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dir. Joshua Oppenheimer. *The Act of Killing.* 2012.

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What happens to the perpetrators after a genocide occurs in a society? The documentary *The Act of Killing* examines three dimensions of this question: the personalities of the men who perpetrated the 1965 Indonesian genocide, their social relationships, and the fate of Indonesian society in general. This exceptional film succeeds in opening three intriguing windows on how a post-genocidal society looks, through a unique combination of vivid portrayals, harrowing interviews, absurd re-enactments, and patient observation. It is an original documentary that makes a genuine contribution to the study of mass political violence and can be recommended to a broad audience.

Anwar Kongo, a friendly gÃ©nocidaire

After most genocides, perpetrators within the regime have generally attempted to deny or conceal their involvement in the killings, while traumatized survivor communities have often mourned and demanded truth, justice, or revenge. In this post-violent phase, sometimes a flawed and fragile democracy develops, and sometimes a different dictatorship takes over. In either case, impunity has proven to be the rule and punishment of the perpetrators the exception in post-genocide societies. This is a genuine dilemma because often an enormous number of people are involved in crimes. In the 1965-66 genocide in Indonesia, an estimated 500,000 Communists, suspected Communists, Chinese-Indonesians, and others were killed by the Suharto regime in one of the worst cases of mass murder during the Cold War.

One of the killers was Anwar Kongo, a slim, streetwise, and jolly seventy-year-old man who still lives in his hometown Medan on the Indonesian island of Sumatra. The sympathetic Anwar takes great care of his personal hygiene and looks after himself: he spends a lot of time in front of the mirror, combing (and dying) his curly grey hair with precision, frequently inspecting his teeth, wearing flashy sunglasses, and dressing up in bright batik shirts. Coming across him in the streets, one might think of him as a model grandfather who enjoys the good life, loves to dance, drink, and sing. In 1965-66, Anwar Kongo murdered approximately one thousand suspected Communists and other oppositionists of the Suharto regime. *The Act of Killing* follows him and provides a disturbing image of a mass murderer who got away with genocide and is enjoying a worry-free and comfortable life.

The process of genocide perpetration generally evolves through three phases: initiation, routinization, and coping. *The Act of Killing* provides clear empirical evidence for this claim. It depicts how Anwar Kongo experienced these three phases: in the beginning of the killing process, he still bludgeoned his victims to death with a rod. Standing on the very rooftop where he murdered hundreds of people, Anwar shows that the method caused too much spilled blood to be cleaned, so he moved on to strangle his victims with a metal wire instead. After this initial scene, the producers ask Anwar to re-enact the killings for the camera, and he eagerly sets up dramatic scenes, including costumes and makeup, bringing to life his memories and feelings about the killings.

Oppenheimer himself argued that the film is âa documentary of the imagination.â[1] This is a good point: we must understand the imagination of genocidaires better. How do they imagine themselves; what is their self-perception? Perpetratorsâ collective fantasies about themselves and especially about their victims are the cognitive and emotional foundations of genocide. An-

war and his consorts enjoyed gangster films, westerns, and musicals. They mimicked the heroes, replayed the scenes, and adored the pathos of righteous killing in those genres. The genocide thus emerged as a fatal cocktail of thuggish masculinity with a sentimental edge. Besides the ubiquitous impunity in Indonesia, many viewers were dumbfounded by Anwarâs esthetic style, which many characterized as bizarre, surreal, even grotesque. But it should be taken extremely seriously. Understanding the perpetratorsâ self-image is vitally important, because their fantastical construction of the Self also contains the projection of the imagined Other.[2]

Oppenheimer also argued that the film is essentially about impunity. Again he was right: as the minutes creep by and the atrocities pile on, the viewer is sickened by the boundless impunity Anwar is enjoying. Nowhere does he make an attempt to hide, conceal, or misrepresent the truth of the massacres. However, Anwar Kongo is a man haunted by his increasingly troubled conscience. He drinks, doubts his own truths, has nightmares in which his ghoulish victims return to vex him–all signs of a guilty conscience, or what is known in genocide studies as a âperpetrator trauma.â When he finally plays the role of victim during one of the enactments, he comes to a sudden realization of the horrific violence he inflicted on them. Back on the rooftop where he first explained his strangling methods, he retches over and over, without really throwing up. What we see is a man who is sickened by his acts, and by himself.

