

### 3 Film as Death

#### *The Act of Killing*

##### Abstract

Chapter 3 focuses on *The Act of Killing* (Joshua Oppenheimer, Christine Cynn and anonymous), a film that opens up uncharted territory on which to recast the tenets of documentary, world cinema and filmmaking in general. It required the crew to put their lives at risk in the name of a project they hoped would change the way we experience cinema and reality with it. The film's realist commitment emerges from where it is least expected, namely from Hollywood genres, such as the musical, the film noir and the western, which are used *as* documentary, or a fantasy realm where perpetrators can confess to their crimes without restraints or fear of punishment, but which retains the evidentiary weight of the recording medium.

**Keywords:** *The Act of Killing*; Joshua Oppenheimer; Christine Cynn; Documentary; Genre

Since its release in 2012, *The Act of Killing* (Joshua Oppenheimer, Christine Cynn and anonymous) has amassed a great number of fervent admirers and fierce detractors worldwide. Both sides would however agree that the film opens up uncharted territory on which to recast the tenets of documentary, world cinema and filmmaking in general. An evidence of this is a poll with critics and filmmakers conducted in 2014 by *Sight and Sound* magazine (2014) which enshrines *The Act of Killing* among the most important documentaries ever made. In every respect, the film challenges and innovates, first of all through its focus on unrepentant murderers involved in the massacre of more than a million so-called communists in Indonesia in the mid-1960s, who reenact their most gruesome crimes in the style of their favourite Hollywood genres.

The labyrinthine controversies caused by this unusual documentary method have mainly centred on the crew's intimate dealings with the

perpetrators during the eight years the film took to be completed.<sup>1</sup> Most of the reviews and essays, however, fail to acknowledge the fact that the entire crew put their own lives at risk in the name of a project they hoped would change the way we experience cinema and reality with it. Ethical issues undoubtedly pervade the whole endeavour, given not only the unrevealed agreements between crew and cast that necessarily took place before such a film could be made, but also the obvious exploitation of its subjects, despicable though they might be. And it is indeed ethics which will be at the core of my approach, but one which I have elsewhere defined as an 'ethics of realism' (Nagib 2011). I hold the view that *The Act of Killing's* greatest political contribution is the rejection of simplistic dualisms which place criminals as radical others to human beings, positing instead filmmakers and film subjects as stakeholders in the same humanity capable of causing catastrophe as well as regeneration. In this, it resonates with Alain Badiou (2002: 25), when he claims in his book on ethics:

In the context of a system of thought that is both a-religious and genuinely contemporary with the truths of our time, the whole ethical predication based upon recognition of the other should be purely and simply abandoned. For the real question – and it is an extraordinarily difficult one – is much more that of *recognizing the Same*.

I argue furthermore that ethics in this film refers to the physical commitment on the part of crew and cast to the truth of the unpredictable events unfolding before the camera, an understanding which is tributary to André Bazin's (1967) realist formula that combines faithfulness to the pro-filmic phenomena with a belief in the inherent honesty of the film medium (Rancière 2006: 2). But an ethics of the real is also detectable in the film's allegiance to Brecht (1964: 91ff) and his championing of the unmasking of representational artifice as the only possible realist method. In what follows, I will examine how this ethical realist programme operates on three key cinematic arenas: genre, authorship and spectatorship.

As far as genre is concerned, the film's realist commitment emerges from where it is least expected, namely from Hollywood genres, such as the musical, the film noir and the western, which are used *as* documentary, that is to say, as a fantasy realm where perpetrators can confess to their

1 For readers interested in gaining an insight into this literature, a good way to start are two special issues devoted to the film, in respectively *Film Quarterly*, Winter, Vol. 67, N. 2, and *Critical Asian Studies*, Vol. 46, N. 1.

