO/ 2012, dir. cut).
34 Oppenheimer 2004, 119.
35 Heryanto 2012, 225.
36 Oppenheimer, Director's Statement.
37 Barnes 2013b.

The Act of Killing is set in Medan, a highly multi-ethnic Indonesian city in North Sumatra.[38] The film follows a group of "preman", or free men, around former death squad leader Anwar Congo. Back in the 1960s, these men were fans of Marlon Brando, John Wayne and other American movie stars. They saw themselves as cowboys, selling and reselling cinema tickets. In Medan, this group was deeply involved in the killings of thousands of "communists", as they claim them to have been, and Chinese. The film does not provide information or tell stories but challenges the perpetrators to re-enact the killings they performed while Oppenheimer is behind the camera. The result is, in Oppenheimer's words, a "non-fiction fever dream".[39]

The film director was initially struck primarily by the boasting of these killers. He recalls filming in 2004 former death-squad leaders who demonstrated to him how in less than three months their squads had slaughtered more than 10,000 people in a clearing by a river. That experience inspired him to try to understand such bragging and how it was related to impunity. In Oppenheimer's own words, quoted in the *New York Times*, "Here are human beings, like us, boasting about atrocities that should be unimaginable."[40]

For Oppenheimer, and for many people watching his work on the G30S, this boasting appears as a strange ritual of exorcism. In The Act of Killing Oppenheimer searches for moments when ghostly apparitions are articulated non-discursively. To find these moments, he focuses on "symptoms", so on shivering, uneasiness, angriness, loud voices, laughter and silences. For him, symptoms are "telling". He understands his role as a cinéaste as similar to that of a midwife, as he explores "how to massage reality so that it gives birth to those metaphors that are immanent in it".[41] His perspective is, however, more similar to that of a priest, as I will show in my analysis of Scene Three below. Moments and symptoms hidden in these metaphors make visible how people cope with the "good" killing of "bad" people, as the Suharto New Order regime has portrayed this history for decades. The boasting of the cocky killers is such a symptom. Boasting, Oppenheimer claims, is a means of hiding. It means "desperately running away from the guilt", he told *kunstundfilm.de* during an interview.[42] Silence in the movie is another symptom, especially present in the director's cut. These moments of silence, Oppenheimer assumes, are "haunted landscape shots". The absent victim seems to appear in the silence, as if this victim "haunts every frame of the film". This haunting becomes tangible in portrayals of the dead who are continually addressed, as cut-off heads, bleeding victims or happy mur-

38 Anderson 2012, 274–279.
39 Louisiana Channel.
40 Rochter 2013.
41 Louisiana Channel.
42 Barnes 2017, *kunstundfilm.de*.

Fig. 1: Suryono telling his story. The Act of Killing (Joshua Oppenheimer, GB/DK/NO 2012), 00:55:28 director's cut.

dered communists in the hereafter. While victims are present in silence or as the haunting frame, in Scene One, discussed below, a victim speaks and appears in the midst of the boastful killers.

I will not discuss the plot of the film but instead have selected three scenes in which the ghosts become tensely sensible.

SCENE 1: SURYONO'S STORY

When the killers are asked to "show" how they interrogated, martyred and murdered communist suspects, they discuss how they are going to perform those acts. "It must be exactly as we have done it", one person says. Then comes Suryono's story (00:49:11–00:52:45).[43] Suryono is one of the "neighbours" helping on the film and earlier we saw him playing a harsh interrogator. Suryono's narrative is interesting because it is a clear effort to break through the routine of abstract killing and demonstrates how artefacts of memory are reburied once they have gone "up" through performance and gesture.

Suryono tells about a time when he was 11 or 12 years old. He woke to a knock on the door in the middle of the night, which his stepfather answered. The only thing Suryono remembers is hearing his stepfather screaming for help (*tolong!*). His terrified family did not dare to go to the door. The next morning he found his stepfather killed and cut up, crammed in an oil drum. Together with his grandfather, the boy took the man's body to the roadside and buried him "like a goat" (*seperti kambing*). "Nobody dared to help us", Suryono recalls. He goes on to tell how his family was forced to move to a slum because of their communist "contagion" and how he never was allowed to learn to read and write.

