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False fronts

The Act of Killing shatters Indonesia's sense of itself

By Michael Meyer



Ready for my closeup Anwar Congo, right, prepares to re-enact one of the hundreds of murders he committed in 1965. (Courtesy of Drafthouse Films)

In the early hours of October 1, 1965, a group of junior officers in the Indonesian military assassinated six generals and threw their bodies down a well. Their coup attempt was crushed by nightfall, but the murders became the opening scene in the founding of present-day Indonesia. The senior surviving officer, General Suharto, accused Indonesia's Communist Party of being behind the killings, and, in the words of historian John Roosa, an authority on these events, "orchestrated an extermination of persons affiliated with the party." This was the height of the Cold War, and Indonesia had the largest communist party outside of a communist country, with affiliates ranging from labor unions to intellectuals to peasant farmers. In the name of saving Indonesia from the threat of Marxism, the army and its affiliated militias carried out one of the largest mass killings of the 20th century in less than a year.

By March 1966, Suharto was running a military dictatorship that would last nearly 32 years. The 1965 murders of six generals was the pretext for his entire regime. "Under Suharto," Roosa **explain** with sacred sites, rituals, and dates." Each year, Indonesian students were required to view a graphically violent, Hollywood-style dramatization of the murders. The executioners, many of them active gangsters, were celebrated as national heroes and rewarded with political power. Even after the Suharto regime ended in 1998, this power structure remained. There was no official apology or reconciliation, and the killers continued to live alongside their victims' families. The extermination of communists became as much a part of Indonesia's founding mythos as the extermination of Native Americans is a part of America's—a bit of necessary unpleasantness.

The Act of Killing, a global success on the film-festival circuit that had a brief theatrical run in the US this summer, tells the story of the massacre from the perspective of the men who perpetrated it. Joshua Oppenheimer, the film's director, encouraged former executioners to re-enact their deeds any way they wished. He filmed the re-enactments and the creative process behind them, and blended the two into a documentary in which the killers serve as both subjects and artistic collaborators. The premise sounds offensive and deliberately provocative, like some outré work of post-colonial, art-house horror. But the idea emerged organically, over nearly a decade of filming in Indonesia, as a documentary and investigative technique well suited to tell the story of the massacre.

When Oppenheimer first arrived in Indonesia in 2001, he began talking to surviving victims and their families. He and his co-director, Christine Cynn, lived for a year with a village of survivors in North Sumatra, working on an experimental film that became the forerunner to *The Act of Killing*. Filming was constantly disrupted by local police or military or thugs, and they worried for their

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subjects' safety.

The silence enforced on the victims' families was particularly ironic when compared with the boastfulness of the killers themselves. And when Oppenheimer hit upon the idea of turning to these men for an explanation of the massacre, all obstruction ceased. He would simply ask a former executioner what he did for a living and, within minutes, be taken to a massacre sight and told horrific stories about beating people to death with bricks. In February 2004, an executioner took the film crew to a site near a river where he had helped kill 10,500 people in less than three months, then posed for pictures that look eerily like the ones that would emerge from Abu Ghraib just two months later, smiling and giving the thumbs up as the river into which he had dumped the bodies meandered through the background.

A common misconception among viewers is that Oppenheimer somehow tricked the killers and their associates into participating in the film—that he told them he was making a film that would celebrate them, or that he wanted to make them stars in an action movie. This misconception is based on the perfectly logical notion that anyone who had taken part in such an atrocity would understand the danger of admitting to war crimes on camera. But these men had never been accused of anything; they were heroes. And while Oppenheimer sometimes had to hide his disgust at the casualness, or even joy, with which the men relived their deeds, he never had to be anything but honest about his intention to make a film that highlighted their role as mass murderers.

As he continued to film, Oppenheimer became fascinated by what he called the killers' "performance of impunity" and was convinced that the image they presented in the re-enactments—more than the slaughter they were re-enacting—was the most compelling story of all. The suffering and oppression of the victims could tell a story about the margins of Indonesian society. But the performance being staged for Oppenheimer, by men praised for decades as the saviors of modern Indonesia, told a story about the society's dominant identity and beliefs.