crimes without restraints or fear of punishment, but which nonetheless retains the evidentiary weight of the audiovisual medium. Authorship, in turn, translates as Oppenheimer's unmistakable auteur signature through his role of self-confessed spy, or 'infiltrator', as he defines it, who disguises as a sympathiser of the criminals in order to gain first-hand access to the full picture of their acts. Authorship is felt precisely in Oppenheimer's authoritative recourse to ruse in order to conduct a clinical, even ruthless manipulation of his subjects. One of them, the protagonist Anwar Congo, is clearly affected by post-traumatic stress disorder, and his repetitive reliving of his killings is made to flare up in front of the camera so as to bring back the dead to the present time in their material reality, through his own body, including a harrowing scene of the actor's unpredictable and uncontrollable retching as he reenacts the killing of his victims through strangulation. Finally, as the concluding section will aim to demonstrate, it is in the realm of spectatorship where oppositional binaries are radically abolished. The usual process of illusionistic identification on the part of the spectator is turned on its head by means of disguising these criminals as amateur filmmakers, led to shoot, act within, and then watch their own film within the film so as to force them to experience beyond any illusion the suffering they had caused, a point at which the act of filmmaking changes into the experience of death.

Addressing each of these concepts in turn, I will attempt to indicate ways in which scholarly thought on cinema can progress on the basis of the extraordinary political impact of this film.

## Genre

What is *The Act of Killing*? It is, no doubt, in the first place, a film, but one uncomfortably sitting within the boundaries of the medium and permanently straddling other forms of discourse, not least the category 'non-cinema', expanded on at length in the previous chapters as a form which challenges the separation between cinema and real life. Let us see how. The film was primarily conceived as a core output from the AHRC-funded project 'Genocide and Genre', led by Joram ten Brink, a Professor of Film at the University of Westminster. The study of genre is hence at the very origin of the film, itself part and parcel of a wide-encompassing research project, including other outputs such as the anthology *Killer Images: Documentary Film, Memory and the Performance of Violence* (2012), edited by ten Brink and Oppenheimer himself. Oppenheimer's participation in the 'Genocide

and Genre' project, in turn, fits naturally within an academic trajectory which started with his first degree in film at Harvard University, under the supervision of the radical Serbian filmmaker Dušan Makavejev, and continued with his practice-based PhD at Central Saint Martins University of the Arts, in London. This was followed by his relocation to Copenhagen, where, in 2002, with his collaborator Christine Cynn, he took up a project to film oil plantation workers on the outskirts of Medan, North Sumatra, Indonesia, as a pilot study on the effects of globalisation on agriculture worldwide. This resulted in *The Globalisation Tapes*, a collective film which brought the crew in contact with the victims and survivors of the 1965 genocide of over a million of so-called 'communists' in Indonesia. The film contains the germs of what was to become *The Act of Killing*, as it features Oppenheimer's encounter with Sharman Sinaga, one of the perpetrators of the 1965 massacre who boastfully describes to the camera his killing techniques. Having found a number of other perpetrators all-too eager to recount their deeds onscreen, the directors then decided to devote an entire feature-length film to such accounts.

This gives us an overall idea of the combined academic and practical developments through which the film came to existence, becoming the corollary of the research project 'Genocide and Genre'. How exactly these two terms combine in the film requires, however, further elaboration. In their introduction to the book *Killer Images*, ten Brink and Oppenheimer explain that their research project is not 'a study of the history of screen violence or the genres of film violence', but rather an investigation of 'cinema's engagement with the performance of violence' (2012: 4). Accordingly, *The Act of Killing* is structured upon the principle that murder and, in this case, genocide are performative acts, reliant on social endorsement and empathetic spectatorship. Indeed the most astonishing aspect of *The Act of Killing* is to have found perpetrators who were willing to reenact their murderous deeds in the style of their favourite Hollywood genres, in particular the two protagonists, Anwar Congo, an executioner in the 1965 massacre, and Herman Koto, a gangster and paramilitary leader, as well as Anwar's sidekick. Benedict Anderson (2012), an authority on Indonesian twentieth-century history, presents an interesting explanation for the phenomenon, arguing that the Medan gangsters, given their distance from the central power of Jakarta, probably felt 'a lack of national-level recognition for their role in the massacres' of 1965 (281). Anderson (283) continues:

[Oppenheimer's] camera offers them the possibility of commemoration, and transcendence of age, routine and death [...] They have a

commemorative idea about film, actually Hollywood films which they loved from their teens. The Lone Ranger, Batman, Patton, Shane, Samson, MacArthur and Rambo – all real or imaginary men – are figures of immortality for killers who are heroic patriots, not grand gangsters [...] Oppenheimer thus comes to them as a kind of providential ‘Hollywood’ ally.