Suryono tells this story to people who had murdered hundreds of individuals like his stepfather without legal consequence. Hearing him narrate the events

43 See van Liere 2015, 116–117.

surrounding his stepfather's murder and watching the gestures of his body, it seems as if he is telling a good joke. He makes fun of the strange looking limbs of his tortured and murdered stepfather, laughing continually. Suryono wants his story to be told, even played, and hastens to add, "This is no critique". The killers listen patiently and after he has finished his story, they argue that the movie cannot contain every story: "Everything is planned already, there is no room for all the stories, the movie would take an eternity" (00:51:43). The only way for Suryono to tell his story is not by claiming victimhood, but – on the contrary – by making fun of the victims, by telling the suppressed narrative of violence in the modus of a joke. The ghost who has been conjured up is swiftly expelled. When Suryono participates in a role-play a few minutes later, in which he plays a communist who is to be strangled by an iron wire, he can no longer speak. The discursive routine is broken, not even the language of the joke remains, and Suryono seems to be overcome by an intense grief.

SCENE 2: KILLING A DOLL

The ghosts seem to jump out of the screen in a scene where Anwar Congo is shown stabbing a doll. The doll represents a baby offered to him in his role as killer by Herman Koto (02:12:20), one of his accomplices in 1965, who plays a mother begging for her life. The doll is nonchalantly but effectively cut by Congo, who routinely puts his knife several times into the doll while calmly smoking a cigarette. The scene, published as a director's cut and not shown in the cinema version, is harsh. The doll is "just" a doll, but for Oppenheimer the doll is possessed. Now the ghosts disturb not the killers, but the director himself. He refers to this scene as "filthy, tainted, a tsunami of shit"[44] and recalls having a terrible evening after shooting it and the nightmares that followed over the

Fig. 2: Anwar Congo "killing" the doll. The Act of Killing (Joshua Oppenheimer, GB/DK/NO 2012), 02:12:20 director's cut.

44 Louisiana Channel.

next eight months. This scene comes very close to what he has identified as the routines of violence that made the massacres possible, the routines through which the ghosts become visible for the director.

SCENE 3: OPPENHEIMER AS A PRIEST

As noted, Oppenheimer understands his method of filmmaking as archaeological performance, for he scrutinises the gestures, routines and rituals that were the motor of the massacre as well as the language and genres of its historical account. For this project, designed to make the violence visible in uncanny, ghostly layers, Oppenheimer's function as man behind the camera is decisive. In the last scene I will discuss, Oppenheimer adopts the role of "priest" when his main character, Congo, pulls him invisibly into the movie. Oppenheimer is a conundrum, Benedict Anderson writes.[45] But even as a conundrum, through his "intervention" he leads the movie to a finale in which the ghosts seem to be exorcised from Congo's body, allowing the public to breathe again. In the end, a humanity does remain.

The scene starts when Congo plays a victim. This role reversal seems to be too much for him. ("I can't do it" 01:39:40). Watching a scene played by himself a few minutes later in the film, Congo shows a moment of empathy for his victims. He asks Oppenheimer whether he has "sinned" (*dosa*). By taking up a ritualised role as victim in his own movie, he could feel, he claimed, what his victims had gone through. At this point the filmmaker intervenes to distinguish sharply between what Congo feels and what his victims felt: they knew that they were going to die, Oppenheimer argues. However, Congo does not seem convinced. The scene breaks through the spectral power of the communist framing and throws light on a point of shared humanity in fear. In the words of Larry Rochter in the *New York Times*: "eventually, though, the re-enactments appear to lead Mr. Congo to some sort of remorse and moral awakening".[46]

Soon after, at the end of the movie, much time is given to showing Congo vomiting. This scene has drawn much discussion. Robert Cribb, for example, notes that it seems staged.[47] Indeed, Congo does appear to fake his actions. Yet this does not make the scene less powerful within the film's soteriological plot. On the contrary, this scene enters a domain beyond the grand narrative of the state, a locus where ghosts appear and violence is remembered – the body. Frankfurt philosopher Theodor W. Adorno has written about the recognisability of humanity under totalitarianism. In a speculative effort to save humanity from

