

KILLING THE DOCUMENTARY, AS WE KNOW IT: LESSONS FROM THE ACT OF KILLING

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In March 2013, I bought a ticket to a screening at the Museum of Modern Art. There was a big buzz about a new film called “The Act of Killing” and I wanted to see it.

In the theater, first I was fascinated, then puzzled, then increasingly disturbed by the film’s shock therapy approach to the horrors of political life in Indonesia. After an hour, I walked out, stepping on the toes and handbags of mesmerized audience members. I walked not because talk of murders by murderers made me queasy. These stories, told by low-level assassins, employed during General Suharto’s 1965 coup to depose left-leaning President Sukarno and to destroy all his opponents, aren’t new. (Estimates range from 500,000 to two million accused “communists” and ethnic Chinese were slaughtered.) I walked out because I was miserable in my viewer’s seat – shackled in the intolerable position the film suggested I should be comfortable in. I wasn’t.

Two months later, perplexed by the rave reviews trailing the film from festival to festival, I went to see it again when it opened in theaters. “The Act of Killing” now began with a new introduction by the filmmaker. Addressing the camera, Joshua Oppenheimer gives the audience permission to laugh when there is something funny. Why do we need his permission to laugh? Is he demanding that we feel comfortable watching boastful reconstructions of mass butchery by the death squads of Medan? What is he nervous about? Oppenheimer also reminds us that we are all capable of good and evil...that any among us could be tempted. Hmmm?

Since then, the raves, awards and prizes have continued. No critic seems to be examining – at least in print or on the net – what there is to learn from this “unruly documentary activism”: the new moniker for non-fiction films which assert their status as both art and activism and thus the license they claim to refuse compliance with certain classic codes of ethical documentary filmmaking.

In my opinion, unruly activist films are obliged to produce nothing less than useful experience. Good filmmaking comes down to education – education of the senses, including the sixth sense, as the Buddhists would have it, the mind. Unruly or not, the questions to ask of all films remain the same: How is the audience constructed by the film – that is, to whom is the film addressed – and how? What generalizations are made about the represented...and about us/them differences? What information is privileged or repressed? What arguments are made? Is the experience of the film useful? How are we changed by it?

I suspect that the critics – like the rest of us – don’t know what to do with their engagement with this “bold” film. Without noting any personal discomfort, they stab wildly, flattering the film with platitudes: *audacious, timeless, explosive, shattering, horribly brilliant, shocking, transporting, unprecedented, bizarre, hypnotic, surreal, disturbing, timeless, unforgettable, unmissable, essential, stunning, a minor miracle, a new form of cinematic surrealism, an absolute and unique masterpiece, a radical development in the documentary form, unprecedented in the history of cinema, every frame is astonishing*, and so on.

I read these vague and awkward phrases as fumbling attempts to avoid the writers’ own confusion. Perhaps the critics lack the energy, or the means, or both, to confront what has happened to them in their cinema seats. Yes, they have endured extreme sensation – sensation way off their critical charts. They can say they’ve never seen anything like this before, and they haven’t. Yet, without analysis of their own experience in the theater – and perhaps not wishing to be left off the cheerleading bandwagon – they jump on and more amazed raves flow forth.

As far as I have been able to discover, no critic has admitted discomfort in the face of this “candy-colored moral migraine” (J. Hoberman). Here and there are tiny hints: Nicolas Rapold wrote from the film’s premiere, “Toronto shock and outrage at the grotesque spectacle of impunity settles into *helpless numbness* [my italics] over the course of the 116-minute running time.” Anthony Lane, in the *The New Yorker*, queries: “Unforgettable though such scenes may be, however, is it wise to weave such fantasies—however distressing or therapeutic—around the practice of evil when the facts of the case are, to most viewers, so obscure?” Jonathan

Rosenbaum, on his blog: “Maybe there’s some other use value for his showcase of the feelings of mass murderers that I haven’t yet been able to tease out of this material.” So far, only Nick Fraser, a BBC Commissioning Editor, and the independent critic, Jennifer Merin, both at About.com, have written negatively about the film – elegantly and succinctly. The rest of the critics have handled this hot and “revered” documentary without respect for the Indonesian people, or, it’s my understanding, for the film’s international audiences.