In the film, Anwar corroborates this hypothesis by stating in a conversation with Herman that ‘whether this ends up on the big screen or only on TV, it doesn’t matter, we have to show that this is who we are, this is our story, so in the future people will remember’. There is also the additional coincidence that Anwar and his accomplices used to work in the film exhibition sector and that, at the height of its power, the communist regime in Indonesia had demanded a ban on American films, badly affecting their business and giving them a further pretext to participate in the massacre of communists following their defeat by the Suharto army.

Does this however suffice to establish a direct connection between genocide and genre? Cinematic genres, like all genres, are a combination of repetition and variation that provides captive audiences with the reassuring recognition of a pattern whilst endowing each new product with a fresh attraction. Genre has also been seen in the light of the structure of the myth, that is, as a cultural ritual capable of ironing out differences and conflicts in a community (Stam 2000: 127), leading to general catharsis and reconciliation. Repetition and variation are equally discernible in genocide, which can by the same token be associated to forms of cultural rituals. But there is a fundamental barrier between the virtual realm in which any cinematic genre, including the documentary, takes place, and the real-life context of genocide. *The Act of Killing* seems intent on breaking this very separation, by forcing the conception of genre out of the safe haven of film and into the reality of life. As regards the spheres in which this film operates, David Martin-Jones engages in an interesting discussion with Slavoj Žižek, who has analysed the *The Act of Killing* from the perspective of global capitalism. For Žižek, what the Indonesian perpetrators are doing, when they publicly and boastfully re-stage their past crimes for the camera, is not breaking out of the private sphere, but expanding it to the point of obliterating the public sphere, replicating today’s social networking phenomenon. In so doing, Žižek continues, the film exposes ‘the ruthless egotism of each of the individuals pursuing his or her private interest’. For Martin-Jones (2019: 165), however, ‘the past that the film provides us with an encounter with is [...] not one of the privatisation of

the public space, [...] but the suspension of the laws that normally govern such a space'. He says:

The gangsters' way of remembering and memorialising the historical moment of the exceptional 'non-place' is by recreating a time when their movie fantasies could be lived out, and when they became heroes for it.  
(164)

The problem about the recreation of a lawless 'non-space', where real crimes are enacted in the style of film genres, is, of course, that genres cannot be the subject of the same moral indictment applicable to genocide. Consequently, in proposing to equate the two, the film is either being excessive in its charge on cinema and genre, or too light with regard to genocide, and this apparent ambiguity has been the source of many of the ethical objections levelled against the film (see, for example, Fraser 2013).

The fact however is that neither genre nor genocide is the actual focus of the film, whose primary project is to document the mental and emotional processes of those who have seen death with their own eyes and caused it with their own hands. Its greatest achievement is, in my view, that the distorted, grotesque and horrifying imagery resulting from this process exudes a kind of realism that no cinematic genre, not even documentary, could ever produce. This is the reason why nothing we see in the film even remotely resembles a cinematic genre of any kind, despite all the genre paraphernalia deployed to convey the perpetrators' fantasies. An apt illustration of this effect can be found right at the beginning. The film opens with an image that has become emblematic and features in all its publicity: a giant rusty-coloured carcass, in the shape of a carp, against the backdrop of purple clouds, a blue lake and blue mountains, all obviously digitally enhanced (Figure 3.1). The sound is a mixture of wind, birds, cars passing, which are gradually taken over by incidental music, a mellow female choir over keyboard notes setting the pace for six female dancers who exit the giant fish's mouth one by one onto a suspended catwalk, holding the train of their strapless dresses. The music carries on to the next shot of a waterfall occupying the whole frame, whilst the camera slowly tilts down to capture the raised hands and then the full body of Anwar and Herman. The camera then recedes in order to include in the frame another group of female dancers, with tight shiny red tops, long white skirts and false feather headdresses swaying in front of the waterfall. By now the music has been replaced by an off-screen voice on a loudspeaker, urging the characters to convey joy, happiness and peace. Anwar, in a priestly



Figure 3.1 The disconcerting opening of *The Act of Killing*.

cassock, smiles beatifically. Herman looks like a pregnant woman, with his huge stomach squeezed in a flashy blue dress (one of the many drag costumes he will sport throughout the film), a large-brim white hat with a blue lace and clownish make up. The off-screen voice shouts 'cut' and helpers enter the scene to hand out towels to the cast drenched by the waterfall spray. The complete opacity and apparent absurdity of the whole sequence will be partially unravelled as the film evolves. However, thanks to its implausibility as a realm of fantasy, this overture brings home to the viewer the all-too material and puzzling reality of the actors, the location and the cinematic apparatus.

