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Providing evidence for a philosophical claim: The Act of Killing and the banality of evil

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There has been an ongoing debate among philosophers and film theorists about whether films are capable of doing philosophy. The vast majority of the contributions to this debate have concentrated on narrative fiction films and the extent to which they are capable of producing something recognisable as philosophy.[2] This essay begins to correct this imbalance by arguing that a documentary can do philosophy. Documentaries are an important, thriving genre of contemporary filmmaking, so the failure to consider the possibility of their making a philosophical contribution is a serious lacuna in the debate about cinematic philosophy.

I

In *Thinking on Screen*, I briefly discuss the possibility of documentary films doing philosophy, but my treatment is cursory and stands in need of a great deal of supplementation.[3] There, I point out documentary films appear capable of doing philosophy in a way fiction films cannot – namely, by using their soundtrack to make claims about reality for which the image track provides actual empirical evidence. My example, drawn from Carl Plantinga, was Edward R. Murrow’s television documentary *Harvest of Shame* (1960), in which a variety of claims about the situation of migrant farm workers in the United States are made via the soundtrack and then supported by images shown in the film.[4]



This film clearly uses its image track to provide evidence to support claims made in the soundtrack and thus shares with philosophy the use of argumentation. However, the film's claims about the conditions of the farm-workers are not philosophical, so it does not establish the possibility that documentaries can do philosophy, but only that they can present arguments in which the image track provides the evidence for assertions made in the soundtrack.

The obvious question this poses is whether it is possible for a film to include images that serve as evidence for a philosophical claim. At first blush, this seems implausible. Most people regard philosophy as a non-empirical discipline, one whose claims are *a priori*. On this view, there appears to be no way for a documentary image of the real world to serve as evidence for a non-empirical, philosophical claim. But over the past half a century, there have been significant challenges to the notion that philosophy is a non-empirical discipline. If these are valid, then a way opens up for the images in documentary films to function as evidence for philosophical theses.

For example, as long ago as 1951, Willard Van Orman Quine (1961) argued philosophy and science should be viewed as continuous rather than radically different modes of inquiry, for both are investigations of the nature of reality. From Quine's point of view, philosophy's self-conception as a non-empirical discipline whose claims are not impinged upon by experience is simply misguided. Rather than seeing philosophy as foundational, as the *a priori* conception does, Quine proposes the metaphor of knowledge as a vast, interconnected web. Our beliefs as a whole confront experience, with no portion being exempt from relations with either confirming or disconfirming evidence.

More recently, experimental philosophy has come on the scene. Advocates of this approach to philosophy are skeptical about philosophers' appeals in thought experiments to 'what people would say', which have generally been made without any empirical support. Rather than trusting the intuitions of philosophers about what people would say, practitioners of experimental philosophy actually perform surveys to find out what people actually say about the scenarios employed in philosophical thought experiments. So rather than arguing with one another about the difference between scenarios in the Trolley Problem, experimental philosophers actually perform surveys about what people think and use the results to justify their claims. Once again, philosophy is treated as a discipline involving empirical claims requiring empirical justification, and this opens up the possibility of a film actually confirming a philosophical thesis which is now taken to be *empirical*.

II

My contention in this paper is that *The Act of Killing* (Joshua Oppenheimer, Christine Cynn, and anonymous, 2012)[5] does philosophy both by providing empirical evidence in support of the banality of evil thesis developed by Hannah Arendt in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and also by filling out the meaning of that thesis.[6] In making my argument, I will ignore many other aspects of and issues about the film, such as whether it provides an adequate corrective to the official version of Indonesian history dominant in Medan. I do so in order to examine how the film presents what I take to be an original contribution to the philosophical understanding of the nature of evil.

Eichmann in Jerusalem is an expanded version of reports Arendt submitted to *The New Yorker* magazine, which had employed her to cover the trial of Adolph Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1961. Eichmann was a mid-level Nazi bureaucrat who nonetheless played a pivotal role in the extermination of the Jews. He had escaped detection by the Allies after the Second World War and for many years had been living fairly openly in Argentina. Upon discovering his whereabouts, Israel organised a kidnapping operation in 1960 to bring him to Jerusalem to stand trial.[7] This highly publicised trial was the first prosecution of a former Nazi undertaken by the Jewish state. As such, it attracted worldwide attention. Eichmann was found guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity. He was hanged in 1962.

