

TRACING FRICTIONS IN *THE ACT OF KILLING*

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The Indonesian criminal is, then, not an Other, different from oneself. His face, rather, is an object one sees through, as one sees through spectacles or telescopes.

—James T. Siegel¹

Joshua Oppenheimer has called *The Act of Killing* his love letter to Indonesia. It did not take long for him to discover that his love was requited; after hundreds of community screenings in various cities throughout the country, countless comments and reviews have appeared in blogs and social media confirming how Indonesian viewers truly appreciate the labor of love of Oppenheimer and his co-directors Christine Cynn and Anonymous.² *The Act of Killing* is a beautiful and disturbing gift, a mirror that projects the image of a nation both violent and surreal. And this raises further questions: How do Indonesians recognize their faces in the mirror? How do they resituate themselves as witnesses to violence after *The Act of Killing*?

Indonesians who grew up under the Suharto “New Order” regime like myself were trained to make meaning of violent imagery from an early age. At the age of nine, my history lesson was a four-hour propaganda film featuring pools of blood, slashed bodies, and the orgiastic chants of a crowd that I understood to be murderous communists. To grasp the impact of *The Act of Killing* on Indonesian viewers, the best place to start is the iconic film to which it is responding: Arifin C. Noer’s *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* (*The 30th September Movement Treason*, 1984). Like Oppenheimer’s film, *Pengkhianatan* blends documentary and fictionalized reenactments of events deploying modes of horror and melodrama. Unlike the amateurish films of Anwar Congo and friends in *The Act of Killing*, the reenactments in *Pengkhianatan* were carefully structured by one of the best directors of the period, Arifin C. Noer, a fact that makes the film very convincing and therefore highly problematic. *Pengkhianatan* presents the

New Order version of “the communist coup,” legitimized through history textbooks and museums, in which the Communist Party kidnapped, tortured, and murdered seven military officials during an attempted coup d’état. Communism had been eliminated at the time of the production of *Pengkhianatan*, supported by the 1966 decree banning communism, but the film warns the viewers of a latent danger; as James T. Siegel writes, “the fear of communism is expressed as a fear of specters.”³

Films about the 1965–1966 killings produced within and outside Indonesia have made occasional visual references to two films: Peter Weir’s *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1982), particularly its *wayang* (shadow puppet) images, and *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI*.⁴ Banned during the Suharto regime for depicting the 1965 political turmoil, *The Year of Living Dangerously* was finally screened at the Jakarta International Film Festival in 2000, drawing considerable attention from the public, who linked the screening to the newly celebrated freedom of expression.⁵ On the one hand, the *wayang* has been used, like in Weir’s film, as a visual metaphor of the elusive realities of the 1965–1966 conflict that one desperately tries to grasp through shadowy images and an unseen puppet master. On the other, the New Order’s powerful myth of communism has been shown through footage of spectacular violence in *Pengkhianatan*. A scene in *The Act of Killing* shows Anwar Congo watching *Pengkhianatan* on TV, which suggests that the canonical film inspired him in the same way as gangster films and musicals. The perpetrators’ film *Arsan & Aminah* could be seen as a response to Oppenheimer’s “invitation” to “create your own *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI*.” Herman’s cross-dressing as Aminah, a member of the communist-affiliated women’s organization Gerwani, revives the myth of Gerwani as monstrous women who castrated the generals, part of the propaganda that the military campaigns used to justify the killings.⁶ Aminah, a scantily clad, liver-eating woman whose sexual monstrosity is overemphasized through Herman’s unruly body, reminds us of the merciless Gerwani woman who slashes a general’s forehead with a razor blade in *Pengkhianatan*.

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Herman relishes playing a Gerwani woman in *The Act of Killing*.

The New Order regime was built on spectacular violence that existed simultaneously with its invisible double, spectral violence. In the 1980s, criminals were murdered by unseen killers whom people referred to as Petrus (the Indonesian acronym for “Mysterious Shooters”), and the display of their bodies in public places terrorized citizens who were uninformed about how and why these criminals died. Terror was produced by the oscillation between what Indonesians saw and what they were unable to see. The citizens speculated, in the dark, that the state was behind these violent acts, but they could never break through the deceptive facade of the “now-you-see-it-now-you-don’t” game to confront the puppet master. While *Pengkhianatan* attacks the viewers’ senses through brutal images of torturing communists, Suharto’s procedure of “exterminating” (*menumpas*) communists through a massacre that killed one to three million people was completely absent from the film.