Let me explain by resorting to Bertolt Brecht, whose epic theatre is usually described as promoting anti-realism insofar as it is aimed at disrupting narrative continuity and verisimilitude. This opening, and indeed *The Act of Killing* as a whole, is the living proof of the vital reality principle inherent in Brecht's anti-illusionistic method. Brechtian to the root, the film is entirely structured on the principle of systematically preventing the formation of a plausible fictional or narrative world in the name of the reality of the profilmic event. Peter Wollen (1985: 501ff) defined as 'narrative intransitivity' the Brechtian disruption of the fable as applied, for example, by Godard to his films. In *The Act of Killing*, this and other procedures prescribed by Brecht, such as the disconnect between the scenes and the opacity of the characters who become 'objects of enquiry' rather than 'taken for granted' (Brecht 1964: 37), are followed to the letter in order to conjure up the material reality of the fiction-making apparatus, rather than the

impression of reality of the fictional world. Thus the prelude with the giant carp and dancers, rather than enabling the recognition of a genre pattern, elicits estrangement for the real-life quality of the dirty, rusty carcass that prevails over the artificial colours around it, as well as that of the dancers who fall out of sync with each other revealing their life-like amateurism. The jump-cut to the waterfall scene further enhances the sense of realism, as it shows more clumsy dancers and amateur actors ill at ease in their roles, one of whom, the obese Herman, even spits to the side in the middle of his performance. As a result, the spectators are driven away from the 'natural beauty' the voice in the loudspeaker refers to and instead presented with the unpalatable reality that inhabits it, even before they are told of the thousand people Anwar has killed with his own hands, assisted by the likes of Herman. This is how, in this film, disrupted fiction prevents the formation of cinematic genres, in this case, the musical, by means of the repulsive reality at its origin.

In the scenes that follow, other cinematic genres, such as the gangster film and the western, will be played out and equally deconstructed through the interference of the realism of the medium, which places the 1960s genocide as the constant and unavoidable backdrop to all performances. Making genre emerge from the spectre of death is not, however, a recognisable feature of the documentary genre, but the result of a strong authorial signature, that of Joshua Oppenheimer, which I will now address.

## Authorship

As an intellectual straddling both filmmaking and film studies, Oppenheimer seems acutely aware of the place he wants to occupy in the auteur pantheon. His statements are strewn with references to directors devoted to documentarian activism focusing on crimes against humanity and human rights, such as Errol Morris, Jean Rouch, Rithy Pahn, Claude Lanzman, Werner Herzog and other filmmakers he aspires not only to compare with but even perhaps to surpass. In tune with this noble lineage of filmmakers, all of them celebrated for their risk-taking approach and fearless engagement with their subjects, Oppenheimer devised an 'infiltrative method' which led him to penetrate right-wing militias, white-supremacist groups, UFO abductee groups, and cults as if he were one of them, a daring venture for a Jewish homosexual like him, resulting in his two American films of the 1990s, *These Places We've Learned to Call Home* (1996) and *The Entire History of the Louisiana Purchase* (1997).