Arendt's discussion of the trial is far ranging, engaging many important themes about the nature of the Nazi regime and the attempt to bring perpetrators to justice. The claim upon which I will focus is that Eichmann instantiated a new type of evil. According to Arendt, the standard answer to the question of how people are able to perform horrendous acts of evil, and one Arendt traces back to characters in Shakespeare's plays, conceives of evildoers as malicious individuals.[8] Iago is the classic example. He possesses a genuinely evil character and explicitly desires to harm Othello, although the reasons for his hatred are multiple and somewhat ambiguous. During her coverage of Eichmann's trial, Arendt discovered she could not understand Eichmann using this model. As SS-Obersturmbannführer (a rank equivalent to a lieutenant colonel in the Army), Eichmann was responsible for organising the transportation of Jews to ghettos and extermination camps. Millions of people lost their lives because of his actions. What struck Arendt about him was the absence of the malicious hatred that fueled the actions of villains like Iago: 'Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth ... Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all.'[9] During his trial, Eichmann exhibited selective memory. He could not remember many of the significant events he had participated in that involved the extermination of Jews, but he was always able to recall slights that he perceived to have hindered the advancement of his career. In attempting to explain the gaps in Eichmann's recollections, Arendt posited a fundamental incapacity: '[t]he longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely related to his inability to *think*, namely, to think from the standpoint of someone else.'[10]

That Arendt posits *thoughtlessness* as central to Eichmann's evil actions may be surprising to those accustomed to thinking of the Holocaust in terms of a bureaucracy oriented towards extermination. But she is very clear that this is the characteristic she believes explains Eichmann and the unique nature of the evil he propagated. As she puts it in the postscript to her book:

[w]hen I speak of the banality of evil, I do so only on the strictly factual level, pointing to a phenomenon that stared one in the face at the trial. ... He was not stupid. It was sheer thoughtlessness – something by no means identical with stupidity – that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of the period. [11]

Arendt's emphasis on Eichmann's thoughtlessness is both central to her explanation of the banality of evil and also a serious problem in her account. The portrait of Eichmann that emerges from her report as someone who took his own career more seriously than the horrific slaughter of hundreds of thousands if not millions of people is striking. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt does not provide any deeper psychological rationale that explains the possibility of such a character type, so her account clearly stands in need of supplementation.

Another serious flaw in Arendt's account is her underestimation of Eichmann's anti-Semitism.[12] Arendt took Eichmann's claim that he "personally" never had anything whatsoever against Jews'[13] at face value, but this seems a mistake, especially in light of recent research that has established Eichmann's anti-Semitism.[14] If Arendt admitted Eichmann was anti-Semitic and that this played a role in his activities, it would undermine her claim he did what he did without having any personal animosity against Jews and therefore render her banality of evil thesis inapplicable. That is, if Eichmann's actions sprung from his hatred of Jews, then his actions would be analogous to those of Iago, or, to choose an actual example from twentieth-century American history, Bull Connor, the racist sheriff of Selma, Alabama in the 1960s. So, if, as seems likely, Eichmann were motivated by anti-Semitism, the banality of evil thesis would lack empirical support.

III

The Act of Killing is a confusing documentary to watch. One reason is the film presents only very limited background about the situation in Indonesia. All we get by way of context are three different titles imposed over a shot of contemporary Medan, the Indonesian city in which the film takes place, featuring modern skyscrapers, flashing neon ads, and a skateboard park – an indication of the penetration of this country by global capitalism. Here is the text visible in the titles:

Title 1: *In 1965, the Indonesian government was overthrown by the military. Anybody opposed to the military dictatorship could be accused of being a communist: union members, landless farmers, intellectuals, and the ethnic Chinese. In less than a year, and with the direct aid of western governments, over one million "communists" were murdered.*

The information contained in this title is accurate, though estimates of the number of people killed vary widely, with some claims that ‘only’ 500,000 ‘communists’ were killed. From the title, one might assume the subject of the film is the 1965 coup and the mass murders that occurred to stabilise the regime, but that is not correct. As we shall see, no footage from that time is included in the film and we only hear about those events from the perspective of a small group of perpetrators of mass killings in the city of Medan, the capital of Northern Sumatra and the fourth largest city in Indonesia. This selectivity suggests the film is not attempting to provide a comprehensive and accurate picture of the slaughter of people in Indonesia in 1965 and 1966, despite what this title might be taken to imply and what many critics have mistakenly thought.[15]

Title 2: The army used paramilitaries and gangsters to carry out the killings. These men have been in power – and have persecuted their opponents – ever since.