Throughout the film, Oppenheimer encourages his collaborators to produce ostentatiously surreal and violent dramatic film reconstructions of their death squad activities. Ever since Robert Flaherty asked his Inuit collaborator, Nanook the Bear, (his real name was "Allakariallak") to fake the capture of a seal in 1922 – at the very beginning of ethnographic film tourism – we have seen hundreds of social actors perform “real” re-enactments of their lives for the cameras of documentary filmmakers. There is nothing new in “The Act of Killing” but carnage, and the special, cozy relationship we are urged to enjoy with the killers. Perhaps this is exactly what the critics are avoiding with their raves – that they have been duped into admiring, for an hour or two, the cool Rat Pack killers of Medan.

Collaboration is a way to share, with the social actors represented, responsibility for a film’s acts of description, strategies and arguments... a way to “keep it clean.” Some of the most useful films I’ve seen in the last twenty years – non-fiction and otherwise – have been the products of collaboration with the social actors represented, in unique and disparate ways. Carolyn Strachan and Alessandro Cavadini’s “Two Laws,” Kent MacKenzie’s “The Exiles,” and Rolf de Heer and Peter Djigirr’s “Ten Canoes” come quickly to mind.

First on this list should be Rithy Pahn’s “S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine” – the perfect counter model to “The Act of Killing.” In S-21, the two survivors of the infamous Cambodian prison and their Khmer Rouge prison guards are brought together in a patient re-enactment of their crimes, which the traumatized guards cannot otherwise recollect.” The Act of Killing is also a collaboration of sorts, but for me a non-productive, uncomfortable, even unclean one.

Here are six warnings based on what I saw in “The Act of Killing,” a dangerous model for the future. I write here to start a dialog with other filmmakers where there is none – not yet. It is up to us to learn from this film and work hard to avoid its miscalculations and mistakes.

1. DON’T MAKE HISTORY WITHOUT FACTS:

In spite of the scale of their deeds, the Medan gangsters featured in “The Act of Killing” are, in fact, no more than foot soldiers and footnotes to a much larger drama – a 50-year sequence of upheavals, which permitted a paranoid and aggressive U.S., with other allies, to depose left-leaning leaders and popular movements in any way they saw fit – all over the world. It began in Iran in 1953, then in Indonesia, 1965, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia starting in 1965, in Chile, 1973, then in El Salvador and Nicaragua, 1979, in Guatemala in 1982, in Iraq, 2001, and then some. There is no mention in Oppenheimer’s film of the role of the U.S. in the Indonesian massacres, or of the bigger Cold War drama.

It is irresponsible, even obscene, to take up the current abysmal Indonesian political condition without laying out the history of who was complicit in the military overthrow of President Sukarno and the massacre that followed, activities that threaten citizens even today. The U.S. Embassy in Jakarta supplied the right-wing Indonesian military with lists of up to 5,000 suspected Communists for elimination. (Steeped in the “domino theory”, which argues that if one state in a region came under the influence of communism, then the surrounding states would follow in a chain reaction, President Lyndon Johnson was dedicated to the “containment” of China’s and the Soviet Union’s capacity to spread communism throughout Asia. Johnson continued to support Suharto’s “New Order” coup until the general had terrorized and then completely secured the country.)

Without context, there is only sensation and spectacle. Yet there is the illusion of learning and caring. After two hours of “The Act of Killing,” we leave the theater with a fantasy degree in Indonesian history... credentialed, but ignorant, and yet absolved. Instead of offering useful history and analysis, the film’s exploitation of the

Medan thugs actually rebunkers the traces of the 1965 genocide and its aftermath, further perpetuating the crimes.

2. THINK TWICE BEFORE REPRESENTING DISPLAYS OF VIOLENCE PERPETRATED ON LITTLE BROWN PEOPLE BY OTHER LITTLE BROWN PEOPLE:

Consider whether your film helps anybody understand anything useful, especially when representing people of another color, or any other category of human, in unique and complex historical situations.

