

The 1965-1966 killings

The study of the 1965-1966 killings in Indonesia, and for that matter the study of the country's politics more generally, will never be the same again with the recent release of the documentary film *The Act of Killing* (21 August 2012, Toronto International Film Festival), directed by Joshua Oppenheimer with co-director Christine Cynn. The film's protagonists are leading figures in the local paramilitary organisation Pemuda Pancasila [Pancasila Youth], who were responsible for the killings of hundreds of real or suspected communists in North Sumatera in 1965-1966, as part of a nation-wide program that took approximately one million lives. Although testimonies and published analyses of the event have slowly emerged, it is one of those topics that most people have some knowledge about, but prefer not to discuss even in private.

Ariel Heryanto



THE RESULT OF SEVEN YEARS of hard work, involving many hundreds of hours of footage, the documentary radically challenges some of the old and familiar assumptions in the study of politics and violence. It also demonstrates an ingenious method of documentary filmmaking that will be of special interest to students of media studies, history, visual ethnography, and the anthropology of media. Undoubtedly, human rights activists and institutions will have a deep interest in the way this film penetrates the entrenched impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators of one of the worst massacres in modern history. Some of the leaders of the groups responsible for the massacre still hold government offices at local and national levels today.

All currently existing films with a focus on the 1965 killings and its aftermath (as distinct from those that present the same events only in the background of their story)² are dedicated to giving a voice to the survivors and members of their families, occasionally with sympathetic comments from experts. These films have broken the general onscreen silence that has lasted for over a quarter of a century. To my knowledge, a total of 16 such documentaries have been produced, most of them in small circles, by individual survivors,³ local non-governmental organisations⁴ and filmmakers,⁵ in addition to three titles by foreign filmmakers.⁶

All these documentaries show the ordeals of the victims and the various forms of their victimisation. Made with low budgets and very basic technology, most of these locally produced documentaries feature talking heads from among the survivors and eye-witnesses. Frail and aged-looking women appear in many of these films, speaking emotionally about their endless agony and presenting their condemnations against the past injustice and the continued failure on the part of the successive governments to acknowledge it.⁷

Individually and collectively, those films have merits of their own, and their importance to the fledgling efforts to unearth the buried history cannot be over-emphasised. However, due to their limited circulation, but also to the successful anti-communist propaganda that has been deeply embedded and normalised in the public consciousness since 1966, these documentaries have yet to make any significant impact in public. For now, their impact is certainly too limited to undermine the New Order propaganda. These previous films presented a counter-claim that boldly reversed the positions of good versus evil that were firmly implanted in the nation's history by successive governments and their supporters, best

exemplified in the nearly four-and-a-half-hour anti-communist state-produced film entitled *Pengkhianatan G 30 September* (1984). However, a reversal of this kind only reproduces, and does not eliminate or problematise, the fundamental framework of a good versus evil dichotomy that structures the government propaganda and public imagination. While giving voice to the silenced victims, the perpetrators of the 1965-1966 killings did not appear in these alternative films. In government-sponsored propaganda and off-screen statements, whenever these perpetrators (or their sponsors and supporters) speak of the events, their statements consist mainly of denials along with the frequent placing of blame on the victims.

In remarkable contrast, *The Act of Killing* is fascinating as much as disturbing for its radical subversion of the prevailing paradigm, in that it presents a narrative of the killings in a complex story, with multi-layered sub-narratives, rich with ironies and contradictions. An adequate discussion of the significance and problematics that this film brings to the fore is far beyond the scope of this brief article. Here I can only mention in the simplest terms some of the most obvious aspects that will have immediate impact for our current scholarship on the issue.

The Act of Killing graphically visualizes acts of violence that make the horrors in the previous documentaries (allusions to anti-communist captors, torturers, rapists), as well as in *Pengkhianatan G 30 September* (the evils of an allegedly communist-backed movement against rightist six generals and one lieutenant on the eve of 1 October 1965) pale into insignificance. In this respect, *The Act of Killing* incriminates the perpetrators of the 1965-1966 killings more seriously than any of the preceding films have done. But this new documentary goes much further than simply validating or reinforcing the survivors' allegations about the cruelty of the military-orchestrated anti-communist pogrom.