This title is more problematic. It is true that paramilitaries and gangsters were used in the killings, but they do not remain in power everywhere in Indonesia, at least according to Benedict Anderson, who argues one of the peculiarities of Medan is precisely the extent to which the gangsters and paramilitaries remain in power and have not been rebuked for their role in the massacre.[16] Still, the title appears to be an accurate reflection of the situation in Medan, where the Youth Group Pemuda Pancasila was instrumental in committing the atrocities and remains a major factor in the region’s politics.

Title 3: When we met the killers, they proudly told us stories about what they did. To understand why, we asked them to create scenes about the killings in whatever ways they wished. This film follows that process, and documents its consequences.

The final title zeroes in on the nature of this documentary. It clearly indicates that the film is documenting the killers’ current presentation of their own story by filming scenes in which they reenact the killings they participated in between 1965 and 1966.

The idea of allowing a group of mass murderers to present themselves to an international audience as they would like to be seen is both surprising and perplexing. Giving mass murderers a platform with which to present their account of their actions seems ill-considered. But, as we shall see, this is not the case, for the results are not what the perpetrators expected and actually establish the film’s ability to make a contribution to the philosophi-

cal understanding of evil. In general, although the titles provide viewers with enough information to understand the basic structure of the film, they leave out many details that could have been supplied. This is a deliberate strategy employed by the filmmakers to force viewers to engage with a certain amount of confusion as they attempt to understand what they are seeing on the screen.

There is a second difficulty *The Act of Killing* presents to the average American viewer like myself, who is largely ignorant to the facts surrounding the coup. There are important elements of shots orchestrated by the gangsters that are not easily understood and that the documentary does not explain. Probably the most puzzling involves one of the gangsters, Herman Koto, appearing in drag. In the film's very first shot, we see a group of beautiful young women dancing along a platform coming out of the mouth of a huge fish.[17] After a cut to a waterfall, we see a differently attired group of attractive, young women dancing in the mist along with Koto in drag wearing a long aquamarine dress and Anwar Congo, another of the Medan gangsters who will become the central character in the film, wearing traditional black garb, as we hear a director yelling instructions. This scene will be reprised at the end of the film in a fully edited form (i.e. without such distractions as the director's voice), but the documentary does nothing to explain the significance of what we are seeing.

Given the bookending of the film with this puzzling scene, it is odd that no title or voiceover is provided to explain it. With some assistance, however, we can piece together what this bizarre scene is doing in the film. We can start by asking why a film about mass killing includes what looks like a scene from an ersatz Hollywood musical. The answer has to do with the role that Hollywood played in the lives and imaginations of the gangsters. One of the remarkable facts about the Medan gangsters is they modeled themselves and their 'acts' on Hollywood films. They are colloquially referred to as 'the movie theater gangsters' because, when they were recruited to kill people, they worked as ticket scalpers at the local cinemas in Medan. But American films were not simply a source of their livelihood, for they also modeled themselves on the characters they saw portrayed on the screen. More shocking and surprising is their adoption of the methods of killing from different genres of Hollywood films.

This interest in American films helps explain why the gangsters want to participate in the making of the film and, more specifically, why the film takes the peculiar form that it does. These gangsters believe they have not

received their due – they see themselves as having played a crucial role in supporting the new regime – and the opportunity to star in a film offers them the chance to show their story to the public and thus to immortalise themselves. That is why the gangsters want to make a film that is beautiful and that shows them in a positive light. And this explains why the gangsters include elements from popular Hollywood genres, the musical being the relevant one in this context.[18]

Unpacking some of the meaning of this scene does two things. First, it allows us to gain some access into the thinking of the gangsters as they collaborate with the filmmakers. We learn that a good deal of what we see in *The Act of Killing* reflects the gangsters' self-understanding. Of course, not everything we see does, for the filmmakers' selection of what to shoot and their editing of the footage, in addition to the fact that the film includes supplemental footage the filmmakers have shot, allows a very different perspective to emerge than that shared by the gangsters.