Horror shows, like the terrorizing of the Indonesian people, make us gasp in horror and disbelief. Yet, as with all liberal-consensus documentaries, we feel we are doing some civic duty by just witnessing the troubles. We feel we have “cared.” Then, when the film ends, as the lights are coming up, we recuperate ourselves in our cinema seats, semi-consciously, with the unspoken sentiment, “Thank God that’s not me... nor mine.” (Thank God I don’t live in a gangster paradise, as Indonesia is represented in this film.) The horror show is over and we can go home, enlightened, ennobled, refreshed...absolved.

After 60 odd years of “underdeveloped” and “third world” geo-political constructions by “first world” cultures, to step into “third world” waters requires respect and extreme caution to avoid unconsciously generating chauvinistic representations. There is no evidence in this film – and there should be – that the Indonesian people are capable of resistance to domination and terror. The history books and filmed records tell us they are capable. (For example, witness Joris Iven’s “Indonesia Calling,” a 1946 documentary film about trade union seamen, waterside workers and passionate Indonesian freedom fighters, refusing to service Dutch ships containing arms and ammunition destined for Indonesia to suppress the country's independence movement. “There is A Poet: Unconcealed Poetry (Puisi tak terkuburkan),” by the Indonesian filmmaker, Garin Nugroho, made in 2000...the first Indonesian film to revisit the 1965 massacres. And more recently, the 2011 documentary Dongeng Rangkas. There are others.)

The Swedish filmmaker and University of Minnesota scholar Dag Yngvesson, currently writing a PhD dissertation on Indonesian Cinema, has watched “The Act of Killing” at many different Indonesian screenings and describes the relation of us (western filmmaker/western audience) vs. them (Indonesian subjects) in this way: “As ‘The Act of Killing’ uses the information it has gathered to shock its Indonesian audience into accepting the truth of its representations, it simultaneously reduces its local viewers, who are implicitly “in” the film, to the level of not yet democratic, not yet enlightened, and, at some level, still in need of a caring outsider to help guide them on the path to positive change.”

In a recent panel presentation, Yngvesson expanded his analysis of how The Act of Killing secures the post-colonial country of Indonesia to our understanding of a doomed state.

Yet each moment of creativity, and each ostensibly ‘free’ admission of violence, lechery, or lack of remorse from its participants ultimately serves to tighten the reigns of Oppenheimer’s discursive control. Using their candid descriptions, he feeds both local and international audiences an Indonesia that is too easily digested, shocking atrocities and all, and settles comfortably within the pre-processed realm of the known. Well-stocked with ideas born of the Geneva Convention and the International Criminal Court at The Hague, Oppenheimer places his interlocutors, and their film, in a hermetically sealed story-world where a typically crumbling, underdeveloped nation is neatly divided along axes of good and evil by the contemporary standards of international law.

Don’t produce freak shows of the criminal, oppressed, “the primitive”. Don’t herd “others-than-us” into cinema cages and then examine their “peculiarities” of action, speech, their fears, their limitations, their despotisms, as if they are foreign to the natural, the human... the family of man. Don’t wantonly project unexamined political criteria, especially on a people with a long history of colonial subjugation.

3. BE FAIR TO YOUR SOCIAL ACTORS:

With gentle encouragement from the director, the movie gangsters of Medan serve themselves up as willing

subjects to be consumed. There is a pining for the spotlight, for the opportunity to exhibit their power. However, to “empower” social actors in documentary, when the “actors” don’t realize how they will be seen on the world stage (in this film as immoral, grotesque, juvenile and pathetic) is a questionable practice. Many times over we have witnessed, on film and elsewhere, debased, paramilitary mad men in the pay of power. There is nothing new here about these particular criminals – nothing except their ignorance of their own exploitation in the cinema.

The writer, Jeremy Mohler, has suggested that Anwar Congo, the central figure in the film, might have been pleased to tell his tales to an American filmmaker, as he and his mates were hugely enamored of the American action films that were banned by Sukarno’s left leaning government in the 60’s. Mohler writes, “Congo and his buddies resemble the lower-level gangsters in *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), eager to please the bosses but unaware of the larger games being played above them.” Because Congo’s corrupt bosses received funding, weaponry, manpower and kill lists from the CIA, Congo might have understood, naively, that the American documentary director would thus be delighted with his lurid accounts of murder, since that’s just what the U.S. aid was paying for. I base this speculation on Yngvesson’s account of Congo’s sense of betrayal on seeing the finished film.

