

Mihaela Precup*

“THEY ALWAYS KILL WITH WIRE”: INDONESIAN ADAPTATIONS OF AMERICAN CINEMA IN THE ACT OF KILLING (DIR. JOSHUA OPPENHEIMER, 2012)¹

Keywords: *American cinema; Indonesian genocide; documentary film; state of exception; adaptation*

Abstract: *The Act of Killing (2012) is a documentary by American film director Joshua Oppenheimer, who went to Indonesia and encouraged former executioners to reenact their murders from the time of the 1965-1966 military coup, when one million people were killed after they were accused of being communists. In a country where the government openly supports the main paramilitary organization, Pancasila (whose members also participated in the genocide), and glorifies the gangsters who were paid to kill communists and boisterously explain the etymology behind their Indonesian name, fremen (from the English “free men”), Oppenheimer found that he was not allowed to interview the victims. Instead, he was pushed by circumstance to tell the story from the perpetrators’ point of view. The main character, Anwar, is a movie buff and big fan of American popular culture, particularly gangster movies, Elvis Presley and other movie stars and their standard costumes such as cowboy hats and bolo ties. His murders, as well as his reenactments of the murders, are sometimes close quotations of these aspects of American culture. This paper will be focusing on killing as an act of adaptation, imitation, and cultural collaboration. From this perspective, the act of killing is transformed—in the perpetrator’s view—into a performative tribute to a specific segment of American cinematic culture. The value of human life (not inherent to life, as Butler warns in Precarious Life and Frames of War) is thus read through the distancing effects of filmic adaptation; however, through the reenactment of his crimes, Anwar also appears to open himself up to an understanding of his deeds as morally problematic and traumatic, and his reading of his victims’ lives changes. In order to understand how that change is made possible (and how previously bare life becomes valuable), I will place myself in conversation with theoreticians such as Giorgio Agamben, Judith Butler, and others.*

There is an intriguing assimilation of American culture present in the criminal acts of several Indonesian perpetrators of genocide from Joshua Oppenheimer’s *The Act of Killing* (2012), a documentary about the Indonesian genocide from 1965-1966, when one million people were killed during a bloody

* University of Bucharest; Romania.

¹ This work was supported by the strategic grant POSDRU/159/1.5/S/140863, Project ID 140863 (2014), co-financed by the European Social Fund within the Sectorial Operational Program Human Resources Development 2007 – 2013.

change of regime which had president Sukarno replaced by Suharto. The documentary, however, is not preoccupied with the actual political details of the change of regime. In fact, it only provides minimal political and cultural background and appears to focus instead on issues such as the visual representation of torture and mass murder, the dynamics of witnessing, remembering, and reenacting scenes from the past, as well as the particular interpretation of the value of human life that made it possible for so many to be killed.² In order to find out more background information, one needs to do additional research which includes recorded interviews with Oppenheimer, who demonstrates that he would have been perfectly equipped to add more specifics, but decided not to do so.³

As a genre, *The Act of Killing* is difficult to inscribe in any one category: although it is close to the advocacy documentary, it does not suggest a specific reading of its events and subjects; although it examines a certain time frame from the history of Indonesia, it does not make explicit the conjunction or the chronology of the facts that led to the crisis, and although its purpose is to introduce to a Western audience an episode from the history of Indonesia, it steers clear of the methods of the ethnographic documentary. It does not try to provide more details about Indonesian culture, which can be described as “an ethnological goldmine” which “consists of some 336 ethnic groups, living on 13,677 islands, speaking 250 dialects and are religiously and culturally different.” (Lee 2) Oppenheimer was inspired by cinema vérité, but he employs a wide array of other staple methods of traditional documentary film: interviews with the participants, focus on one key figure who tells the story of his own participation in the events, filming on location (including the location of various killings), some reliance on photography to show what the main characters had looked like fifty years before, and (in the absence of actual footage from the killings), reenactments. However, his film is different from most documentaries about genocide because his interviewees are perpetrators, not survivors, which is rather uncommon in films about genocide. However, it is not the first film to focus on perpetrators instead of their victims. In an interview with Nick Bradshaw, Oppenheimer himself mentions Rob Lemkin and Thet Sambath’s film *Enemies of the People* (2010) that interviews a top member of the Khmer Rouge

² In an article from Indiewire, filmmaker Jill Godmilow takes issue with the scarcity of facts and cultural background introduced by Oppenheimer in *The Act of Killing*, and particularly “the role of the U.S. in the Indonesian massacres,” an important detail that the director does mention frequently in interviews but decides not to include in the film as such. Although Godmilow’s objection is partly justified—the lack of basic information about actual events does create a factual fog—it also stems from a specific understanding of the purpose of the documentary genre, that of offering as much relevant factual information as possible about its main subject.