Second, it helps explain the decision to withhold crucial information that would give viewers a clearer sense of what is taking place on screen. The filmmakers want us to be puzzled, to realise a great deal of what we are seeing is not an accurate portrayal of the reality of what took place in 1965 and 1966 but, to a significant extent, a projection of the minds of the gangsters. As we watch the film, we often are uncertain about whether what we are seeing is an accurate portrayal of reality or just a reflection of the gangsters' imaginations. This gives the film an ironic structure in which the audience comes to accept the filmmakers' critical take on the gangsters' self-justification.

IV

The philosophical significance of *The Act of Killing* depends upon its innovative use of reenactment – a feature of documentaries since their inception as a means for visually showing audiences events that actually took place but are not accessible via previously recorded film. Although this practice has been criticised by proponents of direct cinema, it remains common in documentary films and has even had a renaissance in the work of such filmmakers as Errol Morris.[19]

The Act of Killing employs a more complex strategy than simply filming reenactments of scenes from the 1965 genocide. First of all, in many though

hardly all reenactments, actors are hired to play the part of the characters in the event being reenacted. In *Tongues Untied* (1989), for example, Marlon Riggs hired actors to reenact his being attacked by white youths; while in *Nanook of the North* (1922), Nanook himself reenacts certain scenes for Flaherty's camera. In *The Act of Killing*, the primary people performing in the reenactments are the very gangsters who did the mass killings. However, in the reenactments, they play all the roles, including those of their victims who are now dead. In some of the scenes, the families, friends, and political associates of the gangsters take part in the reenactments, as in the reenactment of the burning of a village. For our purposes, however, the use of the actual participants in an event in its reenactment is crucial because it creates a unique ontological structure to the reenactment, as I will shortly explain.

A second innovative feature of *The Act of Killing* and its mode of reenactment is that it is not the filmmakers who are staging the reenactments, though they do film them. The reenactments are orchestrated by the killers themselves. The film includes a number of scenes in which we see the gangsters discussing how to film a scene that we then see filmed. This means that there are actually two cameras doing the filming: the first, which is the camera filming the reenactments, can be thought of as the gangster's camera; but there is also a second camera, the filmmakers' camera, and it records the filming of the reenactments. This doubling of cameras is central to the particular mode of reenactment used in the film.

The filmmakers' camera also records interviews with the gangsters as they watch rushes of their reenactments on a television as well as in various other contexts. This is a third important aspect of the film's unique reenactment style, for it allows the film to gain access to the emotional experience of the gangsters during the reenactments. This is because a gangster – most centrally Congo – not only plays a role during the reenactment that is filmed by the gangsters' camera, but also is filmed by the filmmakers' camera as he watches himself acting during a reenactment, thereby showing the audience his reactions.

The innovative strategy of reenactment then involves these three elements: recording a scene taking place, playing back the recording to one of the participants in the scene, and recording his reactions as he watches himself acting in the scene. This triple overlapping use of cinema's ability to record and project profilmic events differentiate this film from ones that simply record events taking place before a camera. The doubling of the cameras and the complex editing are elements that allow this film to trans-

end simply recording events and constitute it as making a substantive use of the film medium.[20]

V

It is now time to consider how *The Act of Killing* supports Arendt's thesis concerning the banality of evil. It does so despite the enormous gulf separating Eichmann and Congo. Eichmann never killed anyone with his own hands but rather facilitated the execution of millions in the gas chambers.[21] Congo brutally executed thousands of people with his own hands, most of whom were innocent victims. How can the banality of evil thesis developed in relation to Eichmann apply to Congo?

The key is the notion of thoughtlessness, which Arendt unpacks as an inability to take another's perspective on a situation. I have discussed how she applies that idea to Eichmann. My claim is that Congo also exhibits this trait and is thus also an example of a banally evil person, indeed, even a better one than Eichmann. And it is the use of reenactment in *The Act of Killing* that allows us to see precisely why Congo was unable to understand the perspective of his victims and comprehend the immorality of his actions. In fact, only because Congo winds up occupying the position of a victim of torture and execution during the reenactment process and subsequently views the film rushes of his acting is he able to comprehend what his victims felt and assess what he terms his 'sin' from an ethical point of view.