Yet a few months after the highly successful launch of Oppenheimer’s film at several major Western film festivals, in an Al Jazeera follow-up report inspired by “*The Act of Killing*” (Vaessen 2012), Congo weeps during a Skype conversation with his former admirer, who is now safely back in Europe: “I very much feel that what you’ve produced has made things very difficult for me.” Oppenheimer indicates that he understands Anwar’s predicament, but assures Congo that he will never forget his bravery in opening his story to the world, revealing “how people can commit evil acts.”

Oppenheimer has indeed succeeded in documenting, and drawing mass attention to, a predicament both uniquely horrifying, and, at the same time, rather typical in the discourse of the Third World: that of gross human rights violations, and, in this case, genocide, at the hands of a corrupt regime and its supporters. The film is thus both problematic and also potentially powerful as a local political tool, depending on the context in which it is shown and what other sources of information viewers have to process its sweeping claims.

Congo, having heard Oppenheimer out via Skype, says nothing, but instead raises himself, still streaming tears, and walks away, leaving laptop and camera alone in the room. For him, and Indonesia, there will be no ending scene, plane ticket home, or “180 degree turn” that leads to an unambiguous truth.

Oppenheimer has said, on the record, that he would be in danger if he returned to Indonesia...in danger, perhaps, from the government, but maybe from the gangsters themselves.

4. AVOID BUILDING A FILM ON THE BEDROCK OF PORNOGRAPHY.

Pornography is the use of other people’s “reality” for our pleasure. In “*The Act of Killing*,” our pornographic interest is generated primarily by the gangsters’ ignorance of us watching and disapproving. It’s titillating to stand on the safe side of a one-way mirror... unseen, amazed, judging... as the gangster’s cinema fantasies grow more and more grandiose. The film keeps stimulating wonder, and titillating narrative questions: “How far will the gangsters go... especially on camera?” “Don’t they know we are watching them... aghast?” “Why have they been tolerated for so long?” There are adequate answers and explanations of the gangsters’ performances but explanations would dampen audience fascination with the sideshow boasts.

Don’t titillate us with others’ sad condition, with the Medan gangsters’ demonstrations of their power and their Hollywood fantasies. Rather, try to de-titillate or de-pornographize such experiences, so that the underlying structural forces producing and protecting these criminal behaviors are laid bare. There are many techniques to do this: Harun Farocki de-pornographized napalm in “*Inextinguishable Fire*.” Trinh T. Minh-ha de-pornographized African villagers in “*Reassemblage*.” Alain Resnais de-pornographized the atomic bomb in

“Hiroshima Mon Amour.”

5. DON'T COMPROMISE YOUR AUDIENCE – DON'T TRY TO TRAP US IN OUR APPETITE FOR EXTREME EXPERIENCE:

As the cameras roll, Congo proudly demonstrates his preferred killing technique (strangling with piano wire... “less blood”) then carefully directs the re-enactment of it on film. Because the American director stands in for viewers, we enjoy, vicariously, his intimate, non-judging, comfortable collaboration with Congo. As the filmmaker’s silent and awed accomplices, we are unable to separate from identifying with his methods of seduction – cameras, crew, make up, props, costumes, and extravagant lighting instruments – so that the gangsters can squeeze, in their inept way, sinister, and sometimes absurdly romanticized, movie experience from their own histories.

Normally, in non-fiction film – for better or for worse – we are left alone with our Judeo-Christian “thou-shalt-not-kill” and certainly our “thou-shalt-not-kill-and-boast-about-it” judgments. But here, both our invisibility behind the camera, and our comfortable and confident superior moral position has been eroded by our partnership with the unseen but very present director, who keeps encouraging the gangsters’ boasting demonstrations.

We want to trust the director but we are not used to this treatment and so we squirm... we squirm, rationalize and hope... hoping, for almost two hours, that the end of the film will loose the narrative straightjacket we have suffered by Congo’s finally realizing remorse. We feel deeply compromised by the intimacy and collusion. We struggle to exercise our own judgment. Our occasional snickerings at the glamorized fantasies are but feeble attempts to twist ourselves out of this excruciating dilemma. The filmmaker has forced a trade of our moral reasoning for grotesque cinema thrills.

