

The Power of Action and Silence in Joshua Oppenheimer's The Act of Killing and The Look of Silence

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Abstract

Film as one powerful media to penetrate political and cultural barriers is evident in two Joshua Oppenheimer's films on Indonesian 1965-6 genocide, *The Act of Killing* (2012) and *The Look of Silence* (2014). This paper explores how the films evoke controversy and generate power to raise contemporary Indonesian society's awareness regarding the historical trauma. Furthermore, the exploration expands to questions on humanity: what it means to be a human in a condition in which the victims live in silence and fear while the killers have impunity and see themselves as heroes? *The Act of Killing* focuses on triumphant "butchers" of thousands of accused communist and on the society that emerged from that genocide. *The Look of Silence* amplifies the silent and fearful lives of the survivors and relatives to the victims. The findings show that the films' narrative and visualization manage to reveal the wounds of the nation and the damaging consequences of the unreconciled trauma.

Keywords: Indonesia, Power, Action, Silence, Historical Trauma

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The past will never pass as long as threats still prevent us from acknowledging what happened in the past and from voicing the meaning of the traumatic past incident. (Joshua Oppenheimer)

Introduction

In almost 70 years of its independence, contemporary Indonesia is still haunted by its traumatic past that cost hundred of thousands innocent Indonesians. The past refers to the 1965-66 killings of the accused communists throughout Indonesia, which was a part of the global conflict between the U.S. and the Soviet Union that represent democracy and communism respectively. The CIA devised a plan to install Soeharto and bring down the leftist Soekarno that included the killings of top Indonesian generals and put the blame on the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) for it. The incident was never reconciled as the New Order regime under president Soeharto (1967-1998) rose to power owing to the incident. Furthermore, they perpetuated the discourse of communism as evil to preserve their power and control the people. They demonized communism, exalted themselves as heroes of democracy, generated impunity for the butchers, and condemned the accused communist survivors and their relatives for life.

The fall of Soeharto's regime in 1998 does not change much most Indonesians' perspective towards communism. More than 30 years of indoctrination on the evil of communism has seemingly made this idea an innermost conviction for most Indonesians. Thus, it explains the reason why Indonesians never talk about it openly, let alone commemorate it in reconciling manners. Due to the New Order regime's strict censorship and repression, any communism-related materials are either destroyed or banned. It may also explain the absence of any contesting historical accounts on what happened in 1965-66. The first openly public effort to talk and challenge the mainstream conviction about the killings is Hilton Cordell's *Shadow Play* (2001), which reveals the human tragedy in Indonesia under the manipulative and propagandistic Soeharto. In 2009, an American anthropologist and psychiatrist, Robert Lemelson, released *40 Years of Silence* that breaks the silence of the survivors and their descendent through testimonies and difficulties they face living in contemporary Indonesia. The effort to reveal this "wounds of the nation" is epitomized in Joshua Oppenheimer's controversial and innovative documentary, *The Act of Killing* (2012) and *The Look of Silence* (2014).

The fact that all four films are produced by non-Indonesians does not mean that no Indonesians dare to challenge the New Order version of history. There were artists, activists, and students who voiced their concerns and protests, but it came with consequences: some were outcast, others were kidnapped and interrogated, and few of them were "silenced" and never found. Even after the fall of Soeharto, especially around the beginning of the 21st century, this sort of intimidation occurs. This suggests that the New Order ideology remains strong as ever. It may also explain why the majority of Indonesians prefer to stay silent when it comes to the discussion of the 1965-66 killings. Consequently, the four films mentioned above were never publicly released on Indonesia movie theaters due to the fact that they would definitely be banned. In fact, the Indonesian film crew behind *The Act of Killing* insisted on anonymity to avoid intimidation. Thus, the screenings were done privately and exclusively, usually intermediated by students or activists, and even then the

military, police, or certain mass organizations still interfered with an excuse that the screenings may trigger social unrest, as happened in the latest screenings of *The Look of Silence* in three places in the city of Yogyakarta on 17 December 2014, and in Malang city on 10 December 2014. The controversy the two films arouses regarding the historical tragedy highlights the significance and importance of Oppenheimer's films as one medium for reconciliation. Like it or not, Indonesians have to face and acknowledge the past atrocity that has cost the lives of many innocent fellow Indonesians. Any excuses people make on the importance of the communists' killing which outcome is the democratic Indonesia, do not change the fact that genocide occurred, the killers are free, and the innocent survivors live in fear. In addition, an unreconciled trauma of this magnitude may create a precedent in the future that such tragedy is allowed to happen for a "right" reason. These main issues are the main focus that the films try to address, that for whatever reason, killings are unacceptable and reconciliation is critical for the nation to move on.