The moral and dramatic center of the film and its philosophical contribution, then, is its depiction of Anwar Congo's dawning recognition of the full significance of the horrific experiences of hundreds if not thousands of his innocent victims.[22] Watching this process – particularly in the scenes I discuss – allows us to comprehend what was necessary for Congo to kill so many people. Although there are other factors, what we fully realise only towards the end of the film is that Congo never actually thought about what his victims felt and therefore did not understand the nature of his crimes. Once he does, he realises their enormity. Viewers have a different but parallel realisation of the moral and intellectual blindness that allowed Congo to do what he did, thereby coming to understand the film as providing evidence in support of Arendt's thesis.

When we first meet Congo, it is on the rooftop of a newspaper building in Medan where many of the killings actually took place. Congo – with the assistance of a fellow gangster – demonstrates how he killed his victims. Congo explains he had to alter his initial technique because so much blood was spilled by simply stabbing the victims that a new and less messy method was needed. With evident pride, Congo demonstrates for the camera – and hence for us – his solution, seemingly unaware that his reenactment will horrify most viewers: instead of cutting their throats, he garroted his victims with a wire secured to a pipe on one end and attached to a piece of wood that he pulled on the other. This method was quicker, less violent, and left no blood to be cleaned up. In a later scene, Congo admits that he had gotten the idea from Hollywood films, specifically gangster films.[23] Congo does exhibit some scruples about what he did, for he admits having to drink and use drugs to put ‘all that’ behind him. The strategy appears successful, as Congo breaks into a dance to show how he behaved at that time and also to demonstrate that those horrors no longer affect him. As one of his fellow perpetrators says, ‘He’s a happy man.’ But at no time does he acknowledge that what he did was immoral.

As we watch and listen to him, we are horrified both by what he did and also by the pride of his recitation. After all, as one of his fellow gangsters, Adi Zulkadry, later admits, ‘[k]illing is the worst crime you can do. So, the key is to find a way not to feel guilty.’ Zulkadry here explicitly endorses a policy of thoughtlessness, of not thinking about the morality of their actions. Zulkadry seems to have managed this task quite successfully, albeit at the apparent price of cutting off all of his emotions, turning him into an empty shell of a human being who appears unable to connect to even those closest to him, his daughter and wife. But Congo has not. He admits to being troubled by nightmares. But being horrified and understanding the ethical significance of what he did are two different things.

What is particularly appalling about Congo’s pride at having discovered a technical solution to the problem of killing his victims bloodlessly is his treatment of killing as only presenting a technical problem to himself and his fellow murderers. But, of course, this is precisely what Arendt saw in Eichmann, a perpetrator of horrible evil who does not grasp the ethical significance of what he did, and this connection is integral to my interpretation of the film’s philosophical significance.

As the film presents the perpetrators’ reenactments, something startling occurs: taking part in the reenactments causes Congo to realise for the first

time what his victims experienced, thereby allowing us to see his ‘thoughtlessness’. The first step in this process takes place in what is probably the most brutal scene in the film, in which Congo acts in the role of one of the victims in a reenactment. What this remarkable scene depicts is Congo’s inability to maintain the stance of an actor playing the role of a victim. Instead, he comes to occupy the position of a victim of the very crimes he committed.

To understand what transpires, we need to understand the ontological structure of the reenactment. Congo is both a perpetrator and an actor in the reenactment. As such, he plays the role of a victim. Two dichotomies are necessary to characterise this ontological situation: that of an actor playing a role, thereby creating a distinction between reality and fiction, and another within the reenactment between the roles of perpetrator and victim. So, Congo is a real perpetrator acting in the fictional role of one of his own victims. What transpires is an *ontological collapse* of this structure, for the actor playing a character actually becomes that character, at least briefly in his own imagination, and a perpetrator of torture and murder becomes his own victim albeit only imaginatively.[24] As a result of this double collapse of roles and reality – in which the actor *becomes* the character he is supposed to simply be playing, experiencing himself as a victim of his own crimes – Congo is no longer able to repress an ethical assessment of his own actions.

