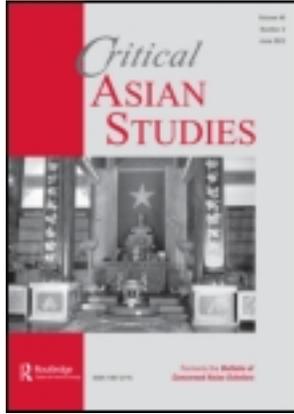


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PICTURING VIOLENCE: Anti-Politics and *The Act of Killing*

Leslie K. Dwyer, George Mason University

The Act of Killing (TAOK) is a brilliant film.¹ Following a cohort of former “movie theater gangsters” from Medan who freely confess to their brutal part in carrying out the 1965–66 massacres of alleged Indonesian communists, the film upends the conventions of documentary violence. Eschewing the format of most retrospective accounts of atrocities in which experience-distance expert commentary and close-up victims’ testimony are intercut to render legible the unimaginable, TAOK’s director Joshua Oppenheimer² chose instead to work in a far more intimate and innovative way, encouraging the killers to act out their memory fantasies in a stylized, color-saturated film-within-a-film that features—in addition to copious amounts of blood—ghosts, waterfalls, dancing girls, and a portly killer-turned-drag-queen, back-ended by the song “Born Free.” In a media landscape so crowded with images of mass violence, TAOK manages to do the nearly impossible, breaking through our numb satisfaction as consumers of violent images not by ratcheting up the number of body parts, but by confronting us with far more jarring juxtapositions: terror and its garish aesthetics, deadly enmity and riotous humor, deep emotion and utter banality, all of this epitomized in the bizarre sequence that veers the film off into a hallucinogenic reenactment of the killings, the scene in which the central protagonist, the aging-yet-dapper thug Anwar Congo, happily demonstrates his garroting technique on a Medan rooftop after dancing the cha-cha, only to lament that if this was really real he wouldn’t be wearing white pants.

As a representation of violence, TAOK succeeds in raising profound questions about how images of violence intersect with its materiality. When we hear how American gangster movies helped the Medan killers find the right mood and style for their deadly work, or watch as a talk show host exclaims over Anwar’s technological innovations in killing communists more “efficiently,” it becomes all too apparent that violence is as much a discursive act as a physical one. The film asks us to reflect on our own position as viewers, a demand so disconcerting that it provoked a confrontation in the Washington, D.C., movie theater where I last watched the film: the couple in front of me were arguing sotto voce about the man’s alleged insensitivity in laughing uproariously at the antics of Anwar’s drag-clad sidekick, Herman. His partner countered, “this is a movie about *genocide!*” TAOK gives none of the satisfaction of, say, a *Hotel Rwanda* or a *Schindler’s List*, where viewers can leave the theater having shed a

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1. This essay is based upon multiple viewings of the 159-minute version of the film (Oppenheimer et al. 2012).
 2. The film also credits an Indonesian codirector, “Anonymous.” In nearly all of the interviews about the film, however, Oppenheimer speaks for its production and editing choices, thus I refer to him here in the singular. It would be fascinating and important to hear more from the anonymous Indonesians involved in making the film.

cathartic tear, feeling their emotional response equivalent to having “gained awareness” or “done something” about genocide. Yet as a representation of a space of memory politics inhabited by 250 million Indonesians for whom the luxury of leaving the theater is generally not possible, the cultural work performed by the film has far more complex implications. Indeed I would argue that *TAOK*, innovative as it is, ultimately fails as a transformative intervention, instead giving strength to the exclusion of activist voices from Indonesia’s political sphere and resurrecting colonial-era narratives of a barbaric “heart of darkness” penetrable only by the civilizing eye of the Western camera.

But first, more appreciation: interceding in the arena of Indonesian political narrative, the film does succeed on a number of important counts. By highlighting the corrupt patronage system that animates Indonesian paramilitary groups like Pemuda Pancasila, the organization in which Anwar and his friends hold honored positions, it demonstrates, yet again, how Indonesian mass violence has never been separable from economic violence, a point made most forcefully in regards to 1965–66 by Brad Simpson in his book *Economists with Guns*.³ It shows how what passes as official history in Indonesia, where high school textbooks and national monuments still present the massacres of an estimated 500,000 to 1,000,000 Indonesians as an orderly triumph over the “evil” of communism by Soeharto’s New Order regime, comprises a brutal fiction secured by a vicious erasure of state violence. And it invests issues of continuing impunity for the 1965–66 killings, and for corruption and abuse of power at all levels of Indonesian society, with a vital yet mostly unsentimental urgency. I have yet to see comments or questions directed toward Oppenheimer asking what I personally, as a scholar of the 1965–66 mass violence, have been asked outright or obliquely dozens of times: Why should we care? Wasn’t that a very long time ago, and hasn’t Indonesia “moved on” to democracy? Shouldn’t Indonesians—much like Americans who were told to get back to shopping after 9/11—focus on forgiving, or forgetting, or bringing their GDP back up? This is perhaps *TAOK*’s greatest contribution to Indonesian political discourse, that it does not just rely on familiar emotions, but illustrates how violence continually returns to infiltrate the everyday, this nonlinear movement of time, where reenactment meets the ongoing real, drowning the complacent myth of a finished past.

