



The following article was first published in *Media Development* 3/2014.

## **“The Act of Killing”: truth, memory and reconciliation in Indonesia**

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*The documentary film “The Act of Killing” reflects the ongoing impunity enjoyed by the paramilitary groups responsible for the crimes of Suharto’s regime in Indonesia in the late 1960s. Applauded by critics, internationally awarded and nominated for an Oscar in 2014 in the category “Best Documentary”, this movie creates a reflection on the recent past of a society that sees perpetrators as heroes and at the same criminalizes victims and justifies the atrocities committed against them. The film gathers stories about crimes against humanity with world-historical importance that had never been recorded before. “The Act of Killing” is a clue element in the national process of reconciliation and clarification of the truth about the dictatorship in Indonesia.*

One of the first scenes in “The Act of Killing” shows a man walking up stairs that lead to a roof where he begins to speak, without any emotion whatsoever, about the huge number of persons he killed up there. He describes how the victims were beaten to death, their blood flooding the floor. The foul odour filled the air in such a way that he had to invent a better method.

Accompanied by another person, this old man dramatizes how a victim was hung using barbed wire. He continues explaining, in a terrifyingly normal way, that he tried to forget how he murdered many persons by using drugs and alcohol and just tried to amuse himself. Then he hums a song while he dances a cha-cha-cha with a smile on his face.

This man is Anwar Congo, considered one of the “founding fathers” of the paramilitary groups that supported Suharto’s dictatorship in Indonesia in the late 1960s. In less than one year, these groups assassinated more than a million people who were regarded as part of the regime’s opposition or who simply did not win the paramilitary’s sympathy, including communists, intellectuals, artists and Chinese immigrants.

Congo is one of the protagonists of Joshua Oppenheimer’s documentary “The Act of Killing”. The film shows the absolute impunity still enjoyed by these death squads for the crimes committed, and the shocking admiration that a society can have, based on fear, indifference or ignorance, thus legitimizing the regime’s existence, justifying the crimes it committed and criminalizing its victims.

## **Global resonance**

The movie has thrilled not only Indonesian audiences but others worldwide, because it dug in the history of a country that refuses to revise its past and to take a critical position on it. At the same time, it revealed a reality that other countries in the world share and in which they are unfortunately involved. In an interview by the author with the American director Joshua Oppenheimer, published in a Spanish digital paper in 2013, he explained that he and co-director Christine Cynn had the intention to film a movie in Colombia about the work conditions of the cultivators of olive palms, but desisted because the presence of extreme-right paramilitary groups in parts of the country threatened the security of the film crew and the production of the documentary.

Instead they decided to film in Indonesia, where the situation is similar to Colombia, without yet knowing what they were going to discover there. "In Indonesia we started to film a movie, focusing on a community of survivors of the massacres of General Suharto's regime whose members worked in an olive palm plantation. This community tried to establish a syndicate, but feared they may have the same bad luck as their fathers and grandfathers, who had been sent to concentration camps or were killed in 1965, when the regime declared syndicates illegal", said Oppenheimer.

Thus the documentary changed course, as the director explained. "In our conversations with the survivors we noticed the fear of the victims and the absolute impunity of the crimes committed by the paramilitaries, who celebrated the happenings. The victims we spoke to told us that some of those who committed the crimes were living nearby and asked us if we could speak with them to obtain information about what had happened to people they knew and how they could find their remains. It was then that I thought that we could directly address the perpetrators and ask them what had occurred."

This was how Oppenheimer and his team came to know many of the perpetrators, Anwar Congo among others. One of the things that most impressed them was the shameless way they spoke about the murders they had committed – even in front of their wives, children and grandchildren – without any repentance, as can be seen in the movie. This was "shivery, shocking and terrible" for the director.

## **Premiere on Human Rights Day**

"The Act of Killing" was released in Indonesia on 10 December 2012, coinciding with Human Rights Day, and since then it has been screened and acclaimed in many countries around the world. The film received multiple awards at events including the British Academy of Film and Television Award (BAFTA) 2014, the Berlin International Film Festival 2013, the International Film Festival and Forum on Human Rights (FIFDH) in Geneva in 2013, and the award for the best documentary in critics circles from London, Vancouver and Toronto in 2013. It was also nominated for an Oscar in the category "Best Documentary" in 2014, but eventually did not win the award.