Social relationships

Anwarâs social environment consists mostly of right-wing Indonesian vigilantes, steeped in nationalism and sexism. He surrounds himself with idolaters such as the pot-bellied wannabe politician Erman, Pemuda Pancasila leader Yapto Soerjosoemarno, and Suharto regime propagandist Ibrahim Sinik. Together, they mutually reinforce the moral landscape of the genocide, continuously convincing each other that what happened was a necessary act of national self-defense against the threat of Communism. The film presents Indonesia as a perpetrator society, enveloped in a genocidal moral universe, in which mass murder was good, the victims had no humanity, and democracy is only a barely tolerable means. This universe is reinforced through a lack of social correction by the state and external powers. It is clear that Anwar Kongo was thoroughly socialized in this moral universe: he is a monoglot who probably never left the country and does not realize how the genocide is perceived in the outside world (he says: âoutsidersâ). At the same time, he affectionately teaches his grandchildren to be honest and respectful, for example when he explains them to be gentle with a handful of ducklings at a pond.

Many studies of genocide have convincingly demonstrated the central role of paramilitaries in the perpetration of genocide. Throughout the twentieth century paramilitaries have been responsible for widespread violence against civilians. Genocidal regimes are thought to spawn paramilitary units as a covert augmentation of state power for special purposes such as mass murder. Many of these militias do not consist of ideologically committed soldiers, but of men with a prior career in (various forms of) organized crime. Criminalsâ involvement in paramilitary units can account for their conduct, dynamic, and recruitment. Serbian mafia don Zeljko RaÅ¾natoviÄ (Arkan) or Sudanese crime boss Musa Hilal are two illustrious examples of men with criminal careers who organized death squads (the Tigers and the Janjaweed, respectively). So too, in 1965, Anwar and Adi were small-time gangsters loitering around cinemas, drinking alcohol, selling contraband, and smoking marihuana–until they were activated and vastly empowered by the Suharto regime for the special purpose of mass murder.

A most interesting character is Anwarâs more intelligent friend Adi Zulkadry, who flies into Medan to visit Anwar. Deep in his heart, Adi understands the criminal nature of the 1965 genocide (âI am absolutely aware that we were cruel.â), and therefore uses intellectual manipulation to deny and neutralize the genocide. When, during a fishing trip, Anwar confesses that he suffers from nightmares, Adi advises his friend to see a psychologist, who could offer him coping mechanisms for the guilt he feels. Upon Oppenheimerâs question that the 1965 genocide may constitute a crime according to the Geneva Conventions, Adi dismisses them, retorting that since it is the victors who write law and history, as a victor he will draft the Jakarta Conventions. Oppenheimerâs audacious question sparks Adiâs suspicion that this documentary may have a critical edge, which causes some friction with him. Indeed, the only confrontational scene in the documentary is when Adi harshly dismisses Oppenheimerâs question. In another scene, Anwar and Adi take a trip down memory lane as they cruise around in a yellow convertible, bragging and pointing at locations where they killed people. âRemember the âCrush the Chineseâ campaign of 1966?â Adi asks at one point. âI killed every Chinese person I met. I stabbed them. I donât remember how many, but it was dozens.â And the men laugh out loud.

Whither Indonesia?

The Act of Killing is also an explicitly sociological movie. By focusing on the afterlife of one killer, it also comments on Indonesian society in general, such as the state monopoly of violence, moral norms, democracy, and religion.