After Suharto was brought down by the Student Movement in 1998, there was a demand from civil society to bring spectral violence into the light. Excavating New Order violence and the history of 1965–1966 became a concern—or perhaps an obsession—among activists, scholars, and artists, resulting in the formation of NGOs, various publications, oral history projects, novels, and films.

Indeed, progressive Muslim President Abdurrahman Wahid proposed to revoke the 1966 decree on the ban of communism to open up a space for reconciliation before his impeachment in 2002. The fear of communism, combined with the historical tension between the Communist and Islamic parties, however, was so entrenched that this proposal was declined by both secular and Islamic right-wing parties.

Because of its emphasis on the legacy of the New Order regime rather than on post-authoritarian frictions, *The Act of Killing* does not capture the nuances of the tension. However, if Indonesians want to reclaim *The Act of Killing* as an intercultural project involving Indonesian collaborators as “anonymous” co-director and crews, the film should be situated within the trajectory of previous works that have attempted to summon the communist specter to interrogate the history of 1965–1966. Films ranging from documentaries such as Lexy Rambadeta’s *Mass Grave* (2001) to the mainstream popular ones such as Riri Riza’s *Gie* (2005) have addressed the issue of the massacre as a narrative missing from *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI*.

Observers of Indonesian cinema immediately notice that the daring approach of *The Act of Killing*, which allows the perpetrators to speak and visualize their memories, marks its significant difference from its predecessors. Previous



Anwar the murderer is also a kindly grandfather in *The Act of Killing*.

films have largely focused on giving voice to the massacre survivors as a counter to the hegemonic narrative in *Pengkhianatan* and official Indonesian history textbooks, although this kind of reversal, according to scholar Ariel Heryanto, has its own limitations. Through such films we learn that the state should be held responsible for the atrocities (thus the villain role is reversed), but they do not eliminate “the fundamental framework of a good versus evil dichotomy that structures the government propaganda and public imagination.”⁷

The horror in *The Act of Killing* lies in our access, via Oppenheimer, to the perpetrators’ confessions of their crime, expressed without remorse, and to their private lives in which they interact with their families like ordinary people. Oppenheimer makes use of the gendered trope of the family established in *Pengkhianatan*, where all the murdered generals are portrayed as family men. The generals project the ideal image of New Order masculinity, foregrounding the role of the *Bapak* (father) as the head of and role model for his family and society, a position intended to stand in stark contrast to the construction of communists as scheming men and monstrous women. In *The Act of Killing*, the family becomes a site where good and evil are blurred, as the killer who boasts of his cold-blooded murder is the same man who teaches his grandchildren not

to hurt animals. In one of his interviews, Oppenheimer reveals his intention that the audience “recognize a small part of themselves in a man like Anwar.” On the issue of violence, he further reflects, “we are all complicit in it, we all depend on the suffering of others for our everyday living.”⁸

If Indonesians were forced to be witnesses to violence in the New Order era without being able to peer backstage, the political reforms of 1998 highlighted the spirit of transparency that enables them to point a finger at the puppet master. How, then, does *The Act of Killing* complicate the Indonesian act of viewing? Indonesian viewers, like their Western counterparts, were shocked and disturbed by the confessions of the perpetrators. The shock, however, came from realizing that people like Anwar actually exist, instead of Oppenheimer’s proffered recognition of “a small part” of ourselves in him. Public discussions have rarely touched upon what I believe is the more pressing question for Indonesians, and perhaps for the international audience: Under what conditions, socially and historically, could such brutal confessions take place?

First of all, confessions were made possible by Oppenheimer’s years of effort in building trust and respectful relationships, as clearly seen in the film. What should not be forgotten is the contributive factor to this process; as in many other cases involving foreign anthropologists in

Indonesia, trust is given because whiteness often denotes access to the world. Traditionally, Indonesian elite figures tend to be more open with Western researchers than with the ones who look like them and speak their language; hence, it is not too difficult to imagine how the gangsters or *preman* (free man), who in the film declare their ambition to spread the news of their heroic killing to the international world, would welcome Oppenheimer as “the (Western) man with a movie camera.”⁹ As a documentary filmmaker and academic, Oppenheimer is aware of this privileged position. Therefore in his interviews he acknowledged that he felt “entrusted” by Indonesian people to make a film that they could not do themselves. While safety was a primary deterrent, it is also hard to imagine what kind of social role any Indonesian filmmaker could play to become intimate with the *preman*, or to interview figures whom people feared during the Suharto regime, such as the head of the paramilitary organization Pemuda Pancasila.