In Indonesia, special screenings were organized for film producers and directors, artists, human rights defenders, journalists, actors, educators and historians among other groups. Furthermore, free copies were distributed to citizens on September 30, the date when the genocide is commemorated.

Obviously, making such a critical film implied difficulties during and after the shoot. But during the screening at the National Human Rights Commission of Indonesia, everyone agreed that every effort should be made to make the movie as widely known as possible. Nevertheless, some movies are still banned in the country: "The human rights defenders and survivors told us, 'We need to demonstrate the regime's nature', not because the Indonesians do not know it, but because they have so much fear that they are incapable of speaking about it", the director affirmed.

Although supposedly a democracy since 1999, when the first parliamentary elections were held, Indonesia continues to be governed by a far-right ideology and there are still many remnants of the dictatorship, such as censorship. The regime members turned those who watched and spread the movie into a "military target" and included them on their persecution list. "We knew that the documentary had to be sent to the censors before it could be projected in public. Otherwise they would forbid it and watching it would be an offense", explained Oppenheimer.

"Without prior official authorization, the paramilitaries and militaries would have an excuse to attack the projections. In order to prevent this, we built up big domestic support and invited people to see the movie with their relatives and friends in private sessions". On the release date, the movie was projected in 50 locations in 30 cities, and about 200 people attended each screening. Involving a society that is afraid but longing for justice in a reflection about the past has been the key to overcoming censorship.

Even so, "The Act of Killing" forced the team to adopt security measures. Oppenheimer said that he occasionally receives threats and the identities of the film crew in Indonesia are being kept secret in order to be able to protect their lives: "It saddens me that they cannot be involved in those changes that are so necessary for Indonesia, that they cannot travel with me to the premieres or screenings of the movie all around the world. I am dreaming of the day when things have changed and I can add the credits of all people to the film", said Oppenheimer.

### **Encouraging social change**

Showing "The Act of Killing" in citizen networks that afterwards discuss what they have just seen and plan strategies to introduce structural changes, implies that the documentary transcends denunciation to become a key element in the mobilizing and reflecting on peace and development.

"The Act of Killing" clearly takes the side of those considered "the losers" by history, although it does not show them – an approach that is original. The story is told from the perspective of the perpetrators, who incriminate themselves more than any of the victims could have done: "We see the contrast between the

survivors, who were living mired in silence, and the perpetrators, who were not ashamed to tell their stories”, said Oppenheimer.

The movie has a clear and plain intention to encourage and contribute to social change by seeking to uncover the truth about the serious violations of human rights under the Suharto regime, to compensate victims, to make the perpetrators ask for forgiveness, to see that justice is done and a reconciliation process can start.

“We wanted to generate *public debate*, therefore we did not upload the movie straight away to the Internet, so that *people could gather together and talk about it*. Reactions have been surprising and unpredictable: nowadays Indonesians are talking about their past, calling for a Truth Commission, because without it there cannot be reconciliation. Many of the perpetrators are dead and were sentenced in absentia to send a clear message that these things are forbidden, that this kind of behaviour is objectionable and that these acts cannot be repeated,” says Oppenheimer.

### **“The Act of Killing” and reconciliation in Indonesia**

“The Act of Killing” is an element in the national process of reconciliation and clarification of the truth about the dictatorship in Indonesia. Oppenheimer affirms that he and his team felt that the stories to which they had access, about crimes against humanity that had never been recorded before, were of world-historical importance. Hence they created a vast audiovisual archive about the massacres as part of the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council’s Genocide and Genre project, with Oppenheimer as one of the principle investigators.

The contribution to public discussion that the movie is making sets a precedent about the importance that documentary film can have for social change by allowing Indonesian society and, by extension the world in general, to revise its past, change its present and build a new future: “What Indonesia needs is not only peace and reconciliation, but a popular movement that openly fights political corruption, that fights for freedom of expression and for the equal redistribution of national property among all the people that have been impoverished, victimized and excluded from social life and the economy,” affirms Oppenheimer.