What separates *The Act of Killing* and *The Look of Silence* from other documentaries that similarly deal with war victims and criminals is their deep and disturbing psychological effects, not only for those with prior experience or knowledge on the incident, but also for general audience. *The Act of Killing* has punctured the boundary of horror and documentary genre through the exploration of the killer's memories, psychology, physical actions, and especially the killing re-enactments. For Indonesians, the shock mostly comes from the contrasting and revealing facts of the incident which totally differ from the mainstream version. To the general audience, the visualization and narration of the proud "butchers" through their "killing performance," coupled with the bitter and fearful silence of the victims, create a creepy-surrealist account of the incident. The killing re-enactments in *The Act of Killing* and the awkward encounter between the survivor and the killer in *The Look of Silence* collide the past and the present, and blur border between fact and fiction. They bring back the traumatic past and open the wounds that have been forcedly buried for many years. In addition, the revelation that the victims remain victims who live in fear and uncertainty, while the criminals are regarded as heroes and hold power, make the films almost unbearable to watch.

The Act of Killing

The Act of Killing opens with the following introduction:

"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 1 million 'communists' were murdered. The army used paramilitaries and gangsters to carry out the killings. These men have been in power—and have prosecuted their opponents—ever since..." (Oppenheimer, 2012)

Taken from the first scene of *The Act of Killing*, the quotation above underlines the ever existing horror of the past that indirectly shapes the seemingly peaceful and democratic contemporary Indonesia. Oppenheimer does not show what most Indonesians do not know about the tragedy but what they already know and try to

ignore and forget. The last two sentences of the introduction above become the film's main concern: how the killings were performed and what the present consequences on both the killers and the families of the victims. The power of *The Act of Killing* comes from four important variables that center on the perpetrators: the candid camera, the perpetrators' account/memories, their loud, boastful and surrealistic theatrical actions, and the perpetrator's sense of guilt, especially that of Anwar Congo's.

The "protagonists" of the film are two ex-paramilitary members, Anwar Congo and Adi Zulkadry (see figure 1), who claimed to be ones among many communist killers of the 1966. The film is set in Deli Serdang, North Sumatra, one of many places in Indonesia where the killings happened. In one interview, Oppenheimer said that among tens of killers whom he interviewed, only Anwar shows a glimpse of remorse and burden of living with such a horrifying memory. This is achieved through the use of candid camera. Behind his pride and boastful manner, the camera candidly captures some scenes in which Anwar is seen a weak and tired old man who tries to cope with his past atrocity. These shots show the genuine emotion of Anwar and Adi when they are confronted with their own past. Thus, the audience is presented by alternating expressions of proud/guilty/nervousness of the perpetrators, especially Anwar Congo. The moments when the camera captures his action/reaction during or in-between the re-enactments shooting show the mixed feeling clearly, at the same time also directly connect the present and the past. These seemingly accidental shots speak as loud as the re-enactments themselves, both amplify the power of visualization that generates the audience's awareness and the sense of urgency for nation reconciliation.



Figure 1: Adi Zulkadry (left) and Anwar Congo (right)

The second strength of the film comes from the killing re-enactment which ideas come directly from the perpetrators. Regarding the re-enactments, R. G. Collingwood, a historian philosopher (as cited in Brink, 2012), argues that re-enactments are significant to understand history because "history is concerned not with 'events,' but 'processes'" (p. 177). *The Act of Killing* emphasizes on a horrifying missed and/ or ignored past "historical process," which is still being shaped at present by the perpetrators and victims. By re-living this process through graphic re-enactments and the everyday lives of the perpetrators, Oppenheimer shocks and arouses Indonesians' consciousness of the unreconciled trauma within the Indonesian history. Oppenheimer brilliantly produces "a documentary within a documentary film" with multiple layers of narration, many of which juxtaposes the present situation

and the past accounts, merging them together when the re-enactments are done at the actual “historical” sites with the actual perpetrators (see figure 2).



Figure 2: A re-enactment of one “favorite” killing method in the actual killing site, performed by Anwar Congo

This particular scene above shows a powerful visualization when Anwar, leisurely and methodologically, demonstrates one method of killing which he claims prevents the victims from spilling too much blood, as stated in his narration below:

“There’s many ghosts here, because many people were killed here ... They died unnatural deaths. They arrived perfectly healthy. When they got here they were beaten up and died ... Dragged around ... And dumped ... At first we beat them to death. But there was too much blood. There was so much blood here ... So then we cleaned it up, it smelled awful. To avoid the blood, I used this system. Can I show you ...?”