*The Act of Killing* also benefits from this kind of approach in a seemingly collaborative dynamics through which Oppenheimer gains intimacy with and the confidence of mass murderers to the point of having them reenact their crimes onscreen in the manner of their Hollywood idols. A similar collaborative method had been employed, for example, by Jean Rouch, whose ideas of 'shared anthropology' and 'ethnologue' (Sayad 2013: 80ff) had been put to the test in films such as *Moi, un noir* (1958), in which Niger migrant workers in Abidjan tell their life stories under the guise of Hollywood and European stars such as Edward G. Robinson and Eddie Constantine, and here too a gruesome story of killings emerges through this seemingly playful method. Another of Oppenheimer's sources is said to have been the 'Theatre of the Oppressed' (Lusztig 2013: 51), developed by Augusto Boal on the basis of his experience with deprived communities in different parts of the world. Key to Boal's method was the turning of passive spectators into active participants who directly intervene in the theatrical performance in order to change it into political action. In line with this kind of shared authorship and collaborative work, as practised by democratic ethnographers and politicised dramatists, in *The Act of Killing* parts of screen writing, directing, shooting and acting were also delegated to the film subjects, as explained in the initial titles:

*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 killings in whatever ways they wished. This film follows that process and documents its consequences.*

Equally collaborative was the overall directorial work, shared between Oppenheimer, Christine Cynn and an Indonesian co-director who had to remain anonymous for security reasons. Oppenheimer's position at the helm of the decision-making process remains, however, abundantly apparent. His authorial voice and signature are clearly noticeable in every aspect of the film, providing a seamless continuation to the infiltrative work he had been consistently pursuing from the beginning of his filmmaking career. Indeed, *The Act of Killing* is Oppenheimer's most daring infiltrative film, as

it required him to stay for eight years in close contact with utterly dangerous and powerful criminals, including the Vice-President of Indonesia, Jusuf Kalla, himself a member of the Pancasila paramilitary militia who supported the killings and continues to crush opposing voices to this day. (The other documentary made by Oppenheimer in Indonesia, *The Look of Silence*, shot before *The Act of Killing* but only released in 2014, cannot be considered 'infiltrative', for it focuses mainly on the survivors of the 1960s atrocities.)

The risk of such an enterprise was obvious, given that the director is the exact opposite of the kind of providential 'Hollywood ally' those criminals expected him to be, as suggested by Benedict Anderson. Every single shot of the film is aimed, not at fulfilling, but at undermining his subjects' hopes of gaining recognition and glorification for their acts. That his subjects have no say in the final product of the film becomes clear from the start. We know that the film was eight years in the making, and whichever version we are able to see today, be it the theatrical feature or the director's cut, is only a small and highly edited fraction of what was actually shot. In any case, this end product certainly does not correspond to any film the protagonists themselves had in mind, although several passages indicate that they were expecting their own edited version of it to be produced. There is, for example, a reasonably lengthy discussion between Anwar and Herman about whether a scene, in which the former is beheaded, should come at the beginning of the film and initiate a flash-back, or at the end. The beheading scene, together with its replay on a TV set, is part of the finished version of *The Act of Killing*, however we never see the film these two actors are talking about. The only possible conclusion from this procedure is that the film actors are being duped into believing they have a say on the final product.

Anwar, Herman and his friends seem to be dreaming of a film full of action, beautiful scenery and enjoyable music, but everything shown in *The Act of Killing* is visually and aurally revolting, as well as morally repugnant. Particularly disgusting is the appearance of the perpetrators themselves. Herman is not just overweight, but constantly exposing his gigantic belly (Figure 3.2), spitting and intimidating children and women. Anwar is repeatedly captured in the act of removing his false teeth and then clicking them back in place (Figure 3.3). Gangsters and Pancasila paramilitary refer to women in the most offensive terms, telling how much they enjoy raping 14-year-olds and similarly appalling stories. All these scenes and conversations are obviously shot and edited under the director's direct command and surveillance, regardless of what his supposed actors and collaborators think of them.



Figure 3.2 *The Act of Killing*: Herman is constantly exposing his gigantic belly.



Figure 3.3 *The Act of Killing*: Anwar is repeatedly captured in the act of removing his false teeth and then clicking them back in place.

Oppenheimer might well be wary of the public's immediate perception of this betrayal, when he states, in the production notes:

Anwar is the bravest and most honest character in *The Act of Killing*. He may or may not 'like' the result, but I have tried to honour his courage and his openness by presenting him as honestly, and with as much compassion, as I could, while still deferring to the unspeakable acts that he committed.