In his view, “The Indonesian people must fight hard battles and perhaps the movie can help them face those with less fear, opening a space for them in order to talk about the problems of their country.”

### **“The other”: Friend or enemy?**

Telling the story from the perpetrators’ point of view, without them apologizing for the violence, and in this way giving relevance to the victims without needing to show them, is another interesting and innovative aspect of “The Act of Killing”, that provokes reflexivity among the killersa themselves.

Even when they feel comfortable and safe in their impunity, it seems that the perpetrators are aware of the reactions that their confessions could provoke: “The children of the communists will try to revise the history, but will not succeed. They will never be able to retaliate”, says one of them. “The government

should ask for forgiveness, not us. It would be like a medicine, it will reduce the pain”, says another. “We could do it, the proof is that nobody punished us”, says yet another. The majority of them do not show the slightest sign of regret.

In this respect, the case of Anwar Congo is special. His personal journey of “realizing” the seriousness of the crimes he committed, thanks to the stories that he himself tells and recreates in the movie, runs parallel to the history of the massacres. Initially he says that he had tried to forget, while later he confesses that he had nightmares, as if he felt some remorse.

Congo recognizes himself in the mirror that the movie holds up to him. His attitude is critical. When “The Act of Killing” raises the moral and ethical dilemmas of the protagonists, it can lead the viewer to think that forgiveness is a necessary step to reconciliation. By appealing to the awareness of the perpetrators, and not only to that of the victims, while searching for peace and clarification of the truth, the documentary can contribute to social change in an inclusive and progressive way.

“As a character, Anwar is interesting because his conscience is present from the beginning”, says Oppenheimer. “Perhaps the fact that he was dancing does not prove that he is proud, but instead that he knows that what he did was wrong although he does not want to show the world his guilt. He justifies his crimes, but does not want to look at himself in the mirror to see an assassin. The movie shows that impunity and corruption are inevitable when a regime of terror has been installed and that our apparent ‘normality’ is being built at the expense of others.”

It is interesting that, while “The Act of Killing” tries to return dignity to the victims, it also makes an effort to show that the perpetrators are human beings too. “The movie shows that the victimizers have done terrible things because they are human beings and therefore know the difference between right and wrong,” says Oppenheimer. “Precisely because they are moral beings, they are tormented by what they have done and try to run away from it. They lie to themselves, justifying and celebrating.”

According to Oppenheimer, in order to understand what happened, we need to keep in mind the context in which these acts took place and in which those human beings were living: “I think that we are the product of the society in which we live, of our context, our past. If we refuse to look at our past, it’s like we do not want to know who we are. We have only one chance to live on this earth, and it would be a waste to live without asking ourselves anything about what it means to be a human being, without asking ourselves who we are.”

“Perhaps if we took better care of each other, society would be different: we would respect each other more, less grotesque disparities like abysmal inequality would exist between the rich and the poor. Perhaps if we built a different society, we could make it unimaginable that such awful acts could have been committed by paramilitaries in Indonesia,” reflected the director.

The personal journey of Anwar Congo through history was important for Oppenheimer, though it does not seem to have resonated with the other perpetrators nor to have promoted an immediate change in Indonesian society.

"I think Anwar changed to a certain extent, but he does not have the strength to recognize that what he did was wrong. He saw the movie on 1 November 2012 and he was really touched. He cried for a moment, went to the bathroom and then he came back. He said: 'Josh, this film shows how it feels to be me and I am very satisfied and thankful for having had the opportunity to show these feelings which I had been unable to show for decades.' He and I will keep in touch and that will not change, because filming the movie was like making a journey together. What happened during this process will always affect us", says Oppenheimer.

"The Act of Killing" makes another contribution of utmost importance: it highlights the fact that it generated reflections about the shared responsibility between killers and a silent society that promoted the perpetrators to the category of heroes and at the same time denigrated the victims and justified violation of human rights, supported by the media.

### **Media as agents of war or peace**

Another interesting subject that the film raises is the role of media in the construction of imaginaries about good and bad, heroism, victims, violence and the truth. To understand dominant narratives, it is very important to grasp the enormous influence of cinema and the press, especially in countries where there are totalitarian regimes supported by the media. "The Act of Killing" makes a very important contribution to critical reflection on the role of journalists and the media as collaborators in social conflict.