The reenactment of an interrogation is staged with an interrogator played by one of the perpetrators sitting facing Congo, a desk separating them, as two of the other perpetrators stand on either side of him, making loud noises by striking wooden boards against his chair, placing knives against his neck and stomach, and yelling at him and threatening him. The brutality of the perpetrators’ actions is shocking, and not just to us. Congo winces at the loud noises his comrades make and their placing a knife at his neck, apparently reacting without artifice to what his fellow perpetrators are doing. Congo winds up so shaken that one of his fellow perpetrators/actors tells him not to cry, for it is just a show. They take a brief break and then resume filming. His fellow perpetrators/actors blindfold Congo, placing a wire around his neck in the precise manner we had earlier seen him demonstrate. Soon, Congo appears to faint and tells his comrades that he ‘feels funny’. Again, the comrade advises him not to think too much about the character he is playing. But, after they resume the fake strangulation, Congo breaks off the filming, saying ‘I can’t do it again.’

The power of this scene derives not just from its depiction of the brutality with which Congo and his fellow perpetrators tortured their victims, it is even more significantly because of what happens to Congo. The contrast between his breakdown and earlier bravado is particularly startling, for we witness a collapse in Congo's psychology that we could not have anticipated. It is interesting to speculate on what provokes Congo's collapse. In part, the brutality of his collaborators' torture provokes reactions in Congo that take place below the level of his conscious thought. For example, the loud bangs produced by the striking of paddles on the chair and table cause Congo to blanch, since he cannot anticipate precisely what his collaborators are going to do. As a result, he exhibits the startle response, a sub-conscious emotional response to sudden loud noise, something that many audience members may also experience watching this scene. The collaborators also scream and push Congo, all of which produce automatic emotional responses that take place at such a low cognitive level that his explicit awareness that he is not really a victim cannot block them. The result is that an important aspect of his experience becomes virtually identical to that of an actual victim of torture, for there are *some* aspects of their situations that are identical. Of course, Congo's responses are not limited to this sub-conscious level, but the responses at that level prompt a more full-blown emotional response of being the victim of torture.

The result is an ontological collapse in which Congo 'becomes' a torture victim. Given that, we are surprised that in the film's next scene Congo asks to watch the scene again at home on a television. The film now consists of a series of shot-reverse-shots, allowing us to see both clips from the scene of Congo's 'torture' and Congo's reactions as he watches them. Even more startling, both to viewers and to Oppenheimer who is filming Congo's reactions, is Congo's desire to have his two grandsons watch the clips with him. Twice brushing off Oppenheimer's suggestion that the scene is too violent for the young children, Congo proudly discusses his acting with the two young boys who have come to sit on his lap and watch their grandfather on television. Once they have left, Congo suddenly squints, as if he now sees something more on the screen. 'Did the people I tortured feel the way I do here?', a puzzled Congo asks Oppenheimer. 'I can feel the way the people I tortured felt because my dignity has been destroyed. My pride has gone and then fear comes right then and there', he continues, as he looks at his own image on the screen, explaining his understanding of what transpired dur-

ing the reenactment. 'All the terror possessed my body. It surrounded me and possessed me', he admits.

Congo here explains his dawning recognition of the process by means of which his victims were undone by the torture to which they were subjected. The brutal interrogation which they underwent destroyed their dignity and pride, leaving nothing in their wake but brute terror. Even though he was 'just' acting as a victim in the reenactment, Congo actually experiences these feelings because the reenactment breaks down the ontological structure in which performing the role of a victim would have insulated him from actually experiencing the psychology of victimhood. Indeed, an element in the compelling nature of this film is its repeated demonstration that reenacting brutality is itself a brutalising process that creates its own victims, who cannot maintain their ontological distance from the experience of the real victims of the mass murders.[25]

Oppenheimer's reaction to the apparently naïve question Congo asks him – 'Did the people I tortured really feel the way I do here?' – reveals that, at least at the time of the filming, he did not fully realise the significance of what he had captured on film. Rather than helping Congo explore the significance of his reaction, Oppenheimer cruelly rejects Congo's acknowledgment of what he had experienced by telling him, '[a]ctually, the people you tortured felt far worse because you know it's only a film. They knew they were being killed.' Valid as this point may be, it denies the significance of what Congo has experienced. Congo himself is puzzled by Oppenheimer's reaction, as he cocks his head slightly to the side. He then looks down, as if he's considering the truth of Oppenheimer's words. 'But I can feel it, Josh. Really, I can feel it', he responds. Slowly, as if a light is dawning, he says plaintively, 'I did this to so many people, Josh.' He then cries. 'Is it all coming back to me? I really hope it won't. I don't want it to, Josh', he says, as he wipes tears from his eyes with his right hand. He shakes his head as if to dispel the horror of his realisation. The scene ends with a cut to a still of Congo in his role as torture victim displayed on the television.