As always, critics must be cautious when dealing with an artist's self-assessment, difficult though it is to resist Oppenheimer's compelling written and spoken prose. Rather than his personal statements, it is more enlightening to look at his authorial persona within the film itself in order to understand what is actually at stake. Oppenheimer's presence in *The Act of Killing* is subtle and camouflaged. He never appears on camera and his voice as an interviewer, in fluent Indonesian, is only occasionally heard, mostly when there are immediate ethical issues at play. For example, when Anwar calls his two pre-teen grandsons to watch footage of him re-enacting his strangulation methods and the director, off-screen, objects that the scenes are too violent for them – though the children end up watching the footage anyway. But a sense of the director's ubiquitous presence is rendered precisely for his absence, that is, for his refusal to help make sense of the chaotic spectacle those despicable criminals are trying to put together for the benefit of the camera. Because they are no professional actors and are entirely foreign to movie making, their 'Hollywood' film within the main film turns them into grotesque and involuntary parodies of themselves and their acts. There is no attempt, on the part of the main film crew, at improving or polishing their imagined scenes, leaving the gangsters unmasked and exposed in their naïve enjoyment of their dreadful performances. Here again it is the reality of the medium that prevails, not just because the spectator is presented with all the discussions and preparations for the scenes, but because the theatrical performance fails to configure itself as such, leaving intact the deadly acts at their base as well as the authorial power of the non-intrusive director.

Alongside the infiltrative method, another clear authorial feature is the choice of Anwar Congo as the main protagonist. We are given no reasons for Anwar being singled out to monopolise the attention of the camera, but we soon realise that he is moved by a persistent obsession with death by the throat, through strangling, gagging or beheading. Despite the claim that he alone was responsible for a thousand deaths, no firearms or weapons of any kind other than primitive methods of compression or severing of the throat are suggested. This provides the film with the unifying imagery of the violated throat running through its entire length, determining its editing structure as well as visual and aural *mise-en-scène*. Variations of the motif of death by the throat multiply. In one of the most gruesome moments of the film, Anwar distributes hats to a handful of real gangsters, including Herman, in the style of his favourite Al Pacino gangster films and John Wayne westerns. He goes on to describe how he used to place the leg of a table on the neck of a victim and sit together with his accomplices on the table, who would shake their bodies to the rhythm of songs until their

victim's throat was completely crushed; so all his fellow actor-gangsters sit with him on the table, singing 'Hello, Bandung', to support him in the demonstration of this killing method.

The garrotte, made with a wire wound around the victim's neck and pulled with the help of a wooden handle, an idea which Anwar claims to have drawn from mafia movies, is played out as a leitmotiv. Anwar gives several demonstrations of the use of this weapon, whose main advantage he describes as being the little waste of blood. This is in fact the missing information which, towards the end of the film, completes the meaning of the opening musical sequence, in the form of a sequel. The waterfall scenario from the opening is replayed, now to the music track of the 1966 British film drama *Born Free* providing the backdrop to the swaying dancers, Anwar in his cassock and Herman in his drag costume. This time, however, two of Anwar's victims also appear, their faces smeared with white make-up to indicate their afterlife status. They ceremoniously remove from their neck the wire with which Anwar had strangled them. One of the victims then takes a ribbon with a medal out of his pocket and hangs it on Anwar's neck, declaring: 'For executing me and sending me to heaven I thank you a thousand times'. Anwar seems elated when re-watching this scene on a TV set in his home, little realising his status as guinea pig in the hands of his psychoanalyst director, interested in tracking down to the very bottom his obsession with the garrotte. This goes as far as a shot of weird erotic overtones, in which Anwar, in one of his reenactments, lies under a table, holding the ends of a wire wrapped around the neck of his victim on the table, and as he pulls the wire a sound emerges from his throat like an orgasm, following which he relaxes as his victim is now presumably dead.