In some scenes, it is clear that the protagonists have built their identities as gangsters and executioners based on the fictional characters of Hollywood movies, from which they got much economic benefit by reselling tickets for screenings, and learned or improved their killing techniques. That leads to reflection about the vindication of violence in the media and the endorsement of 'success', 'richness', and 'power' acquired through violence, which are imposed like a model and shown as 'desirable'.

In relation to the role of media as accomplices of impunity, the movie shows how the paramilitaries built a discourse around themselves that legitimizes the crimes they committed. This is especially noticeable in the scene in which some of the killers are invited to a talk show on the National Television of Indonesia where they are presented as triumphant in the genocide against communists and praised as national heroes.

The role of media as active promoters of violence during the conflict is perhaps most obvious in the scene in which Ibrahim Sinik, director of the newspaper *Medan Pos*, proudly tells that he used his work to gather or publish defamatory information about persons who later were assassinated by the paramilitaries. "My job as a journalist was to make people hate them," he says to the camera.

But media can also be agents of reconciliation, historical memory, justice and truth. "The Act of Killing" and its impact on the Indonesian and international press exemplify this. In the same way that media can position themselves on the side of injustice, they can also contribute to the construction of a renewed

society based on justice and truth. One example is the Indonesian magazine *Tempo* that, in an act of courage, independence and journalistic ethics, published a special issue, in English as well as in the native language, in which they make a revision of the country's history and talk about the massacres while referring to the movie.

### **Documentary cinema as a portrait of reality**

How could so many people have been killed? What keeps the regime in power and why do citizens apparently keep on supporting it? How is so much impunity possible? Why have those responsible for crimes against humanity not been judged, if they are fully identified? Who were the ones who wrote the history and how come their story became the dominant one? These are some of the many questions that a spectator might be faced with, wherever he or she lives, after having seen "The Act of Killing".

"The whole global south has been made that way. Perpetrators have won through massive political violence, with terror regimes; they prevent people from organizing syndicates, manage natural resources, and create unfair labour laws to obtain cheap labour. Many things that we buy in Europe are produced in countries like Indonesia", reflects the director Joshua Oppenheimer.

"Many people asked me 'Are you not getting tired of all this? Don't you want to leave it all and go back home?' But very soon I realized that there is no way to escape from it; there is no home to go to. When you visit a store to buy clothing, you are actually buying something that was made under terrible circumstances. In this way, in our daily lives we depend on people like the protagonists of the movie, and there are hundreds, thousands, if not millions like them who ensure that everything stays the way it is. In this sense, the developed world is not far from the reality of those countries."

"The Act of Killing" shows a reality that is happening in Indonesia, but the same reality exists in several other parts of the world. The reflections that it generates are not limited to a geographical area. The movie is a portrait of reality so it is impossible to be unaware of it. In a way, the personal journey of Anwar Congo through his own history and his country's history, which he helped to construct, are a metaphor for the transformation in Indonesia after "The Act of Killing": just like Congo, the country shifted from cynicism about the past to "realizing" and reflecting about the seriousness of the facts and the need to speak about them.

The role that this movie plays as an agent of change is very clear to Oppenheimer: "I am very satisfied because every time "The Act of Killing" wins an award, there is a headline about Indonesia. That is very important because, in this way, the government has to stop looking the other way and will be forced to pay attention to issues of concern to the people and which are revealed in the documentary," says the director.

"I think the most important success of this film has been the fact that it helped the Indonesian people to look at their past without having fear," added Oppenheimer. I would feel very honoured when spectators everywhere see themselves reflected in people like Anwar and recognize that, in one way or

another, we are all perpetrators, that each act of evil in history has been committed by human beings like us, that the world cannot be divided into good or bad. It would be an achievement if we could perceive the reality that "The Act of Killing" depicts not as a distant reality but as one in which we all are living."

*The present article is adapted from the author's work "Documentary cinema, memory and reconciliation: An interview with Joshua Oppenheimer, director of "The Act of Killing" published in Glocal Times No. 20 (June 2014), University of Malmö (Sweden).*

**Reference**

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