In 2013, Texas-born film maker Joshua Oppenheimer launched his documentary film *The Act of Killing*, which explores the aftermath of the 1965 mass killings in Indonesia. The work received worldwide critical acclaim, won numerous awards and prizes at festivals (European Film Award, BAFTA Award, DocsBarcelona, Berlinale), and was nominated for an Academy Award in 2014. Oppenheimer’s new film, *The Look of Silence*, was released in August 2014.

**Interview by Anneleen Spiessens**

**THE AIM OF ALL GENUINE ART IS ALWAYS ENGAGED**

Joshua Oppenheimer

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The Act of Killing is therefore an enquiry into the nature of memory and imagination. Rather than offering an account of what happened in the past, the film exposes a present-day regime that has never been forced to acknowledge its crimes and is established on glorifying mass murder. In this sense, it is also a film about the power of fiction. As it turns out, fiction in Indonesia – be it in the form of cinema, propaganda or re-enactment – precedes, surrounds, supplants but ultimately also uncovers the violence in the real world.

Joshua Oppenheimer. The Act of Killing broaches the subject of the mass killings in Indonesia in the 1960s, an event that, at the time, was largely obscured by the Vietnam War. You even refer to it as a “forgotten story”. When did you learn about it, and why did you decide to film the perpetrators?

Joshua Oppenheimer: I went to Indonesia for the first time in 2001 to produce *The Globalization Tapes*, a participatory film project. My co-director Christine Cynn and I helped a group of palm oil plantation...
workers to document their struggle to organize a union in the immediate aftermath of the Suharto dictatorship, under which unions had been illegal. However, the Belgian owner of the plantation, Société financière, hired Pancasila Youth to intimidate and threaten the workers. It was then that I found out why they were so afraid: many of their parents and grandparents had been members of a strong union but had been accused of being communist sympathizers in 1965, and were killed. Clearly the workers feared that this could happen again.

After we finished that documentary project, I decided to go back to the plantation and make another film about the paralyzing fear people experience in a post-genocidal society where there has been no justice, no efforts to address what happened, and where the perpetrators still hold key positions in the government. But when I got there in 2003, the army threatened the workers not to participate in the film. On the advice of the survivors, I approached the perpetrators instead. I found out to my horror that every single one of them was boastful, often about the worst details of the killings, which they would recount with smiles on their faces even in front of their grandchildren. Both the survivors and the Indonesian National Human Rights Commission, after watching the material, assured me that I was on to something very important, often about the worst details of the killings, which they would recount with smiles on their faces even in front of their grandchildren. Both the survivors and the Indonesian National Human Rights Commission, after watching the material, assured me that I was on to something very important.

Why did you choose Anwar Congo as a central character for the film?

Joshua Oppenheimer: It wasn’t a conscious decision. I expected to make a film about a group of perpetrators. Between 2003 and 2005, my anonymous Indonesian crew and I spent two years filming every perpetrator we could find, working our way from plantation to plantation, from the countryside to the city, from death squad to death squad, up the chain of command. Anwar was the forty-first perpetrator we filmed. When I first met him, he took me to his old office, to the rooftop where he murdered hundreds of people. He thought it would be useful to bring wire along to demonstrate his killing techniques, and a friend to play the victim. In a way, I think, this friend had to protect him from the ghosts that he felt were waiting there.

So this scene, where he shows how he killed and then dances the cha-cha-cha, was shot on the very first day I met him. In fact, that was a typical first shot with a perpetrator, except for one thing: Anwar, unlike the other forty perpetrators, acknowledged his guilt. Within minutes, he started talking about having nightmares, being afraid of the ghosts, about drinking and taking drugs to forget what he did. Then he starts to dance. Of course, in dancing in a spot where he killed all these people, he was creating one of the most grotesque, potent metaphors for impunity that I encountered during this whole two-year period. Yet, the reason why he was dancing, was because he was trying to banish the pain that he had just described.