³ Oppenheimer’s is not the first documentary film to tackle the Indonesian genocide: in 2000, Indonesian filmmaker Garin Nugroho made *A Poet: Unconcealed Poetry*, about Ibrahim Kadir, a poet who was wrongly accused of being a communist and imprisoned in 1965 (he was released after 22 days); anthropologist Robert Lemelson’s *40 Years of Silence* (shot between 2001-2006 on the islands of Bali and Java, released in 2009) focuses on several survivors and victims’ children from Bali and Java.

about the genocide from Cambodia. The difference is that Cambodia did set in motion a process to investigate and punish those responsible for the Killing Fields (1975-1979), but Oppenheimer's subject lives in a regime where his past deeds have not been officially reinterpreted as morally wrong with the passage of time: no official apology has been issued, no compensation to the victims' families or the survivors, and the official definition of the event is not "genocide."

The only information related to the 1965-66 events is provided at the beginning of the documentary, in typescript running against the background image of a mall. Also visible are a McDonald's sign and other huge billboards advertising various products, a background that is in contrast with the subsequent images of impoverished areas where Anwar is looking for people to play various parts in the reenactments of his killings:

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 army used paramilitaries and gangsters to carry out the killings. These men have been in power—and have persecuted their opponents—ever since. 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 killing in whatever ways they wished. This film follows that process, and documents its consequences.

This introduction does provide the audience with some basic knowledge of what the two sides of the conflict were: the military dictatorship versus those suspected of communist sympathies. The "direct aid of western governments" is mentioned, to clarify the fact that the conflict was international in scope (and to suggest the involvement of the United States). The purpose of the documentary is "to understand why" so many were killed, although as the film progresses it seems that the main question is rather "how it was possible that so many human beings were killed by other human beings."

The decision of the filmmaker to settle on only one perpetrator may seem odd, considering the incredible scope of the tragedy from Indonesia, but after the audience is told that Anwar Congo has taken responsibility for about 1,000 killings, it becomes apparent that the director's decision to focus on him was appropriate. Oppenheimer filmed for five years and interviewed forty perpetrators until he settled on Congo as a main subject, because, as Oppenheimer claims in an interview with Ondi Timoner, "his pain was close to the surface." It is clear from the film that the level of intimacy between Oppenheimer and Congo is quite high: the director, who speaks the language, is allowed into the subject's home, he meets his grandchildren, and is even allowed in the bedroom to film Congo at night, when he is asleep; he is referred to by his first name, "Joshua," throughout the film, by all the interviewees, and the tone and pace of the conversations is very friendly. Oppenheimer also had an Indonesian co-director who appears as "anonymous" because he was afraid of the negative consequences of his participation in a film on such a controversial topic. The key figure is thus treated like a hero in Indonesia at the time of filming: Anwar

Congo, a man in his 70s, “freman” and death squad leader who claims to be responsible for killing 1,000 people himself.⁴

The investigation of “the act of killing” begins from an examination of the method of killing, which, in Congo’s case, is inspired by American cinema, or so he claims. Anwar Congo is so well-respected that he is even interviewed on national television about the new film he is making with his friends; there, sporting a cowboy hat and bolo tie, he regales the audience with tales of how gangster films inspired him to kill with wire.⁵ To the left of the screen one can see props from the film, such as several severed mannequin’s heads they had presumably used or were going to use. The reporter reinterprets Anwar’s explanations just in case they may be misconstrued, by reading from a pre-prepared script: “Which means Anwar and his friends developed a new, more efficient way for (sic!) exterminating communists. It was more humane, less sadistic, and avoided excessive violence.” This, however, is later contradicted by another death squad leader, Anwar’s friend Adi, whose enumeration of the many other preferred killing methods is played on top of a few shots of him relaxing at the mall with his wife and daughter: “We shoved wood into their anus until they died. We crushed their necks with wood. We hung them. We strangled them with wire. We cut off their heads. We ran them over with cars. We were allowed to do it.” Adi thus dispels the fog of glamour surrounding Congo’s reading of his murder scenes as tributes to Hollywood and adaptations of American cinema to real life.