Instead of submitting new 'facts' or a set of serious 'evidence' about the crimes against humanity in 1965-1966, *The Act of Killing* presents an abundance of extravagantly-styled self-incriminations by the 1965 executioners themselves, as they speak proudly to the camera about how they pushed their cruelty to the extreme when killing the communists and members of their families, and raping their female targets,

including children. In front of the camera, they go on to demonstrate step-by-step how they carried out the killings at the original sites of their actions in 1965, thus making the survivors' allegations of their crimes redundant. *The Act of Killing* exposes in a most obscene fashion what the successive Indonesian governments since 1966 have erased from official history and government pronouncements.

More than one of the perpetrators in this film observes perceptively that 'their' film will outdo the government's infamous *Pengkhianatan G 30 September* in portraying scenes of horrendous violence. They remark that the general public is utterly wrong to assume (in line with New Order government propaganda) that the Communists are cruel or brutal; "We are crueler and more brutal than the Communists", they claim. They elaborate what they mean in great detail, both through words and re-enactments on camera. The film contains some of the most violent scenes and language I have seen or heard, on or off screen, from or on Indonesia. Viewers need to have a strong stomach to watch this film.

Questions raised

However, violent scenes and perverted language are only a part of the image that this film presents. *The Act of Killing* is unusual in the series of documentaries on the theme to date; it is the first long film on the 1965-1966 killings to feature the perpetrators, instead of the survivors or their sympathisers, as the main characters. This is only possible with the consent of those individual executioners, especially as they appear without their identities being concealed. They recollect their own crimes, most of the time laughing, singing and dancing, and only occasionally with remorse and reported nightmares.

Three closely-related sets of questions came up in my mind when I first saw two earlier and shorter versions of the film in 2010 and 2011. Some clues began to dawn on me after watching the final and longer version in 2012, and after having further conversations with Oppenheimer, the director.

The first set of questions concerns methods. How did the filmmakers manage to persuade these perpetrators to speak so freely, and in such self-incriminating way? Since it was evident

1 (above): Executioners preparing for the film shooting, in which they acted in rotation as their 1965 victims. Courtesy of the copyright owner who wishes not to be named.

Facts and fictions in dangerous liaisons¹

that there was no hidden camera involved, I wondered if some strategy of deception was being cleverly used. However, if we presuppose that these individuals were active participants in the filmmaking project, the question can be formulated differently from their perspective, vis-à-vis the professional filmmakers: why would these perpetrators want to make all these serious self-incriminations, and liberally so, presumably knowing full well that their statements would eventually be widely disseminated to the public? What did they wish to gain for themselves or give to the audience? While they might have been extremely cruel in their youth, could they possibly, some 40 years later, be so foolish as to not be aware of the risks involved in making their self-incriminations the way they did?

The second set of questions relates to ethical issues. Regardless of the political aptness and risk-awareness of these actors, I wondered for a moment if the filmmakers had given them viewing access to the recordings, so that they could judge reflexively for themselves how they appeared on screen, and could gauge the potential impacts both on themselves and on their audience. Had the filmmakers actually discussed these issues and confronted the actors with the kind of questions that the film audience would likely raise? It is a relief to see in the long version of the film affirmative answers to these questions.

The third set of questions interrogates issues of truth. Regardless of what these perpetrators have said about what they did to the Communists in 1965-1966, to what extent do their statements and re-enactments represent the actual events of 1965-1966? How do we know and assess this? How much fact and/or fiction have gone into the narratives in this film? Does it matter? The remaining space below is devoted to preliminary answers to these questions.

Boastfully self-incriminating

One immediate, if partial, answer to the first set of questions is evident throughout the film: these executioners enjoy boasting. Off-screen, director Oppenheimer investigates this point further in a separate, but immediately related component of the larger project.⁸ The executioners are well aware of the risks involved, and their discussions about these risks are on record. Perhaps we all enjoy some boasting sometimes, in front of some people. One would assume, however, that most people are careful not to do so about absolutely anything, at any time, and before the general public.

So the boasting thesis prompts further and more important questions. Under what conditions – real or perceived – did these 1965-1966 executioners have the pleasure and the privilege of boasting so liberally about what they admit to as their ‘crimes’? What circumstances made it possible for them to enjoy a full and extended period of impunity? Selected scenes in *The Act of Killing* provide some answers. The protagonists in this film enjoy the patronage of their fellow executioners and other anti-communist politicians who have climbed the political ladder, and who have been running the country or provinces in the past several decades. Top national and local politicians who serve as their patrons appear in the film, demonstrating their close relations with members of the local paramilitary, including the film’s protagonists.