These re-enactments “transform the temporal into the spatial and are intensely visual” (Paul Anzte and Michael Lambek , 1996, p. xii), as they not only draw audience into the actual “killing space,” but force them into living the killing/being killed experience through the perpetrator’s act of killing. In his online article, Peter Bradshaw (2014) dubs the re-enactments as “a veritable Marat/Sade of 20th-century history,” emphasizing the sadistic-theatrical scenes of the film. The use of cinematic Hollywood genres such as musicals, gangster and western styles to re-enact the killings (see figure 3-5) are somewhat disturbing and uncanny as it downplays the horror of the killings. Yet, the killers’ choice of the Hollywood styles also implies the perpetrators’ attempt to escape the horrifying past by imagining it as happy memories, just as Oppenheimer in his interview with Amy Goodman (2013), describes Anwar Congo coming out of the movie theater one night, “dancing his way across and killing happily ... acting was always part of the act of killing for the men in the film” (para. 26). The result of this memory visualization (see figure 3-5) is a mixture of weird, out of place and time costumes, accessories, song-and-dance sequences, bloody makeup, mock sessions of torture, music, and other peculiarities in the re-enactments that powerfully signify the psychological problems the perpetrators have.



Figure 3: A musical burlesque-ish killing re-enactment



Figure 4: A gangster/western-like re-enactment



Figure 5: Herman (left), Anwar's hench-man in a burlesque-ish costume, lamenting on Anwar's head as the "victim"

As information, the perpetrators are given freedom to re-enact the killing in any way they want, and these choice of unrealistic/surrealist re-enactments suggests their reluctance and avoidance to deal with the reality of their past actions, thus hiding behind those surrealist re-enactments. Another interesting fact about the re-enactments is that Oppenheimer makes the killers acted both as victims and

perpetrators. Anwar Congo himself compellingly played as a victim more often and more convincingly than as the killer (see figure 3 and 5), which interestingly may hint at his guilty feeling and his attempt to redeem himself. When he plays as a victim, he can easily remember how the victims plead for mercy and how they sound when he slits their throats. His repressed sense of guilt eventually rises to the reality level, which means not during the re-enactment, when Anwar, in the last scene located in one of the killing spots, suddenly feels like throwing up but unable to do so (see figure 6). His condition fittingly concludes the overall tone of the film, that people are disgusted and sick of the tragic past, yet do not seem to be ready for an all-out confrontation and reconciliation.



Figure 6: Anwar in the last scene when he suddenly feels sick and attempts to throw out to no avail

The Look of Silence

The visual power of *The Look of Silence* comes from the camerawork, in particular the zooming and static camera, its pauses and silences, and its focus on face-to-face interaction between the victim's relatives and perpetrators. The film opens with a close-up shot of an old man wearing a phoropter glasses (see figure 6), which also becomes the poster of the film. The old man does not say nor do anything, and it is only after several scenes that the audience learns that the old man is Inong, one of the 1966 killers. In this particular scene, Adi, whose brother is probably killed by Inong, comes to check Inong's deteriorating eyes and while doing so, leading him to talk about the 1966 killings. The scene is highly engaging as it slowly unfolds the tragic past that binds them. The conversation flows smoothly before Inong starts to stutter and finally decides to stop talking when Adi tells him that his brother is one of the victims, with a high chance that Inong is one of the killers.

Suddenly confronted by the unexpected topic, Inong avoids the question by telling Oppenheimer to stop the filming, but unknowingly to Inong, the camera stays and zooms on his silent look. Throughout the narration, Oppenheimer employed the classical talking head style but repurposed it by not solely aiming for the narration, but for the look, which turns out to tell more than the narration itself. Inong's close-up shot is one instance from many in which the interviewees are left speechless while the camera keeps staring at their meaningful silence. The camera often times performs an extreme close-up shot of the interviewees' eyes to reveal the introspective silence through the eyes. Thus, being an ophthalmologist, Adi perfectly fits the film's idea to explore and expose this muted historical trauma by "correcting"

the visions. The longer the silences, the louder they speak to the audience about the muted trauma.

This zooming, static camera shots become the strength of the film in revealing the depth of the psychological trauma that both the victims and the perpetrators suffer from, and this type of shots can be found throughout the film. Inong's contemplative stare, the nervous movement of his lips and body language take us back to the horror of the 1966 event. The camerawork as seen in figure 7 brilliantly captures a powerful moment that fits the film's attempt to re-focus the audience's vision on the blurred historical trauma, which at the same time also serves as an eye-opening moment for the perpetrators themselves.



Figure 7: Inong in the phoropter glasses



Figure 8: Adi and the TV set

The scene is juxtaposed with the scene when Adi, the “protagonist,” watched a clip of Oppenheimer’s interview with some perpetrators (see figure 8). He silently watched the clip on a TV while the perpetrators boasted about their past actions. The camerawork as seen in figure 7 above cleverly shows the isolated and silenced past of his life, which is illuminated by the “silent TV set,” fittingly serves the inherent quality of film, as Bernard Stiegler states, as a “technology of memory” (as cited in Wahlberg, 2008). In his case, however, a memory clash occurs between the victims and perpetrators, with the later being in power. The scene has double layers when the audience watches Adi watches the TV set. Here, the visual power is coming from the way Adi watches it: his silent and perplexed reaction towards what he watches represents the muted voice of the helpless victims, who can only stand and watch the perpetrators’s boastful and proud manners.