In 2005, Oppenheimer began what became the eight-year process of making *The Act of Killing*. He set out to do the exact opposite of what journalism typically tries to do. As he told me in July, "Whenever you talk to somebody as a journalist, they stage themselves for you. They think, 'How do I want to be seen by the world?' And we try to get past that and extract from those interviews information that we can treat transparently. But we're throwing away a great resource. Because in the moment of someone presenting themselves, in that self consciousness, is something also worth exposing: What is the image that they have of themselves?"

If the killers present themselves as national heroes, and this idea has become central to Indonesia's sense of itself, and a way to legitimize its power structure, then understanding that façade is crucial to understanding the massacre and the corrupt system that grew out of it. The point of making a film that focused on this artifice, Oppenheimer says, "was to show the stories we tell ourselves about who we are, that [in turn] make our reality what it is. And to put reality through a kind of prism whereby all these different narratives that make up the surface are visible." The re-enactments trace the imagining of mass murder to the self-image of a society, using the words of the killers themselves to make that seemingly remote connection horrifyingly apparent.

Oppenheimer filmed with 40 executioners before he met Anwar Congo, the main subject of *The Act of Killing*, and the man with whom he would refine his use of re-enactment as a documentary technique. Introduced at the beginning of the film with a title card that reads simply, "Executioner in 1965," Congo is a corpse-thin, grandfatherly figure with a mischievous smile. His paternal air is heightened by the constant presence of his protégé, Herman Koto, a comically fat gangster and paramilitary leader who, while too young to have participated in the 1965 massacre, embodies its legacy.

One of the most-feared death-squad leaders in North Sumatra at the time of the massacre, Congo killed as many as a thousand people using nothing but a length of wire, a club, or a machete. His response to Oppenheimer's challenge was to cast himself as the hero in scenes inspired by the Hollywood genres he enjoyed in his youth. By allowing Congo to indulge in this absurdity, Oppenheimer learns far more about both the man and his society than he ever could have learned from hours of interviews.

In planning sessions for their re-enactments (much of the film is composed of conversations that take place as the killers are preparing for scenes), Congo and Koto talk excitedly about the opportunity to use the film to project themselves into history. The scenes they create for Oppenheimer will form the basis of "a beautiful family movie," Congo says, one that gets at the truth of his youthful exploits. A film that dwells on such brazen artifice could easily lack humanity. But one thing *The Act of Killing* makes clear is that cultivating a public image is an action as quintessentially human as killing. While Congo never comes across as likeable, there's something disturbingly relatable about his vanity and delusion. We're drawn in by his need to be remembered, to be liked by the camera.

Reviews in the US of *The Act of Killing*, while mostly positive, typically lurched from one shocking thing that Congo does or says to another. In one scene, for instance, Congo describes exiting a screening of an Elvis musical, "still in the mood of the film," dancing

across the street to a paramilitary office, and “killing happily.” In a sequence of surreal film-noir scenes that layer fiction upon reality upon fiction, until the viewer is unsure what’s real and what’s theater, Congo and his fellow executioners dress in suits and fedoras and take turns playing victims and killers, choking each other with wire—a method they learned from Hollywood that became their go-to technique. At one point, Congo’s neighbor, who has volunteered to play an execution victim, tells the cast of killers gathered on set that he has a story that might fit with the plot. He explains that his stepfather had been abducted and murdered during the middle of the night, and that as a young child he went out the next day with his grandfather to find the body and bury it at the side of the road. “I promise,” the man says repeatedly during his story, “I’m not criticizing you.”

The killers smile and nod throughout, as if only pretending to listen, and then declare his scene too long and complicated for the story they’re trying to tell. Back to filming now, the killers prepare to choke the man with wire.

An important part of Oppenheimer’s approach was to screen a rush edit for the killers and film their response. One might expect Congo to be concerned about his image when he watches a scene of himself demonstrating how he choked his victims, but his only worry is his wardrobe. “I never would have worn white pants,” he says. “I look like I’m dressed for a picnic.”