Ever since the 1965 genocide, the likes of Anwar have been revered as founding fathers of the right-wing paramilitary organization Pemuda Pancasila that grew out of the death squads. Pancasila is so powerful that its tentacles extend to government administration, mass corruption, election rigging, racketeering, and extortion. It holds mass rallies in sports stadiums, where its martial style and hateful discourse, combined with hundreds of young unmarried men on retainer, waiting to be mobilized, demonstrates that the infrastructure for genocide is still ever so present in Indonesia. Pancasila members are uniformed and organized, though not openly armed, but nevertheless undermine the state monopoly of violence.

An inveterate stereotype about Indonesia is that it is the worldâs âlargest Islamic democracy.â *The Act of Killing* indirectly sheds light on the micro-mechanisms of this pseudo-democratic state. Corruption is so widespread that the general public not only accepts it, but initiates it by demanding bribes from political parties. One of the most gripping scenes is when the drunk, sweaty Pancasila thugs make their rounds in a market, extorting Chinese-Indonesian shopkeepers. The defenseless victims are threatened with âan uppercut right in the stomachâ if they do not pay up, and envelopes brimming with cash make their way across the counter.

The political system is entrenched in dense networks of patronage, in which payoffs are compulsory and substance is sideshow. When Anwarâs unimpressive, corpulent groupie Erman attempts to make a bid for political office, he fails miserably due to lack of clout, money, and personal connections. Paramilitarism and glorification of violence fester at the political elite level too. None other than the Indonesian deputy prime minister Jusuf Kalla makes an appearance before a hall of Pancasila members, orating that they should be proud of being gangsters who work âoutside of the system,â because âsometimes it is necessary to beat people up.â

Then the religious dimension. Indonesia frequently makes the global news headlines due to Islamic fundamentalist threats and terrorism. But religion is surprisingly absent in the film, perhaps because in Sumatra, religious difference is not as apparent as in Bali, East Java, or Maluku. In one scene, the Pancasila men vulgarly discuss oral group sex when they are interrupted by an imam who starts a sermon, as the men quickly raise their palms and reluctantly join in the prayer. In another scene, Erman curses the muezzin for interrupting one of Anwarâs stories. But there is no evidence that Anwar needs or uses religion to clear his conscience, nor that he is particularly pious.

Conclusion

The Act of Killing shows Indonesia at its ugliest: the current regime is founded on genocide, yet not a single soul has ever been held accountable. This does not bode well for the future of the archipelago, as conflicts are simmering in Ternate, Maluku, Bali, Aceh, and other islands. Film is a powerful medium that has a duty in depicting genocide, but unfortunately some films are utterly unrealistic in their representation of acts, emotions, or interactions in genocides. The producers of *The Act of Killing* have rendered a great service to genocide studies. The film allows us to enter the perpetratorsâ minds vividly and observe them sharply and stands out from other genocide documentaries, such as *Die Wannseekonferenz*, *S-21*, or *Final Solution*.

During the screenings I attended in the Netherlands, some people fainted, others were shocked or nauseated, again others burst out in tears, or walked out in disgust. Some screenings were attended by elderly Indonesians, who walked out of the theaters, pale, and astonished. In any case, all were deeply touched by it. Therefore, the producers must be thanked most of all for reaching a very broad audience with this exceptional film. The combination of its format (documentary), topic (genocide), and region (Indonesia) did not guarantee an automatic blockbuster, but the fact that it won many awards and reached viewers not necessarily interested in genocide is a major accomplishment.

Notes

[1]. Comments by Joshua Oppenheimer during the Q&A at a film screening of *The Act of Killing* at NIOD: Institute for War, Holocaust, and Genocide Studies, Amsterdam, May 17, 2013.

[2]. Scholars of organized crime have criticized the idea that crime influences visual culture in a linear way. Rather, they have highlighted that members of the mafia model themselves after fictional gangsters, such as in *The Godfather* and *The Sopranos*. So too, Anwar Kongo and his buddies imitated the characters played by Elvis Presley, Gary Cooper, or Clint Eastwood in their movies.

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