Indeed, a particularly striking aspect of *The Act of Killing* is its sexual symbolism, most blatant in the figure of Herman, who appears in extravagant drag characterisations throughout the film. Saskia E. Wieringa (2014: 198) explains that his depiction is modelled after a popular and rather aged transvestite TV actor and comedian, Tessy (full name, Kabul Basuki), typically portrayed with heavy make-up, thick protruding lips, and glittering jewellery, a type harking back to the *srimulat*, a humorous, low-brow Javanese form of theatre. Anderson (2012) suggests that, in donning such a disguise, Herman is trying to depict communists as cruel homosexuals, but there is another important element at play here. Herman's characterisation, in fact, parallels anti-communist propaganda stories of 'wildly singing and dancing women, seducing and then castrating the army's top brass, the nation's symbol of masculinity', leading the entire nation 'to associate the PKI [Indonesian Communist Party] with depravity,



Figure 3.4 Reenacting cannibalism in *The Act of Killing*.

as the evil to be ripped out of society' (Wieringa 2014: 198). Cinema was a privileged medium to spread such beliefs, as was notably the case of *Treachery of G30S/PKI* (*Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI*, Arifin C. Noer, 1984), an anti-communist propaganda film and compulsory viewing in Indonesian schools, which is littered with such motifs. Wieringa's insider's view (2014: 195-96) gives us the clue to some scenes in *The Act of Killing* which would otherwise remain opaque. An example is the moment when Anwar is playing an anti-communist fighter, called Arsan, who is slaughtered by Herman again in drag, in the role of 'a sexually depraved communist woman called Aminah', mouth smeared with the red juice of some berries (Figure 3.4).

Aminah laughs loudly, madly, and eats a piece of raw liver, shouting it is Arsan's liver that she had just ripped out. Next she produces an oblong piece of stuffed cloth, approximately twenty centimetres in length, also dripping with berry juice and proceeds to stuff that into the mouth of Arsan (who, though dead, is gagging). 'This is your penis, eat it', Aminah shouts. (Wieringa 2014: 198)

The editor of the *Medan Post*, Ibrahim Sinik, mentions, in another scene, that he played a similar role in a 1965 film, whose function was to instil hate against the PKI, and it is the same Sinik who, according to Wieringa (196), wrote the script for this cannibalistic scene. It is fitting that the perpetrators would be performing the roles of their own victims, as this

scene mirrors the acts of cannibalism they themselves committed at the time, as they confess to Oppenheimer, with chilling honesty, in *The Look of Silence*, in which they even describe the habit, among them, to drink a glass of their victims' blood as an antidote to recurrent nightmares of their crimes.

In *The Act of Killing*, the insistence on the drag characterisation goes beyond the ridicule of the enemy, exposing instead some deep-seated desire or fantasy in its raw state, in tune with Anwar's sexually infused obsession with the garrotte and the neck. Ivone Margulies (2003: 217-218) has described as the aim of reenactment films to 'conflate repetition with moral revision', providing a 'symmetry between traumatic ordeal and social redemption'. By collaborating in the making of *The Act of Killing*, Anwar seems to be avidly seeking solace for his trauma through the reenactment of his crimes. But the film firmly denies him such relief by exposing his and his comrades' ill-directed sexual drives and by piling up evidence to the enormity of their acts through their very reenactments.

The extraordinary procedure Oppenheimer devised in order to achieve this effect was to resort to one of the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) from which Anwar is clearly suffering, which is presentification. Sufferers from this condition are haunted by the feeling that the traumatic event continues to happen in the present. This is obviously the case of Anwar, who reiterates, in the film, that he continues to be assailed by recurrent nightmares of the crimes he committed more than 50 years ago. Alongside the reliving of the traumatic events, other defining symptoms of PTSD are vivid flashbacks, intrusive memories and images, and physical sensations such as nausea, which is at the core of a key scene I will return to in the next section.

As Homay King (2013: 31) reminds us a propos of *The Act of Killing*, Freud was the first to identify the symptoms of PTSD, which he described as 'repetition compulsion' in patients suffering from traumatic neuroses, many of whom were war veterans. Moved by the aim of unveiling a horrific past, *The Act of Killing* attempts to bring back the dead from their graves and have them play a role in the present through the very trauma their death has caused. Anwar is nothing but an instrument to that end, stupendously devised by auteur Oppenheimer, who gives free rein to his own imagination in order to attach audiovisual figuration to Anwar's ghosts. These appear, for example, as a noisy swarm of nocturnal bats following a shot of Anwar sleeping, as if they had directly emerged from his nightmares. Or in the shape of a group of monkeys, who descend from the trees to feast on the red berries used to represent blood in the reenactment of the attack on a village, suggesting

cannibalism (which is literally represented in the drag scene above) as well as animal automatism, in a parable to the human murderous instinct.