45 Anderson 2012, 284.
46 Rochter 2013.
47 Cribb 2012.

erasure by totalitarian jargon (useful/not useful, worthy/unworthy etc.), he points to bodily responses (shivering, repulsion) to its violence, which he calls "das Hinzutretende" (addendum).[48] They form a non-rational addendum to total rational control. Violence may be justified, legitimised, denied, celebrated or glorified, but these discourses cannot prevent the body from responding. For Adorno, this response is an a-rational and almost Messianic sign of a truly free humanity, which through a "natural" modus resists violent categorical identifications. Despite Congo's justification and proud acknowledgement of his role in the killings, the ghosts that have been fanatically denied reappear in his dreams and finally find a physical way out. The fever dream ends in a disgusting scene at a former killing site (*kantor darah*, or blood office, as Congo calls it). Congo has stated at the beginning of the film that this place is inhabited by "many ghosts".

The "some sort of remorse and moral awakening" that Rochter identifies makes the film more acceptable. The public has been waiting for such recognition of guilt, and despite its significance, this makes the message of the film less powerful. This moment of implicit conversion finally exposes Congo as the vulnerable grandfather in ways that the audience can relate to. But this scene, with a trajectory for Congo that is not shared by the other killers who feature in the film, leads away from Oppenheimer's initial intent to show the impact of impunity. It is, however, in line with the profound humanity that Congo assumes, evident in his vomiting, a physical expression of the collision of his impunity and his humanity. He has been found guilty, but not by the legal courts but by something within himself that breaks through the powerful categorisations of the New Order regime. The other killers, by contrast, continue to reside in their ghost-filled banality. Their strategies of adjuration will never allow these ghosts to haunt. This "happy ending" makes the movie powerful for a Western public which has seen their Nazis convicted, but less powerful for an Indonesian public that still awaits reparation by the state.[49]

FINALLY UNCOVERING HUMANITY

The Act of Killing is not about the G30S. Facts and details are missing, as are victims other than Suryono. Because such information for the specific case of the G30S is lacking, the movie reaches more general concerns about human violence. Although analyses of violence suggest it is an exception and normally hard to perform and left uncelebrated,[50] we have many instances of routinised violence, remorseless killers and readiness to adapt categories of power. The

48 Adorno 1966, 226.
49 Bjerregaard 2014.
50 Collins 2008.

killers filmed by Oppenheimer on Sumatra are only one such example. The Act of Killing is about how people live with themselves in the face of atrocities, how they deal with their pasts in the present and how they tell themselves stories about who, how and what they are. In this sense The Act of Killing explores memory, seeking access not to the atrocities themselves but to how people relate to a violent past in a present that will not hear accusations based on moral condemnation. The film searches for an existential framework that allows mass killings to be condemned even in a political context that denies moral or legal evaluation. This search by the movie prompts a religious-humanistic, anti-nihilistic, almost Messianic approach. The traces of humanity Oppenheimer looks for tie together European historical and collective memory with Indonesian collective memory, and at the same time this approach looks for "humanity" beyond acts of European or Indonesian mass killing.

Oppenheimer's urge to understand what happened in Indonesia is strongly coloured by Europe's Nazi history, for the events in Indonesia suggest what might have happened in Europe had the Nazis remained in power and portrayed the Holocaust as necessary. The Nazi ghosts exorcised by human-rights advocacy and moral condemnation reappear when Oppenheimer gives us the killers playing themselves and their victims. Penelope Poulou quotes Oppenheimer saying, "My God! It's like I've wandered into Germany 40 years after the Holocaust if the Nazis have never been removed from power and if the rest of the world had celebrated the Holocaust and participated in it while it took place."[51] The persistent effort to expel the Nazi ghosts links the Western world to the Indonesian context, and then on to other contexts and even, more generally, to what human beings are capable of. This makes Oppenheimer's project a mission-like search for humanity in the radical circumstances of political forgetting. Indeed, his film project has a mission throughout: "I was trying to expose a regime of impunity on behalf of a community of survivors"[52] That the stories sicken the public is evidence of the movie's engagement of a fundamental question about "the self" in relation to its ghostly others. This nausea discloses a (physical) link that makes Congo in the end recognisable and acceptable. In this sense, Congo's repulsion conflates with the public's nausea. For a Western public, the response that Congo provides to the issue of the "banality of evil" is filtered through the Nazi past. In the end, evil cannot be ignored for it strikes back at the perpetrator.