Second, the confessions were allowed by historical constructions that produced these *preman*, which demand an examination of how we—Indonesians and, further, the global audience—were produced by the same constructions.¹⁰ Two months after the screening of *The Act of Killing* at the Toronto Film Festival, *Tempo* magazine issued a special edition titled *Pengakuan Algojo 1965* (The Confession of 1965 Executioners), consisting of interviews with people who participated in the massacre. Within a relatively short time for researching and interviewing, *Tempo* was able to gather confessions from different parts of Indonesia that equally testify to Arendt’s “banality of evil.”¹¹ These people were the product of the military campaigns that played out the fear of being killed by communists (“it is better to kill rather than to be killed,” to borrow from one article’s title) by incorporating the discourses of nationalism, gender, and religion. The communist killings were not only carried out by Pemuda Pancasila, which embraced people like Anwar, but also by Muslim groups. Furthermore, the military campaigns were so pervasive that many of the fathers and grandfathers of young Indonesians today who did not directly participate in the killings nonetheless supported them, some actively, others passively. In any event, the vast majority of those who lived through 1965–1966 took part in the creation of the New Order regime and thus share the burden of its crime through involuntary silence. The communist massacre, in other words, is a collective guilt.

The Act of Killing provides a more intricate portrayal of the perpetrators, especially Anwar Congo, who begins to

feel nauseated at the end of the film. However, in its complexities it still reproduces the “us” and “them”—if not good and evil—dichotomy that blocks us from recognizing our face in the mirror and confronting our collective guilt. In one screening at the University of Indonesia (UI), attended by three hundred people who were mostly college students, laughter was heard several times in scenes showing the *preman*’s unintelligent expressions. I found this very disturbing, but I realized that intellectual middle-class biases came into play and established a distance between the Medan gangsters and the Jakarta students who attend one of the most prestigious universities in the country. The *preman*’s misogyny, their base aesthetic taste, their coarse behaviors—all these serve as barriers separating the privileged viewers from the cosmology of the *preman*.

This view of the *preman* might correlate with the historical anxiety surrounding the figures of criminals in Indonesia. According to Siegel, the fear of “criminality” in the society was nurtured by the New Order regime to rationalize its own violence. The criminals are part of the same nation; they are “on the edge of Indonesian society but never outside it,” as Indonesians were trained to maintain their suspicion, to find a scapegoat, to identify—to borrow from an Indonesian proverb—“an enemy inside the blanket” (*musuh dalam selimut*).¹² The method by which the film is exhibited, through underground film screenings in communities and campuses rather than mainstream movie theaters, enhances the feeling that the audiences are seeing atrocities committed by “someone else,” who might not like what they see. The organizers of the UI screening indeed had to answer many questions from campus police relating to the issue of “security.” The secretive atmosphere built through the clandestine screening reenacts the underground discussions during the Suharto era in which people were cautious about the infiltration of government agents as the “enemy inside the blanket.”

While the distance between the Indonesian viewers and the criminals is irreconcilable, the film provides a very limited space for a critical Indonesian subject position. I could not recognize my face in the mirror because the image, even in its grotesque form, is too beautifully cohesive. The post-Suharto Indonesia that I know is fractured, incoherent, and messy; contestations about what defines the nation result in a lack of consensus on many issues, including how to confront Indonesia’s dark past. The universe of *The Act of Killing* exposes different layers of power structures, from small-time gangsters like Anwar to big-time gangsters like Yapto Soerjosoemarno, but they



Anwar and Herman exercise their anxieties in one of many of their staged performances in *The Act of Killing*.

remain monochromatic. The only point of identification for those who were not directly involved in the killings was Oppenheimer himself. Through Oppenheimer's eyes, we might sympathize with the killers but maintain a certain distance in our quest to reveal "the truth." The danger of this kind of universe is that it allows us to put the finger on "someone else"—be it the state or the *preman*—and assert a higher moral ground. In this case, perhaps *The Act of Killing* is closer to the previous films on 1965–1966. We now know who the perpetrators are, but we would never recognize our roles in the creation of these monsters.