Anwar Congo’s gradual recognition of the reality and scale of his own crimes constitutes the narrative backbone of the film. At night, in the middle of the sea, he claims being afraid of karma, of the law of nature – as a preman, by definition, he does not need to fear state law. Later, after playing his own victim during an interrogation scene, he seems overwhelmed and confesses to you in an almost religious way: “Josh, have I sinned?” Finally, we see him again on the rooftop where he killed most of his victims and hear retching sounds of his own dry heaving. Are we witnessing a traumatic rupture here? Is Anwar feeling remorse?

Joshua Oppenheimer: I’m sure Anwar feels remorse, trauma, guilt, regret. Or maybe I should state it more precisely: I would draw a line, especially for perpetrators, between trauma, guilt, regret – and remorse. Remorse is a conscious position, a conscious recognition of what you did was wrong. And that requires courage and a certain kind of self-awareness. Trauma doesn’t require that. It is a destructive emotion that can tear you up inside, regardless whether you allow yourself to feel it or not.

Anwar, when he starts to feel this trauma, tries to somehow deal with it in a way that protects him from its genuine significance – by offering me a kind of generic and dishonest confession. “Now I feel what my victims felt”, he says insincerely, hoping he can redeem himself and be relieved from this horrifying guilt. On the rooftop, at the end of the film, he is suddenly overcome by his physical reaction of disgust or nausea. Maybe he unconsciously feels the irrelevancy of what he’s done. He’s trying to vomit up the ghosts that haunt him, only to find that nothing comes up. Because what haunts him, is his past, and in that sense he is the ghost that haunts him. Maybe that’s a secular definition of karma: we are our past, we are the result of what we do. If you live part of your life harming people and destroying others, and if you then live the rest of your life in denial or “acute shallowness”, to quote Hannah Arendt, then you have somehow ipso facto done yourself in the process. There’s no redemption for that kind of destruction.

You call The Act of Killing a “documentary of the imagination”. By introducing scenography, you encourage the killers to tap directly into their memory. This process reminds us of the cinema vérité of Jean Rouch, which was also destined to reveal, through the work of film, images and thoughts that would otherwise remain inarticulate.

Joshua Oppenheimer: Jean Rouch’s work was far less ecstatic than mine, but I’m absolutely standing on his shoulders. My camera, like his, does not pretend to be a transparent window on reality. Instead it provokes performances in order to understand how people imagine themselves. In order to understand why these men are boasting, in order to understand their openness – not in order to get them to open up! – I would let them dramatize what they had done in whatever way they wished, but I would also film their discussions around the dramatizations. And in so doing, you create an observational documentary of their imagination. For this very reason, The Act of Killing is not a platform.
I think the film, in pushing the generic boundaries, teaches us something about testimony, and the strategic but paradoxical role that fiction can play in processes of truth and social justice. Which relation do you establish between truth and fiction? Do perpetrators are still present or absent from the filmmaking process, arguing the survivors’ case while working with the perpetrators – is it a very unstable and morally uncomfortable one. I imagine. I can you recall a moment when you felt extremely uneasy as a third party?

**Joshua Oppenheimer:** My biggest moral commitment and my primary ethical position was that of a collaborator with the human rights community and my anonymous crew, as well as emissary of the survivors, to do a re-enactment. The confrontations and dramatizations become artefacts of the man’s conscience, in a way. Anwar’s visions and fears shed a light on his own experience of history, but at the same time they unmask the regime. Is it really possible that the Minister of Youth would be flown out by the government in Jakarta to participate in the re-enactment of a pogrom? Is it really possible that Indonesian state television considers this a good story for an entertainment show?

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The camera might offer into the stories we tell. Is another fiction. One that obscures the insight that simulate a reality in which the camera is not present. A prism that makes visible the fictions that constitute our reality, our selves. And nonfiction is the prism for this burden in a family that was terrorized into silence, and today sees his own children being brainwashed at school. Through the archive material of the forty perpetrators I had filmed between 2003 and 2005, Adi found out how his brother was killed. He decides to confront the men responsible for his death, and does so with tremendous patience and dignity. He is a wonderful character, giving a lot of space for the viewer to put themselves in his head because he doesn’t speak for himself. He’s trying to learn about what happened. The confrontations were shot after I finished editing the film The Act of Killing, but before we released it. I knew that after the release, I wouldn’t be able to safely return to Indonesia. Killing is not something you can talk about. While I was doing my research, I would nearly be reassuring myself that I am not like them, which maybe makes me feel good but doesn’t aid in my understanding. Of course I hope, that if I grew up in Anwar’s family in 1965 in Indonesia, in his peer group as a preeminent, I would be a different person and make different choices. I know that I’m very lucky to be here.