6. AVOID USING DOCUMENTARY FOR CONFESSIONS AND/OR PRIMAL THERAPY:

When, at long last, we see Congo in pain, unable to retch (seemingly weakened by the memories he has been attempting to reproduce for the screen) the narrative has completed its task and the audience is relieved of tension – I guess. Theoretically we have been “paid back” for our time and interest, but the payback is unsatisfying and we feel it. Congo’s remorse is not useful for anything except resolving the film’s narrative and rationalizing the compromising footage that preceded it. Congo’s retching can’t stack up against the murders. It can’t unravel the director’s web of intentions. It offers nothing in the way of restorative justice. And it can’t explain how it was possible for Indonesia to be turned on its political/social ass almost overnight and why it remains in its ghastly condition today. It can’t explain anything that we want to understand. That would require a different kind of film.

Poor Congo. On the “Act of Killing” website, the director explains, “He needs the filmmaking to address his own nightmares so he can live with himself. He’s trying to deal with his pain. He’s trying to experience his pain.” The unseen but ever present filmmaker seduces his audience with daring tales of murder, and then rationalizes audience discomfort with the suggestion that we have witnessed the saving of one person’s soul. Congo’s pain is not our business. We are not priests. We cannot pardon anybody. Confessions are private matters unless part of a reconciliation process. This witnessing makes us feel helpless and distraught.

As with scenes of people praying and meditating on camera, it’s hard to believe that these are not performances of self for the camera... perhaps, even unconsciously...performed to pay back the filmmaker’s expensive investment in the social actor’s participation in the film. I trust that I am not the only one in the audience who has speculated that Congo felt he owed the American filmmaker an ending, and delivered it.

The possibility that Congo dutifully performed retching for the American filmmaker had apparently never occurred to Oppenheimer. Errol Morris, one of the executive producers of the film, queried the director about this issue, and, as reported in Morris’ *Slate* article in July, 2013, Oppenheimer was very disturbed by the suggestion that Congo’s participation in his film had not brought him to remorse, that the retching — like the gangsters’ other productions – was a required performance... that Anwar was not seriously interested in

experiencing or confessing guilt. Oppenheimer responded:

You're raising a very, very scary thought. It's so disturbing in some way that it would've been hard for me to maintain my relationship with Anwar, if this were an operating assumption. It could be right. If Anwar doesn't have a past and also has these at the very most echoes, reverberations or stains from what he's done that he doesn't recognize, and if the final moment is maybe yet another moment of performance, if he then disappears into the night and we're left in this shop of empty handbags, and there's no connection to the past on that roof, then it's almost too chilling for me to contemplate what the whole movie is really saying. It's a disturbing thought.

It *is* a disturbing thought.

AFTERTHOUGHTS

One afternoon, in a dentist's office, I leafed through *People* magazine's December 30, 2013 issue. There were many top ten lists, among them the Top 10 Movies of the Year. Sandwiched between #3, "American Hustle" and #5, "Gravity," was #4, "The Act of Killing," summarized as: "The year's most stunning documentary unmask men responsible for mass killings in Indonesia as both boastful and pathetic – and disturbingly, still in power." Hot stuff - but that's entertainment. And entertainment, combined with Judeo-Christian high moral education, is what liberal-consensus audiences seem to desire. It's what gets nominated for Academy Awards.

Perhaps distribution of this film should be limited to the numbed and fearful Indonesia people, among whom – and I take the director's word on this – the portrayal of Congo's movie fantasies, and now Congo's "discomfort" are sparking renewed interest in examining the last 48 years of Indonesian history. The director suggests that Congo's cheesy re-enactments will help reduce fear of the right wing state, which has ruled with violence and intimidation all those years. I hope it does. But I would suggest that the possibility of empowerment has been eclipsed. This would have required input, real collaboration between the perpetrators and victims.

The education of the rest of us has failed. Without education, we are likely to stay silent the next time our politicians see it in their interest to destabilize another peoples' government, by any means necessary.