As the film progresses, Congo and his friends slip, **in Oppenheimer’s words**, further “down the rabbit hole of self-invention.” And this reveals the effectiveness of Oppenheimer’s theatrical method as an investigative technique. Watching the re-enactments leads the characters to suggest new and more elaborate re-enactments, the filming of which requires them to dig more deeply into their pasts “both as they remember them, and as they would like to be remembered.” As Oppenheimer notes, “The most powerful insights in *The Act of Killing* probably come in those places where these two agendas radically diverge.” Not only did the re-enactment process capture confessions of crimes that had never been recorded, but it provides insights into the minds of the perpetrators as they attempt to take moments of unimaginable cruelty and mold them to fit their understanding of themselves and their society.

The film is not solely interested in the past, though, nor does it limit itself to the minds of its subjects. In an ever-widening attempt to explain themselves, the killers take Oppenheimer to see some of the most powerful figures in Indonesian society. And these men, rather than attempt to be more subtle or media savvy than the executioners who worked at their behest, amplify the performance of impunity.

We meet a newspaper publisher who was secretary general of the anti-communist forces that participated in the massacre in North Sumatra, and who actually used his newspaper’s building as a base for the killings. He takes Oppenheimer’s cameraman on a tour of his office to see the photos of him with prominent Indonesian politicians. He then confesses casually to using his newspaper as a mouthpiece for anti-leftist propaganda—“My job was to make the public hate them,” he says—and to ordering torture and execution. Near the end of the interview, Oppenheimer presses him on a detail of how the executions were carried out. “Why would I do such grunt work?” he responds. “One wink from me and they’re dead.”

In another scene, we visit a gathering of Pancasila Youth, a paramilitary group that grew out of the massacre and remains active in Indonesia. It claims 3 million members and runs a nationwide network of gambling, racketeering, and extortion operations with tacit approval from the Indonesian government—or at least the approval seems tacit, until Oppenheimer films a government official donning the organization’s orange-and-black fatigues and courting members with a rousing speech that includes lines such as, “We need gangsters to get things done,” and, “Beating people up is sometimes needed.”

The farther up the chain we go, the more we understand that Congo’s image of himself as a hero is not just the delusion of a sociopath, but a fantasy that pervades the highest reaches of Indonesian society. One of *The Act of Killing*’s most horrifying scenes takes place not at the site of a mass grave but on the set of a talk show in North Sumatra. Congo and his friends are invited on air to discuss their glamorous foray into filmmaking, and then are praised for developing the choking technique that became a “new, more efficient method for exterminating communists.” The peppy female host stresses this line, at which point the audience bursts into applause.

While these powerful men are the closest we get to obvious villains in *The Act of Killing*, the film doesn’t go out of its way to frame them as such. There’s no cut to an interview with a persecuted political opponent to sharpen our reaction to the one with the newspaper publisher. Congo is never confronted by his victims’ families. What’s more, *The Act of Killing* contains little in the way of historical context. It doesn’t attempt to explain which portion of guilt should go to the Indonesian military that masterminded the killings, or to the Western governments that gave them direct aide to do so, or to the thugs like Congo who did the garroting and stabbing.

The film’s lack of moral handholding makes many people deeply uncomfortable, but this ambiguity is the key to its power. Without a binary of victims and villains, the viewer is unsure whom to root for or against. Indonesians aren’t offered an affirmation or a rebuttal of the façade being presented, and so they can’t fall back on their past assumptions when deciding what to think about the film or its

characters. Outside of Indonesia, this moral complexity helps explain why *The Act of Killing* has managed to shock audiences that, after a century of unfathomable violence, have become inured to the notion of death squad leaders doing horrible things in distant lands. Shock at the killers' performance of impunity—an emotion expressed by critics and audience members worldwide—is inextricable from shock at the original deed itself. The concept of mass murder is woefully unsurprising to the average news consumer, but seeing it celebrated without any counterbalance from the victims' perspective presents a messy moral universe, one that audience members themselves must resolve, since the film doesn't do it for them.

Oppenheimer says his film helps expose the “dramaturgy” of journalism; it says something not only about the storytelling structures through which Congo and his peers process reality, but also those through which journalism processes reality. There is a similarity between journalistic storytelling and Hollywood narratives that present a tidy moral universe of good guys and bad guys, and conflicts that are resolved by the end of the story—a narrative structure that's as artificial as the façades it pretends to circumvent. It's become a stock criticism of Oppenheimer's approach to say that he risked reinforcing the killers' version of events, but journalistic efforts to get around a façade often end up trapped within the same parameters of debate established by the artifice. A film about the massacre that presented long-suffering victims and unrepentant killers would have played into the same simplistic logic that had already made most Indonesians uninterested in examining the situation.