In August, your latest work The Look of Silence was released. Can you tell us more about the film and its genesis?

**Joshua Oppenheimer:** The film examines the Indonesian mass killings from the perspective of the victims. We follow Adi, whose older brother was killed in 1965. Adi was born twenty years after the genocide, as a replacement for his dead brother. He grew up with this in a family that was terrified into silence, and today sees his own children being brainwashed at school. Through the archive material of the forty perpetrators I had filmed between 2003 and 2005, Adi found out how his brother was killed. He decides to confront the men responsible for his death, and does so with tremendous patience and dignity. He is a wonderful character, giving a lot of space for the viewer to put themselves in his head because he doesn’t speak for himself. He’s trying to learn about what happened. The confrontations were shot after I finished editing the film The Act of Killing, but before we released it. I knew that after the release, I wouldn’t be able to safely return to Indonesia. Killing is not something you can talk about. While I was doing my research, I would nearly be reassuring myself that I am not like them, which maybe makes me feel good but doesn’t aid in my understanding. Of course I hope, that if I grew up in Anwar’s family in 1965 in Indonesia, in his peer group as a preeminent, I would be a different person and make different choices. I know that I’m very lucky to be here.

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There is a moral complexity to the image that we get from the killers in _The Act of Killing_. We see them as cold-blooded murderers reliving their glorious days, but also as husbands, fathers, grandfathers – and as imaginative people. In a way, you suggest that nothing of what these men did is outside imagination, observation, or foreign to human nature. How did you grapple with the complexity of the survivor's portrait in _The Look of Silence_?

Joshua Oppenheimer: To make a film with survivors was to navigate this minefield of clichés, almost all of which are sentimental and self-serving. They are serving the audience, and not the people who are being filmed. That is to say, they serve the audience’s need for a stable and comfortable position with which to identify. But these clichés do an injustice to the complexity of the survivor’s experience. Avoiding them meant that the film became very poetic, very quiet, layered and sensitive. I don’t think _The Look of Silence_ is a complex character study, in the way that you could say Anwar is a real character. Adi is complex, but the main character in the film is silence and fear.

We talked about the perpetrator’s trauma earlier. In which way is _The Look of Silence_ an exploration of the trauma of the survivor?

Joshua Oppenheimer: The trauma of the survivors is something very different, of course. Surviving torture, political imprisonment, death – leaves you forever afraid. In _The Look of Silence_, we see a family that has not been able to mourn, to properly talk about the death of a family member and to integrate that tragic event into their lives. Not only was it never acknowledged, the state was actually blaming the survivors for what happened to them and threatening them into silence. But one of the saddest things is the forgetting. In _Silmacara and Simulation_, Jean Baudrillard says: “Forgetting extermination is part of extermination.” This is also true for Indonesia. The victims are exterminated in the memory. In fact, I think forgetting is an integral part of any victim’s history. Our patriotism, our national myths of freedom and democracy – and for me as an American, the American dream –, these are all based on forgetting. Patriotism indeed is the virtue of the vicious.

I have to say that _The Look of Silence_ is not a film that offers an easy ending. In many ways, it is as painful as _The Act of Killing_. In the final big scene of the film, something important happens. We go back to one of the perpetrators involved in the murder of Adi’s brother, who told his story in front of my camera a couple of years earlier. When we arrive, to my astonishment, the whole family starts to deny knowing anything about it. Adi has nothing to say and leaves, but I’m angry and I want to know the truth, the story, and they threaten to call the police – it ends in a total mess. The film opens with all these pieces that are mysteriously connected: we see a shot of a perpetrator singing the family clips of the husband. They get furious and threaten to call the police – it ends in a total mess. The pieces gradually come together over the first five minutes. At the end of the film, rather than ending harmoniously, all the pieces fall apart again into the mess of what happens, of what a genocide leaves. Nothing can bring back the dead, nothing can fix this. For the survivors, things will never be “okay”. They have never even been allowed to mourn their dead. This makes the Indonesian case different from the Holocaust, where at least we were allowed to mourn. I say “we”, because my family also lost a lot of people in the Holocaust. I left the final scene in the film because it shows that reconciliation has to be a political and social process. It cannot happen until the survivors have the power to guide and frame that process. Yet again, _The Look of Silence_ is a film about impunity and the victory of the perpetrators, but from the perspective and experience of the survivors.