In what follows, I will focus on the consequences of reading the act of killing as presented by Anwar Congo as an act of adaptation, imitation, and cultural collaboration. *The Act of Killing* focuses on cultural and cinematic collaboration in more than one way. Perhaps the most discreet reference is the connection between the genocide and the success of American and other western corporations in Indonesia after 1966. Oppenheimer is much more vocal about this matter in his interviews, but in the film this is not the main topic of conversation.

It is evident that Congo and his friends display a great deal of admiration for and desire to emulate American culture: cinema, fashion, even political leaders.⁶ What is most evident is the transnational circulation of several tropes of American fictional film. *The Act of Killing* is haunted by the ghosts of American cinema, in particular the gangster films that Congo claims he used to watch with great enjoyment. Congo attempts to present himself as a smooth fashionable young man who participated in the successful crushing of the ban on American cinema that the communists attempted. He speaks not only as a fan, but as a “freman,” since he was a movie ticket scalper and the ban would have negatively affected his business. In

⁴ “Freman” is a local word for gangster, and its etymology is clarified by several people in the film as coming from the English “free man,” probably in an attempt to glorify the social insubordination of the small-time crooks who are part of this social group.

⁵ “Killing with wire” is how Anwar Congo refers to the practice of garroting, a cheap method he discovered when it became evident that shooting and beating people to death was both more costly and difficult to clean.

⁶ For instance, Barack Obama—who lived in Indonesia between 1967-1971—is used by Herman Koto as a source of inspiration when the latter prepares to give his first political speeches.

fact, in the interview with Ondi Timoner, Oppenheimer claims that it was not merely the left that boycotted American films in 1965, but also the right, because the head of the American Motion Picture Association in Indonesia (an importer of American films) was exposed as a CIA operative who was part of a plot to overthrow the government.

Congo makes repeated claims that his use of garroting to kill his victims came from American gangster films, with which he competed: “we watched so many sadistic movies so we were influenced by them...we were more cruel than the movies. (...) I was influenced by films starring Marlon Brando, Al Pacino. (...) And westerns with John Wayne. (...) I always watched gangster films—where they always kill with wire. It’s faster with wire.” However, garroting only became more visible in American cinema after Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Godfather* (1972), starring Marlon Brando and Al Pacino; still, both before and after *The Godfather*, shooting was, in fact, the preferred method of execution in gangster films. It is possible that Congo is confused about the chronology or that he is lying outright; in any case, he uses his adaptation of American gangster films to Indonesian gangster life as a means of making his actions during the genocide not only more legitimate, but also more glamorous, by inscribing them in an American fictional narrative based on facts. This was partly because these films came from a country that was perceived as an ally, since the C.I.A. provided support to the Indonesian military during the genocide, something that has not been fully discussed in American public life, although some of the related CIA files were disclosed in 2005:

In the years since, a fuller picture has emerged about how America aided the anti-Communist insurgencies in Indonesia—one of the biggest dominoes around—beginning in the late fifties: running covert bombing missions, furnishing weapons, supplying Suharto with the names of Indonesian Communists. “Communist” was a broad and exploitable category during the purge—a justification to kill people deemed undesirable for any number of reasons. In a top-secret intelligence report from 1968, since declassified, the C.I.A. called the massacre it had supported “one of the worst mass murders of the twentieth century, along with the Soviet purges of the 1930s, the Nazi mass murders during the Second World War, and the Maoist bloodbath of the early 1950s.” (Weiner)⁷

These cinematic influences (gangster films, musicals, and the less-mentioned westerns) become apparent in Anwar’s attempt to include the reenactments of his killings in a larger plot that would be a tribute to Hollywood. The project, devised by Congo and his gangster friend Herman, appears to be a confusing mixture of actual reenactments of interrogations and executions that Anwar participated in, as well as music and dance sequences. Congo pays great attention to the staging of the killings in particular, and his examination of his own photographic archive shows that the executions were, for him, also part of a performance where the fashion of American cinema was creatively adapted to his own practical needs and aesthetic preferences: “I wore jeans for the killing. (...) I look good. I imitated movie stars.” His attention to costume (almost always

⁷ However, the first rumors about the involvement of the C.I.A. appeared in 1990 (see Wines).

including cowboy hats and bolo ties) contributes to the creation of his own brand of verisimilitude that translates as an allegiance to the truth of the films he loved, films where he identified with the gangsters, not the victims.