In the process of presentification and documentation of traumatic symptoms lies the extreme originality of the reenactment procedure utilised in this film, which rather than resorting to archive photos or footage, conflates the past with the present through the repetition of the act whose freshness and material reality is preserved in the traumatic symptoms and abject bodies of their perpetrators. Oppenheimer's auteurist role as an infiltrator and treacherous ally is that of removing the mask of his subjects as well as his own, in front and behind the camera, so as to attach the seal of material truth to the irreparable act of killing.

## Spectatorship

The injection of realism into the realm of spectatorship is one of the film's central aims and greatest achievements. Anwar, Herman and other perpetrators, sometimes accompanied by members of their families, are made to watch the footage of their re-enactments, in scenes which are then interspersed with the re-enactments themselves. They react by suggesting here and there an improvement to their costumes or make up. Mostly, however, they seem enthusiastic about what they see and convinced of the merit of their own stories, and this is clearly the reason why they continue to collaborate with Oppenheimer during the course of eight years. Anwar and Herman's spectatorial naivety could even be seen as providing credit to psychoanalytic theories that characterise the film spectator as passive and regressive, absorbed as they are in illusionistic voyeurism and ready for cathartic identification with themselves as actors.

It is not surprising that they should rejoice in recognising themselves in the skin of their imagined heroes, but it is positively baffling to see them incarnating, with apparent naturalness, both victims and perpetrators in their reenactments, which results, for the spectators of Oppenheimer's film, in the experience of the unbearable reality of their illusion. In a particularly bizarre scene, both Anwar and Adi, his fellow executioner in 1965, play the role of interrogators but with their faces made up in lacerated flesh, as if they themselves had been tortured by the very interrogators they impersonate. It is as if the death mask described by Bazin as comparable to cinema's ontological link to the material world had become alive and were being applied to the faces of those pretending to be the killers, making the past reemerge in the present in its *durée*.



Vivian Sobchack (2004: 59) called 'interobjectivity' the process of 'subjective realisation of our own *objectivity*, in the passion of our *own material*', and the film is undoubtedly pushing its subjects to experience themselves as objects. Viveiros de Castro, along similar lines, resorted to the concept of 'perspectivism' to address an ethos among the anthropophagic Tupi-Guarani, which he defines as 'the ability to look at oneself as the Other – a point of view from which one arguably obtains the ideal view of oneself' (2005: 5). It is not a coincidence that cannibalism is part of the horrors staged in *The Act of Killing*, in the carnivalesque sequence described above, in which Herman in drag bites on a liver and pushes a cut-off penis into the mouth of the severed head of his victim, the latter being no other than Anwar himself. By blurring the boundaries between filmmakers and film spectators, through a psychoanalytic procedure that turns cathartic identification into the reality of acting, *The Act of Killing* renders palpable the agony of victims for those who were, at once, agents and privileged spectators of their killing.

In the hands of Oppenheimer, Anwar becomes the ideal ground for this radical experiment that turns narrative illusionism on its head, that is, the reality of life. Two scenes placed at the beginning and the end of the film leave no doubt of the director's intention to force perpetrators into the skin of their victims so as to give them a physical sense of the plights they had caused. In the first one, Anwar, in a cheerful mood, visits a rooftop terrace that had been the site of many of his thousand murders, in order to demonstrate the use of the garrotte. In the second scene, Anwar revisits the same spot, but now, as the film leads us to believe, after having gone through various re-enactments of his crimes and sporting a more appropriate outfit for the occasion, a yellow suit instead of the white trousers and flowery shirt of the previous scene, and in a more sombre mood. As he attempts to convey the same description of the use of the garrotte, Anwar retches uncontrollably, as if he himself were being strangled and, at the same time, regurgitating, though alas only symbolically, the bodies of his victims. Adding a decisive difference to the second sequence from the first is the use of a single long take. Were it a cinema of montage, the retching could have been edited out, and Oppenheimer suggests that Anwar continued to perform, despite his sickness, probably in the hope that this would be the case. The decision to preserve the long take in its integrity is hence a political one, and simultaneously Oppenheimer's ultimate betrayal of his subject, negating cinema in order to let reality speak for itself.

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