Political culture today in Indonesia thrives on the moral vacuum left by decades of celebrating historical trauma. Corruption, violence and fanatical anti-communist rhetoric are still rampant, and the government relies heavily on Pancasila Youth to take care of its business. There is a continuity, rather than a rupture, between the killings of 1965 and present-day society. What are your hopes for Indonesia’s future?

Joshua Oppenheimer: I am pessimistic, but also optimistic. I’m both, and you have to be. You wouldn’t make a film like this if you felt there was no hope. I am pessimistic, because even though Indonesia is a democracy today, it is completely dominated by criminal blackguards who obtain their wealth through extortion and theft, due to their proximity to Suharto or their participation in the killings. However, there is no celebrating anymore about what happened in 1965 as something heroic. It became anathema and a legacy of the regime. The lie is crumbling, slowly. _The Act of Killing_ will be the child in The Emperor’s new clothes, forcing people to finally acknowledge things that they have been too afraid to speak about. I wouldn’t have done that if I didn’t feel there was a chance, however perishingly small, that it could come to pass. I don’t think a single film can transform a country, but this one has done more than I hoped.

It seems that the perpetrators in Indonesia, up until now, have had the exclusive right to speak. In a society where there has been no transitional justice, they are the only ones that can produce a legitimate narrative about the past.

Joshua Oppenheimer: Yes, and the films were intended to help open the space to discuss the past, I believe _The Look of Silence_ will be an important resource for a genuine reconciliation process.

A final question: would you say your films on Indonesia are about the past, the present or the future?

Joshua Oppenheimer: They’re about the present. _The Act of Killing_ is a film about a present haunted by an unresolved historical past, brutalized by a victor’s history. So in that sense, it’s a film about history without ignoring the relation to the present. But in _The Look of Silence_, it is a film about the present, I believe. It shows the disharmony, the disharmony between the past and the present. What are your hopes for Indonesia’s future?

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Joshua Oppenheimer: Yes, and the films were intended to help open the discursive space. Essentially, I tried to short a circuit, like an intervention. To help catalyze a transformation and change the way Indonesians talk about their past. _The Act of Killing_ has been screened a thousand times across Indonesia, and last year in September, we made it available for free download. It has been downloaded 3.5 million times. Mainstream media are increasingly emboldened to talk about the past and now consider the events of 1965 a crime against humanity.

Why is it important to you to make these “engaged” human rights films?

Joshua Oppenheimer: In some ways it has to do with my family history. In Indonesia, I had this awful feeling that I had wandered into Germany forty years after the Holocaust, only to find the Nazis still in power. Growing up in a family where you learn that the aim of all politics, of all morality – maybe the aim of all art – is to prevent these things from happening again, you have a pretty strong sense that you have to address this impunity when you encounter it. That is more, my work with the palm oil plantation workers taught me that this is not an isolated event: our margarine, our skin oil, many things we buy depend on that terror. The aim of all genuine art is always engaged. Its aim is not to provide new information, that’s the role of journalism. Journalism can be artful, and of course there can be overlap. But the fundamental or ideal role of journalism is to provide new information in the public interest, and to put that information in a context where the public can make decisions. The aim of art is somehow the opposite. It is to invite or force us to confront our most painful truths, and these are almost always things we already know, but are afraid to talk about. Now that _The Act of Killing_ has blasted open the space to discuss the past, I believe _The Look of Silence_ will be an important resource for a genuine reconciliation process.

Interview: L’entretien

Testimony between history and memory: n°118 / September 2014

Témoigner entre histoire et mémoire: n°118 / September 2014

Adi the optician, main character in _The Look of Silence_ (2014).