Congo remains unmoved, reassured, and protected by the cinematic convention when he positions himself as an actor playing the part of a gangster in some minimally decorated chamber, with the participants (his friends) dressed carefully by himself, smoking around an interrogation table. He only falters and is shaken by the spectacle of his own past deeds during scenes such as the reenactment of the Kampoung Kolam massacre where the pace of the narrative becomes very fast, with fire, smoke and particularly blood gushing, and also in scenes that contain more hands-on killings such as the severing of a head. Another moment when he falters is when he himself plays the role of a victim; after the scene ends, he appears to be unwell, and as he is watching himself on screen later, he also claims to be having a revelation: “Did the people I tortured feel the way I do here? I can feel what the people I tortured felt...tearing up. Have I sinned? I did this to so many people, Josh. Is it all coming back to me? I really hope it won’t. I don’t want it to, Josh.” His words have the cadence, humility, and persistence of a prayer, and the role of the moral authority is played in that particular scene (if not at all times) by Joshua Oppenheimer, whom his subject is asking for reassurance and, possibly, even forgiveness.

However, the emotions generated by the adaptation of American cinema to the act of killing also appear to be genre-specific. Thus, another category of films that were loved by the gangsters were the musicals; the consequence is that when they watched Elvis musicals, they often presented themselves in front of the victim dancing and singing, and ended up killing “happily,” the burden of work lifted from them somewhat by the musical memories of what they had just watched.

There are many musical and dance numbers featuring Herman in drag and appearing to play the part of a pregnant communist woman. Great attention is paid to the costumes, even when the drag numbers are clearly meant as comic relief (which is not always). According to filmmaker Kathy Huang, director of *Tales of the Waria*, although drag is common in Indonesian culture, it is mainly associated with cheap spectacle, and “the mainstream media [...] preferred to portray *warias* [transgender women] as buffoons or sexual deviants.” However, it does not become immediately evident why Herman may have been in drag and playing the part of a pregnant woman, because none of the other parts of the broken narrative of the film-within-a-film directed by Anwar Congo seem to give a reason for this. The plot becomes even more puzzling when Anwar and Herman proudly state that their film has everything, and they include humor and romance on the list. The reason for this confusion is that Oppenheimer cut any reference to their script from the final version of *The Act of Killing*. In an article from *The Jakarta Post*, we find out that, “According to Anwar (...) the film was shot in North Sumatra and was originally titled *Arsan dan Aminah* (*Arsan and Aminah*)” (Gunawan and Kurniasari). According to the same article, Congo was supposed to have “portrayed Arsan, who falls in love with Aminah, a member of the Gerwani, the PKI women’s movement, and the daughter of a PKI member.” Oppenheimer’s omission has the unfortunate effect of making the hodge-podge of cinematic references from his subjects’ film appear even more absurd. This

does not work to defend him in the face of critics (like Godmilow) who claim that he may have given free creative reign to his subjects—without warning them of how certain elements will be read as ridiculous by western audiences—in order to create a grotesque spectacle of the otherness of Indonesian culture. On the other hand, it is usually the case with documentaries, this debate about whether the director intervened too much or not enough is inevitable. In any case, I believe the editing could have been made in such a manner as to disambiguate the plot Anwar and Herman were working on.⁸

As a tribute to American cinema, the act of killing undesirable citizens for money becomes, for the perpetrators, both more personal and less emotional. The film is a meditation on how one assigns value to human life (as this value is not inherent to life, as Judith Butler warns in *Precarious Life and Frames of War*). It is also a meditation on the consequences of, in Giorgio Agamben's phrasing, the temporary "suspension of the law" characteristic of the "state of exception" which here becomes "the dominant paradigm of government" (2) decades after the original political crisis occurred. Although the film does not manage to fully answer Butler's nagging question, "under [what] conditions precarious life acquires a right to protection" (*Frames of War* 20), it does suggest that post-factum documentation can work to at least unveil the conditions that made possible so much loss of life. In other words, such films can work to counter the lack of imagination that makes genocide possible (Samantha Power qtd. in Wilson and Crowder-Taraborrelli 4).