A detailed study in English of the political roles of militia groups and gangs of thugs (locally called *preman*, from the Dutch word *vrijman* [free man]) in New Order Indonesia and their mutually beneficial relations with the state apparatus, especially the military, is available in the work of Loren Rytter. Focusing on Pemuda Pancasila, Rytter emphasises the salient role of the branch in Medan, the birthplace and the strongest base of the group, in the 1965-1966 killings.⁹ However, as Rytter has hinted, with the changing configurations within the top level of state power after 1998, it is unclear to what extent

“We are crueler and more brutal than the Communists”, they claim. They elaborate what they mean in great detail, both through words and re-enactments on camera.

2 (below): Three ‘free men’ revisiting the sites and their roles in the 1965 killings, in the city of Medan. Courtesy of the copyright owner who wishes not to be named.

and for how much longer these people can remain in power and provide protection to their subordinates or partners in the provinces. Rytter observes that “contracts for Pemuda Pancasila in preman projects may be drying up, with the balance shifting in favor of ascendant Islamic oriented *preman*” (1998: 72).

Thanks to the executioners’ self-confidence, there was little or no need for the filmmakers to persuade them to speak to the camera as they did. To ensure that fundamental ethical requirements were appropriately observed, the filmmakers did not simply share the rough footage with the film actors-cum-political executioners (Question 2); the latter’s viewing of the footage, and their comments on the footage as they watched, are in fact important parts of the story in *The Act of Killing*. This is one area where the filmmakers display their innovation, but it is also the area where things start to get marvelously complicated.

Instead of simply filming these dangerously boastful individuals as an object of the camera, Oppenheimer invited them to take a big share in the process of the making of the film. Oppenheimer offered them the liberty to create a fictive story for their collaborative project, based on their memory of and personal experience in the 1965-1966 killings, plus their reflective response to that past in the act of recollecting. These former executioners took part in the design, scripting, casting and shooting of a film that they wished to produce and star in. *The Act of Killing* shows how they prepared and produced their film, and how they commented on the footage that resulted from their collaborative work, as well as the unintended consequences of the experience upon the life of at least one of the protagonists. Oppenheimer also asked some of them quite bluntly about their preparedness to face possible charges of war crimes. One of them responds mockingly, in full confidence of his immunity to prosecution: “Please help tell them to indict me”.

The Act of Killing is not a documentary with a straightforward narrative structure of the kind that characterises all the preceding films on the 1965-1966 killings. It is a documentary film about historical agents and also about how these agents make a film about themselves, based on their remembered actions in 1965-1966. Even as it presents an oral history investigation of that murky period, and first-hand recollection from some of the executioners, it is also about these executioners’ consciously drafted fictions and re-enactments as a medium through which they articulate their memories and comment on those memories. Therefore, instead of relegating the protagonists to an object of someone else’s rolling camera, the directors allow them to co-author their own self-incriminating narratives, which they do with considerable liberty, wit, laughter and pleasure.

Framed as such, the selected facts interweave with consciously invented fiction, memories of the past, and the experience of narrating before the camera to converge into an extremely fascinating account of the complex story, with moments of horror, laughter, singing and dancing, full of ironies and surprising slippages. Ultimately (in relation to the third set of questions), the final outcome is no more or less instructive than any of the preceding films on the subject, including those with a sole commitment to factual truths (as in the form of survivor testimonies) or with liberal fabrication (as in the government anti-communist propaganda). They are all highly instructive in different ways; not so much for the specific, crude, empirical ‘facts’ of what happened in the past in any coherent and self-contained format, but rather, and more importantly, instructive in their different ways about what these enunciations might mean to contemporary politics in the present, as much as the conditions past and present that make their actions, recollections and re-enactments possible.

Towards the end of the propaganda?