The scene is abruptly cut to a scene in which an old woman helps a blind old man taking a bath, whom the audience later learns to be Adi's parents (see figure 9 and 10). The film also introduces Adi's son in a school scene in which the teacher, in a brainwash-like manner, feeds the students with the mainstream version of the 1966 historical accounts, in contrast with what Adi tells his son. These silences and the continual misleading indoctrination of the young generation on the historical event suggest the reluctance, denial and even fear of contemporary Indonesians to deal with the nation unattended wound. The film consistently juxtaposes Adi's interview scenes, which represents the present, and Adi's parents' mundane activity scenes, which represent the past, to emphasize the fusion of the past and present, with the brief school scene that refers to the future.

The interviews between Adi and the victims and perpetrators are generally conducted in a different manner: Oppenheimer chooses the traditional talking heads interview scenes for the interview of the perpetrators, and a much informal interview with the victims. For example, there are scenes of Adi's interviewing two low-level government officials in their home in which they sit across each other. In contrast, Adi interviews his parents while they are performing their daily activities such as sleeping, cooking and bathing. The distinctive interview style indirectly also refers to the issue of discriminative treatment of the family of the victims, compared to the patriotic treatment of the perpetrators.



Figure 9: Adi's blind and senile father

Adi's interview with his parents is more intimate and spontaneous, and the nature of interview itself is more dialogic: Adi only asks his father about his favorite song or good past memories. Most of Adi's father scenes are silent shots of his physical deterioration: blindness, senility, and paralysis, which powerfully suggest the helplessness of the family of the victims.



Figure 10: Adi's mom

Unlike Adi's father who fails to cope with the trauma and falls into senility, Adi's mother remembers every details of the traumatic experience but helpless to do anything to the perpetrator who is ironically their own neighbor. She only expresses her anger and bitterness continually and surrenders her life and the fate of the perpetrators to the Almighty.



Figure 11: Inong and his daughter

One interesting and powerful scene is when Adi confronts Inong for the second time at his house, this time Inong is accompanied by his grown-up daughter. In one of his responses to Adi's questions, Inong explicitly says that he always drinks the blood of the people he kills to avoid going crazy. He mentions one of his friends who goes insane after killing so many people. Her daughter is surprised as it is the first time she learns about this particular dark side of his father's past. When Adi says that his brother is one of Inong's victims, Inong again does not respond and only absent-mindedly stares at nothing. Awkwardly, his daughter apologizes to Adi on behalf of Inong. The focus of this scene is Inong and the presence of his daughter further stresses his unsolved psychological issue; that in his silence and seemingly unrepentant manner, the traumatic past keeps haunting him.

Conclusion

The Act of Killing and The Look of Silence hint at the prevalence of anti-communist discourse in contemporary Indonesia and the reluctance to acknowledge the tragic historical event. The difficulties Oppenheimer faced when trying to interview the victims and officially screen the films for public only strengthens it. It is obvious that any attempt to bring back this tragedy into the nation's grand narrative is still considered subversive. In addition, the anonymity of the film's Indonesian crew members in the closing credits suggests that the wound in the national consciousness is unhealed.

The Act of Killing is produced in a "celebratory" manner by the perpetrators, while The Look of Silence focuses on being confrontational. Both films brilliantly arouse visual senses with their camerawork. The loud and bombastic boast of the perpetrators through their colorful and surrealistic re-enactments in The Act of Killing are contrasted with the numb silence of the confrontation between the perpetrators and the victims in The Look of Silence. The Act of Killing power of the visualization is emphasized through the camerawork that mostly employs candid, wide-shot and dynamic camerawork, in contrast to the use of a more static and close-up camerawork in The Look of Silence.

In conclusion, when the authority justifies genocide, when the killers become heroes, and when the family of the victims faces uncertain future and continual threats, then the wound of the nations will never heal. In a controversial manner, this film shakes Indonesian audience up precisely to open their eyes and mind that there is a gaping unattended and unhealed old wound that tragically lies the foundation of Indonesian society. The glimmerings of conscience of the perpetrators in both films and the strong-willed determination of the family of the victims to live a better live may offer a glimpse of hope that sometimes in the future, the nation is ready to face this traumatic past. Before that happens, this two films will become a reminder of how this unreconciled trauma will continuously consume the nation solidity and unity, as Oppenheimer fittingly states, "Without acknowledging and voicing the meaning of the past that pertains to the discriminative treatment of the perpetrators, then it means we bow and surrender to fear and threats from the perpetrators."

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