The value of life differs, in the film, according to the particular performance in which the perpetrator is engaged at a given moment. The many intersecting performances Congo finds himself involved in only serve to obscure his own ethical engagement and to cast doubt over the final scene. In it, he goes back to the initial place of most of the killings, on the roof of a building, with his wire, and instead of being able to tell the tale we already know, he presents us with a meditation on his own crimes that is broken by moments when he cannot speak because he is dry heaving. Although he had mentioned nightmares from the beginning of the film, he had initially seemed more detached. In this final scene, still very carefully dressed, Congo, his hair once again white (he had died it for the performances), seems to have become a textbook case for what theoreticians like Cathy Caruth have identified as the delayed impact of punctual trauma. It is at this point that it becomes evident that Oppenheimer presents us with a very closely controlled chronology of feeling adapted from the narrative structure of genocide fictional films (Wilson and Crowder-Taraborrelli 5). According to Madelaine Hron, one of the problems of films that approach the representation of genocide is the attempt to follow the model of the bildungsroman and "its ideals of progress, social assimilation, and narrative resolution" which "resist, if not counter, the reality of genocide and its aftermath" (135). It is unclear whether Anwar Congo felt that he owed Oppenheimer a final

⁸ In Robert Lemelson's film *40 Years of Silence*, historian John Roosa claims that the reporting of some on the events in the area "was drowned out by a common prejudice that Indonesians were simply an inscrutable people to whom violence came naturally" (min. 33.30). In this context, perhaps Oppenheimer should have made more effort to discourage a reading of the murders through the lens of prejudice.

manifestation of some remorse or if he really did feel it. It is possible that, through the persistent cinematic circulation of the western model of trauma, Congo may have felt obligated to perform whatever ending best suited his film. However, it is impossible to fully demonstrate either of these readings.

Through its cinematic and transcultural dialogues, the film suggests that the value of human life depends on the type of performance in which victims and perpetrators are engaged. Under the eye of the American filmmaker perceived as a friend and ambassador of a friendly culture, simply because he is an American, the perpetrators feel the pressure of performing well; it is possible that they also feel the pressure of translating what was once to them, in Agamben's terms, "bare life" as "politically or morally qualified life" so as not to appear too "cruel" (a worry they voice throughout the film). Perhaps in states of exception one solution for the preservation of human life is to frame it in a performance that makes it difficult to kill. The performance would differ from case to case, but I would like to suggest that part of any successful post-traumatic mediation is the understanding of the interconnectedness of events from separate and distant communities, a conversation among cultures that does not rely on othering, does not propose a hierarchy of suffering, and does not glamorize violence.

Works Cited

- Agamben, Giorgio. *State of Exception*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. Print.
- Bradshaw, Nick. "Build my gallows high: Joshua Oppenheimer on The Act of Killing." *BFI*. 15 April 2014. Web.
- Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, 2004. Print.
- . *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* London: Verso, 2009. Print.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. Print.
- Godmilow, Jill. "Killing the Documentary. An Oscar-Nominated Filmmaker Takes Issue with The Act of Killing." *Indiewire*. 5 March 2014. Web.
- Gunawan, Apriadi, and Triwik Kurniasari. "Actors may sue director of lauded film on PKI killings." *The Jakarta Post*. 15 September 2012. Web.
- Hron, Madeleine. "Genres of 'Yet Another Genocide.' Cinematic Representations of Rwanda." *Film and Genocide*. Eds. Kristi M. Wilson and Tomás F. Crowder-Taraborrelli. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012. 133-153. Print.
- Huang, Kathy. "Tales of the Waria: Inside Indonesia's Third-Gender Community." *Huffington Post*. 26 May 2012. Web.
- Lee, Khoon Choi. *A Fragile Nation: the Indonesian Crisis*. River Edge, NJ and London: World Scientific Publishing, 1999. Print.
- Timoner, Ondi. "Interview with Filmmaker Joshua Oppenheimer." *Youtube. TheLipTV*, 6 Nov. 2013. Web.
- Weiner, Jonah. "The Weird Genius of 'The Act of Killing.'" *The New Yorker*. 15 July 2013. Web.

Wines, Michael. "C.I.A. Tie Asserted in Indonesia Purge." *The New York Times*. 12 July 1990. Web.