This is the first time we have seen Congo fully acknowledge the suffering of his victims and the immorality of his own actions. Gone is the brava-do of the mass killer demonstrating his clever innovation. In its place, a shaken, vulnerable human being emerges. *The Act of Killing* thus amplifies Arendt's rather abstract characterisation of the banality of evil with a direct experience of 'thoughtlessness'. Although Arendt says that it is an inability to take the standpoint of another, she does not explain how a human being

can actually not think about horrific actions he has performed, what such a limited consciousness would be like. *The Act of Killing* provides what Arendt's account lacks: a view of a perpetrator who is unable to understand his victims' experience and thus fails to appreciate the significance of his own horrific actions. We come to understand how this is possible through witnessing Congo's ontological breakdown, with his fictional role becoming real for him. Seeing him acknowledge what his victims felt as a result of his participation in the film's reenactment of torture and murder allows the audience to understand how 'thoughtlessness' is possible, how it is grounded in an inability to empathetically experience another's pain and suffering. The reenactment process employed by *The Act of Killing* forces empathy upon Congo by making his own experience of victimisation the bridge to his understanding of what his victims experienced.

As a result of providing this supplementation to Arendt's account of the banality of evil, the film functions as strong empirical confirmation for her claim that evil need not be perpetrated by heinous villains like Iago, but can be the work of an ordinary, unexceptional individual. It does so by acquainting its viewers with an actual, real life example of a perpetrator of evil on screen, and thus providing them with evidence that empirically confirms Arendt's thesis. This actual instance of a 'thoughtless' mass murderer supports Arendt's view better than her own reflections on Eichmann because we actually see the type of psychological constellation that Arendt claims is necessary for a banal purveyor of evil. Whereas Arendt's analysis of Eichmann depended upon her contested acceptance of his own claim not to have felt animosity towards Jews, viewers of *The Act of Killing* get to see Congo with their own eyes, albeit through edited photographic images of him, and reach their own conclusions about his motivation and psychology.

So, what allows the film to provide this more adequate empirical confirmation of Arendt's thesis is the medium of cinema itself, based as it is on photography, allowing its audience to actually see a perpetrator of evil such as Anwar Congo and, through the mediation of a team of skilled filmmakers who carefully select the shots to film and edit the final product, come to understand what allowed him to perpetrate the evils that he did. And this makes *The Act of Killing* an important document in the philosophical exploration of the nature of moral evil. Through its innovative employment of the documentary technique of reenactment, the film allows viewers to encounter a perpetrator of unspeakable moral evil and to understand the psychology that animates such a person. The film's use of complex narra-

tive devices and editing techniques not only does not detract from the documentary's ability to convey an important truth to its viewers, it actually makes that possible.

VI

I began this essay by acknowledging that proponents of the idea of cinematic philosophy had restricted their thesis – that films can 'do' philosophy – to fiction films and, to a limited extent, avant-garde films. Documentary films have generally not been taken to be candidates for cinematic philosophy because philosophy has been viewed as a purely *a priori* discipline. Once we think of philosophy as not radically different in kind from science (a view gaining increasing acceptance among philosophers), we are able to contemplate the possibility of a documentary film actually doing philosophy. My discussion of *The Act of Killing* presents the film as an important example of cinematic philosophy because it provides better support for Arendt's banality of evil thesis than Arendt was able to by means of her own account of Eichmann.

If I am right about the film, philosophers of film need to redress their failure to countenance the possibility that documentaries can do philosophy. Specifically, *The Act of Killing* shows that a film can make an original contribution to philosophy. Critics of the idea of cinematic philosophy have argued that the insights attributed to films by advocates of film-as-philosophy have been trivial, nothing that could count as an original philosophical insight.[26] But as we have seen, *The Act of Killing* not only provides empirical confirmation of Arendt's thesis, it provides us with original insights about the key notion of thoughtlessness in Arendt's account. So instead of being relegated to the margins of the film-as-philosophy debate, documentary needs to be given pride of place because of its ability to make original contributions to philosophy.