To put such a burden of history on *The Act of Killing* would not do justice to what the film has achieved. *The Act of Killing* is not the only source from which to learn about Indonesia's bleak history; instead, it has to be seen as a starting point to identify what has and has not been done. The film's most valuable contribution to Indonesia, which has not been surpassed by previous projects of its kind, is the capacity to make the issue travel. In the postcolonial context, particularly, travel ensures legitimacy.

Even the young Indonesian viewers at the UI screening are part of the "international" community who learn about the film through the global world, with access to the English language and social media in which news about the film circulates. Indonesian issues and cultural productions, as

elsewhere in the sphere of global circulation, often need to take a detour, for it is only after they gain international reputations that they might achieve national recognition. *The Act of Killing* should be situated in a map of those works that did not have the chance for a (de)tour, along with the frictions—the remnants of the New Order communist myth that exist side by side with the struggles to dig into the past—that made them more resilient. It is only by understanding the detailed terrains on the map that Indonesians will be able to reexamine their position and respond, affectionately and critically, to the love letter of Joshua Oppenheimer.

Author's Note

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Notes

1. James T. Siegel, *A New Criminal Type in Jakarta: Counter-revolution Today* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 6–7.

2. This review is based on the director's cut version (159 minutes), which Oppenheimer recommended for Indonesian screenings.
3. Siegel, *New Criminal Type in Jakarta*, 6.
4. Some examples include Lexy Rambadeta's *Mass Grave* (2001), Nan Achnas's *Pasir Berbisik* (Whispering Sands, 2001), Riri Riza's *Gie* (2005), Chris Hilton's *Shadow Play: Indonesia's Years of Living Dangerously* (2003), and Maj Wechselmann's *The Women and the Generals* (2010). The banning of Weir's film, perhaps more than the content of the film itself, has made it a marker of Indonesia's period of secrecy, terror, and censorship. The title encapsulated the characteristics of the New Order regime so fittingly that it inspired the title of Chris Hilton's film, a documentary that largely focuses on the roles of Western powers in the 1965 political turmoil. Hilton's film uses footage from *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* as well as visual and narrative references to the Indonesian *wayang* puppet play, as in *The Year of Living Dangerously*.
5. *The Year of Living Dangerously* was the highest-grossing film of the Jakarta International Film Festival (JIFFEST). The packed screening was regarded as "one of the most memorable moments" of the JIFFEST. Kenny Santana, "JIFFEST's 10 Most Memorable Moments," *Jakarta Post*, December 5, 2008.
6. For a comprehensive analysis on how the New Order regime was built upon the demonization of Gerwani, see Saskia Wieringa, *Sexual Politics in Indonesia* (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2002).
7. Ariel Heryanto, "The 1965–1966 Killings," *International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) Newsletter* 61 (Autumn 2012), accessed August 1, 2012. http://www.iias.nl/sites/default/files/IIAS_NL61_1617.pdf
8. Nandini Krishnanan, "In Conversation with Joshua Oppenheimer on *The Act of Killing*," *SIFY*, November 21, 2013, accessed December 10, 2013. <http://www.sify.com/movies/in-conversation-with-joshua-oppenheimer-on-the-act-of-killing-news-bollywood-nlvtRmhjehg.html>
9. In his review, "The Act of Humanism: *Jagal, Preman* Love and Economies of Truth," *Wacana: Journal of the Humanities of Indonesia* (2014, forthcoming), Dag Yngvesson focuses on the problematics of Oppenheimer's position as a director, who is invisible but present through questions and commentary from behind the camera. Such distance situates Indonesian viewers as "*not yet* democratic, *not yet* enlightened," which makes Oppenheimer's love letter "a shock therapy session prescribed and carried out by a concerned Westerner."
10. Many reviewers have criticized how the pivotal role of the United States in the coup was missing from *The Act of Killing*. While this article is focused on Indonesian viewers and contexts, I also would argue that the transnational dimension of the large-scale massacre ought to provoke a more reflective questioning by global audiences.
11. Reviews have often linked the perpetrators' view that their cruelty was normal to Hannah Arendt's discussion of the banality of evil. See, for instance, Soe Tjen Marching, "Coming to Grips with the Banality of Mass Murder in Indonesia's Past," *Jakarta Globe*, July 5, 2013.
12. Siegel, *New Criminal Type in Jakarta*, 3.