But Oppenheimer's project is not only about genocide. He wants his work to be a mirror, encouraging a link between killer and audience. In a sense, the audience becomes a bystander. If "those stories are powerful, if they really are

51 Poulou 2016.
52 Barnes 2013a

impactful, it's because there's a moment when you watch the film where you recognize yourself", Oppenheimer is quoted by *VOA News Asia* talking about The Look of Silence. And he continues, "it is where you feel: 'Oh no! Is this what we are as human beings? Is this what we can do to each other? … Yes, it is.'"[53] In a more general fashion, Errol Morris, one of the executive producers, said to the *New York Times* just after the movie's first screening: "The most you can ask from art, really good art, maybe great art, is that it makes you think, it makes you ask questions, makes you wonder about how we know things, how we experience history and know who we are. And there are so many amazing moments like that here."[54] The mission-like nature of the project is fulfilled with this link to the subjective self: what would you do?

Danielle Mina Dadras has argued that Congo's success in the film is "his ability to tap into our – and Oppenheimer's – desire for recognizable narratives of cinematic redemption; that is, films that validate our deeply held belief in the power of stories and their ability to illuminate, in this case, the entanglements of history, guilt, and truth in the horror-show of post-60s Indonesia."[55] The redemption theme is taken up by movie critics such as Henry Barnes, who, writing in the *Guardian*, observed, "The monster who had caused misery for thousands was the dapper gent serving him sweet tea, playing Cliff Richard records and teaching his grandchildren to care for injured animals." For a post–Second World War Western audience, Barnes contemplates, "It's this dissonance that makes the film so disturbing. It forces you to relate to a mass murderer."[56]

The real issue in the movie, however, is not Congo, but his accomplice Zulkadry, who shows no remorse, who has learned to master his ghosts through therapy (00:48:23–00:48:25) and who advises Congo to do the same (00:48:46). Zulkadry points to the natural way of things and bounces the question of responsibility back to the audience: war crimes are defined by the winners, he argues (01:07:45). Or member of the Pemuda Pancasila Herman Koto. In the film Koto does not ask a single question about what was done. He seems to accept the grand narrative of the killers as saviours of the nation. These complicated perpetrators, able to keep the ghosts at a distance, are the real challenge of Oppenheimer's film. Zulkadry, too, opines that the government should apologise (00:47:00) and speaks about reconciliation (*saling memanfaatkan* – forgiving each other, 00:47:15). Koto is not a one-dimensional gangster but, as Oppenheimer points out, "one of the few people brave enough to hold screenings of the film in the city of Madiun, where we made it."[57] These complex men

53 Poulou 2016.
54 Rochter 2013.
55 Dadras 2014.
56 Barnes 2013a.
57 Prigge 2014.

show no visible repentance and thus do not satisfy a democratic audience. But the very complexity of these men evokes the ghosts of Oppenheimer ("Oh my God") and they can live happily ever after with their banality of ghosts. These men do not vomit to save the director's idea of humanity. They are complicated perpetrators who can be found in many post-genocide contexts.[58] The Indonesian situation however poses a real challenge, for here we must think about what was done from a context in which collective memory has been politically constructed such that it portrays good killers and bad victims. Oppenheimer believes that such a strategy cannot eradicate a fundamental humanity that erupts as the result of the re-enactment of categorical routines as he makes Congo perform his happy ending. But the complicated gangster Koto and the intellectual and rational debater Zulkadry generate the unease integral to the movie. The ghosts Zulkadry claims to have mastered are the ghosts of the audience precisely because they are not feared. Their apparitions are the real challenge of Oppenheimer's work on the G30S. Amidst this unease, The Act of Killing is a feel-good discursive ritual that tries to expel these ghosts by telling the story of a single redemption.

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58 See, for example, Drakulic 2004; Glover 1999; Hatzfeld 2005.

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