Though I have demonstrated the possibility of documentaries doing philosophy, it remains to be seen whether there are other documentaries besides *The Act of Killing* that also make philosophical contributions. This is not, of course, something that can be determined *a priori*, but only through the careful interpretations of individual documentary films presented by philosophers of film or film theorists. My hope is that the present essay will

stimulate such work and that documentary films will come to occupy a central place in the canon of cinematic philosophy.

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Notes

- [1] This is a revised version of a keynote address delivered at the International Conference on Philosophy and Film: The Real of Reality in Karlsruhe, Germany, 4 November 2016, a paper delivered at the Philosophy of Film Seminar at the University of Amsterdam, and a paper delivered at Cinematic Ethics 3: Documentary/Non-Fiction Film & Ethical Experience at Macquarie University, 18 May 2017. It benefitted substantially from written comments by Jay Garfield, Katherine Thomson-Jones, and Robert Sinnerbrink, as well as discussions after its presentation.
- [2] An exception is Sinnerbrink (2016a, 2016b), who does discuss documentaries, including this one.
- [3] Wartenberg 2007, pp. 79-80.
- [4] Plantinga 2015.
- [5] The film has two co-directors: Christine Cynn and an anonymous Indonesian. I was able to discuss the film with Cynn and appreciate her willingness to do so.
- [6] As I was revising this paper for publication, I came upon a short review of the film by Soe Tjen Marching that mentions the banality of evil. Marching concludes that the mass murders were more complex than Arendt's thesis could explain.
- [7] The recent film *The People Vs. Fritz Bauer* (2015) provides an account of how Israel became aware of Eichmann's presence in Argentina as well as Germany and America's resistance to his prosecution.
- [8] It is surprising that Arendt provides no actual instances of people acting on such malicious intentions, using Shakespeare's characters alone to support her claim. Perhaps this is because some would contest any specific examples of people whose actions were motivated by maliciousness. For an account of moral evil that focuses on actual acts of evil, see Kekes 2005.
- [9] Arendt 1965, p. 287.
- [10] Ibid., p. 49.
- [11] Ibid., pp. 287-288.
- [12] Robert Sinnerbrink pointed out to me that another problem with Arendt's analysis is that, in order for someone like Eichmann to view his actions as providing solutions to technical problems, he had to accept the anti-Semitic ideology that explained the need for a 'solution' to the 'Jewish problem'. See also Sinnerbrink 2016a, 2016b.
- [13] Ibid., p. 26.
- [14] See Stangneth 2014 for extensive criticism of Arendt's view.
- [15] The double entendre of the film's title, *The Act of Killing*, is important to bear in mind.
- [16] In an interview with *Sight and Sound*, Oppenheimer claims that Medan is typical of Indonesia in this respect (Bradshaw 2015). I am not competent to assess this claim.
- [17] Apparently, the fish is the remnant of an ill-conceived restaurant.
- [18] Koto appears in drag because they are mobilising an anti-Communist myth involving the two characters they portray. For details see Wieringa 2014.
- [19] For an excellent overview of the use of reenactment in documentaries see Nichols 2008. Nichols claims reenactments 'do not provide evidentiary images of situations and events in the historical world', a claim that I dispute here.
- [20] Philosophers and film theorists have generally claimed that only films that make central use of the cinematic medium can actually do philosophy. I think *The Act of Killing* does so, as should be evident here.

PROVIDING EVIDENCE FOR A PHILOSOPHICAL CLAIM

- [21] Arendt 1965, pp. 22-24.
- [22] There is critical disagreement about whether Congo undergoes a transformation during the filming. Although I shall talk as if this does occur, one could equally well emphasise the presence of two competing perspectives on the killings that fight for dominance in Congo's consciousness.
- [23] Despite some effort, I have been unable to locate a specific film using this technique.
- [24] Bill Nichols (2008) calls this the 'fantasmatic'.
- [25] There are other scenes in which we see people engaged in the reenactments suddenly overcome. For example, a woman witnessing the restaged burning of a village is overcome, and the nephew of a victim breaks down completely as he reenacts his uncles' torture. I am suggesting that Congo's experience provides the key to understanding what has happened during these reenactments that makes them so powerful as a cinematic tool for the exploration of evil.
- [26] This view originates with Jerome Stolnitz (1992).