One can never be fully sure of what the protagonists might wish to achieve from the project. On screen, they all claim that they simply want to “tell history truly as it is” to the world, not just to Indonesia, while critically questioning the truth as presented in *Pengkhianatan G 30 September*. Narratives of this kind can easily slip into making former criminals into sympathetic heroes, as one talk show at the local branch of the state-owned television network has done (shown in *The Act of Killing*), featuring the same characters. But *The Act of Killing* is not a story of repentance. While Oppenheimer is careful not to give the protagonists a chance to become self-appointed heroes, neither does he make them look complete fools or monsters. Apparently fully unscripted, one of the most senior, boastful and brutal executioners was unable to contain his own emotion, or the guilt that belied their machismo, after a series of acting and re-enactments with his fellows, in which they, in rotation, took on the roles of tortured communist captives.

The propaganda about the 1965-1966 killings has outlived the New Order government that authored it. *The Act of Killing* promises that we may soon see the demolition of that sanctified propaganda, if and when a copy of the documentary finds its audience among millions of Indonesians: through youtube on the hourly rented computers at the internet stalls, or on smart phones across the nation, home of one of the world’s largest number of Facebook account holders and one of the world’s largest markets of pirated DVDs.

If and when such events transpire, we will witness the biggest irony that most people from opposing positions in the history of the 1965-1966 killings will have to swallow: that the nation’s biggest and most atrocious deception is being ripped apart not so much through the efforts of some extraordinarily resilient survivors with the most damning testimonies, or by some experts who speak eloquently on their behalf, but by courtesy of a bunch of boastful killers that many of us would love to hate.

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Notes

- 1 This article was prepared when I was a Visiting Research Fellow at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University. It is part of a larger work-in-progress, supported by The Australian National University’s College of Asia and the Pacific and the Australian Research Council. I am very grateful to all these institutions for their support, as well as to Joshua Oppenheimer for the privileged access to his film prior to its release.
- 2 Examples include *The Years of Living Dangerously* (1983), *Gie* (2005), and *Sang Penari* [The Dancer] (2011).
- 3 Lembaga Kreativitas Kemanusiaan (LKK) [Institute of Creative Humanity], led by poet-cum-novelist Putu Oka Sukanta, is to date the single largest producer of documentary films that revisit the 1965 violence. Putu and several members of LKK were political prisoners for their active membership of the Institute of People’s Culture [Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat, LEKRA], which was affiliated with the PKI. The six titles that LKK has produced are, chronologically, *Menyemai terang dalam kelam* [Sowing light within the darkness] (2006); *Perempuan yang tertuduh* [The accused women] (2007); *Tumbuh dalam badai* [Growing in the storm] (2007); *Seni ditating jaman* [Art that will not die] (2008); *Tjidurian 19*, after the street address of the LEKRA office in Jakarta (2009); and *Plantungan: Potret Derita dan Kekuatan Perempuan* (2011).
- 4 *Bunga-tembok* [Flower-wall] (2003); *Kawan tiba senja: Bali seputar 1965* [Friends arriving at dusk: Bali around 1965] (2004); *Kado untuk ibu* [A gift for mother] (2004); *Putih abu-abu: Masa lalu perempuan* [Greyish white: Women’s past] (2006); *Sinengker: Sesuatu yang dirahasiakan* [Sinengker: Something unrevealed] (2007).
- 5 *Puisi tak terkuburkan* [Poetry that cannot be buried] (1999); *Djedjak darah: Surat teruntuk adinda* [Bloody Footsteps: Letter to the Beloved] (2004); *Mass grave* (2002).
- 6 They are *The Shadow Play* (2001); *Terlena: Breaking of a nation* (2004); and *40 Years of silence: An Indonesian Tragedy* (2009).
- 7 In 2001, significantly on his personal capacity, President Abdurrahman Wahid offered an apology to survivors and the families of victims of the 1965-1966 killings. His statement provoked an uproar. Early in 2012 there was a news report suggesting that President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono intended to make a public apology for state complicity in the past human rights abuses, with no reference to any specific incidents.
- 8 Oppenheimer, J. & M. Uwemedimo. 2009. “Show of force: a cinema-séance of power and violence in Sumatra’s plantation belt”, *Critical Quarterly*, 51(1): 84-110.
- 9 Rytter, L. 1998. “Pemuda Pancasila: The Last Loyalist Free Men of Suharto’s Order?”, *Indonesia*, 66 (Oct): 47-73, see pp. 55-56.