Oppenheimer understands the appeal of this kind of story. “Within that narrative structure,” he says, “is both a legitimating sense that we are rational and good in contrast to the evil being exposed by the piece, and also the notion that we are hearing something for the first time, reinforcing our own sense of innocence.” The real exposé, he contends, is in showing us things we already know, stories we've heard or told ourselves many times, “and forcing us to say, ‘I knew that. Oh, shit. What does it say about me that I knew that?’”

While it's far from a Hollywood ending, Congo's participation in the film brought him to a similar self-realization. In the film's final scene, Congo is shown on a rooftop where he performed many of his executions. He launches into yet another self-justification to the camera, but then stops short and begins to gag. He tries to compose himself, then gags again, a frightening mirroring of the victims he strangled in this very place.

Whether this moment is an act of contrition or just one more performance is debatable, but the debate is sort of beside the point. Congo's reaction represents a realization that the massacre could be seen as something other than an act of heroism. Oppenheimer's interpretation is that the moment shows Congo “choking on the terror that comes when you look at the abyss between yourself and your image of yourself.” Defining journalism as an effort to expose that gap seems highly compatible with more traditional notions of journalism's mission.

Maybe the most interesting thing about *The Act of Killing* is that it has forced this realization not just on Congo, but on Indonesian society broadly. It's hard to imagine a work of traditional journalism having a similar impact on a nation. Oppenheimer says the film has come to Indonesia like the child in *The Emperor's New Clothes*, exclaiming that “the King is naked.” It has presented the story of the massacre so forcefully, and in the words of the killers themselves, that this gauzy national myth is now a reality that demands a reckoning.

While *The Act of Killing* has since been shown publicly in Indonesia, the editors of *Tempo*, the country's largest newsmagazine, watched it at a closed screening in Jakarta in 2012. The magazine's reporters and editors had never before addressed the killings from the perspective of the victims, but the film inspired them to send 47 journalists across the country to gather evidence. On October 1, 2012, *Tempo* published a double issue on the massacre. According to Oppenheimer, this “set the tone for the Indonesian media. And now the country's leading historians, filmmakers, artists, writers, educators, journalists, and human-rights activists are saying ‘We have to deal with it.’”

Writing in *Tempo*, one critic said, “*The Act of Killing* is the most powerful, politically important film about Indonesia that I have ever seen. The arrival of this film is itself a historical event almost without parallel.”

Indonesia is still a long way from launching a truth-and-reconciliation commission, let alone of purging the government of the corruption that continues as a legacy of Suharto's reign. But, in a societal if not yet practical sense, the country is immeasurably closer to seeking justice than it was before *The Act of Killing* was released.

The film's Indonesian co-director, who, like much of the crew, must remain anonymous for his safety, has made perhaps the most eloquent argument for the film's unusual technique and its impact. In a statement released with the film, he wrote:

Through the imaginations and recollections of mass murderers featured, I understand, with particular clarity, how one of the devices of the old regime is still working so efficiently. It is the ‘projector’ that keeps playing, on an endless loop, a fiction film

inside every Indonesian's head. People like [Congo] and his friends are the projectionists, showing a subtle but unavoidable form of propaganda, which creates the kind of fantasy through which Indonesians may live their lives and make sense of the world around them; a fantasy that makes them desensitized to the violence and impunity that define our society.

What are the degrees of separation between indulging, ignoring, and exposing artifice? *The Act of Killing* challenges journalists to answer that question. The answer doesn't lie in buying theater makeup and fedoras, but in a journalism that is patient and subtle enough to trace belief to action, and action to belief. It requires a journalism of the imagination that interrupts and reinterprets the stories already playing on an endless loop in our heads. Some of these stories we assume to be reality, and others we assume to be bullshit, but in either event they are stories we've been told—and have told ourselves—so many times that we lost the urge to examine them.

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