Yet despite its scenes of politicized performance—Medanese thugs shaking down Chinese shopkeepers and small landowners, Herman the former killer fumbling through his campaign speeches, Vice President Yusuf Kalla praising criminality as a fine way to get things done in Indonesia—*TAOK* is at the same time a strikingly apolitical film, in the sense articulated by Alain Badiou of politics as a disruption, as a movement that can “develop in reality the consequences of a new possibility repressed by the dominant state of affairs.”⁴ The mirror it so deftly holds up for us when we see Hollywood gangsters-and-gore inspiring Anwar and his cronies to “happily” murder their victims, or hear

3. Simpson 2010.

4. Badiou 2009, 11.

killers justifying themselves by reference to U.S. failures to uphold international human rights norms, grows dim when it comes to the film's own positioning and the disappointingly dominant framing it offers. As an actor in its own narrative, the camera rests lingeringly on Anwar as he returns to the Medan rooftop to retch convulsively after viewing his reenactment scenes, maneuvering the viewer into an uncomfortable empathy to the extent that we accept the implication that the filming process has developed Anwar's conscience. Dag Yngvesson, one of a handful of writers to critically explore the film's politics of representation, argues that "[this] violent, melodramatic expression of remorse in a final scene ultimately functions as a sign of the film's, and the filmmakers', ability to *act* politically and to show that change has occurred as a result,"⁵ setting up the film as the liberator of truth from fiction, of real violence from its glossy simulacrum, of heart from the hold of darkness. Yngvesson questions this narrative of change, not by wondering, as others have mused in their reviews, if Anwar's conversion is authentic, but by highlighting the stasis that in fact undergirds it. Yngvesson warns that *Jagal* (the film's Indonesian title) in fact works to re-inscribe a binary vision of good versus evil in its portrayal of Indonesian politics, comparing the film to the rather more bombastic *Pengbiantan G/30/S-PKI* (Traitors of the PKI's September 30th Movement), the infamous New Order-era propaganda narrative in which fiction masquerades as documentary through heavy-handed references to the real: "That blood is red, General!" If in *Pengbiantan* the military are the heroes, saving the nation from depraved communists, in *TAOK*, the storyline is flipped on its head. "Killers" and "victims" remain equally generic categories, with little sense of the ambiguity and dis-ease that so often drives violence. Perpetrators remain all-powerful, ruling Medan with absolute impunity. Counter-memories are silenced, human rights claims are dismissed as white noise, and the victims are nowhere to be heard. This dominant storyline fails to account for what I heard during my own research on the killings in Bali, where violence fractured the social certainties of victims and killers alike, and where young activists have been working to rethink not only the history of 1965–66 but its continuing implications in the present.⁶ It is a framing that is far too cramped to fit most of what Balinese shared with me, including the stories of perpetrators and of victims who, upon hearing that their loved ones were marked for execution, killed them themselves after preparing ritual offerings rather than risk having their bodies dumped, un-cremated, into mass graves.

These critiques are, I hope, a prompt to consider how this film, termed by Oppenheimer in one of his many recent interviews as a "love letter" to Indonesia,⁷ works to outline and ultimately make real new political possibilities in an Indonesia marked by diverse claims to justice and accountability. While a number of commentators have raised questions about the film's ethics, their focus has been almost entirely limited to a narrow institutional version of the "good"

5. Yngvesson 2013.

6. Dwyer 2010.

7. DW 2013.

in which Anwar et al.'s informed consent is exchanged for their participation and the implications of reenacting mass violence as spectacle is contained by questions about how the scenes were financed. (In an odd reassurance that these concerns should not be seen as especially serious, one review in *The New York Times* notes that "The killers did not get a salary but were paid what Mr. Oppenheimer called a 'modest per diem' (approved by the University of Westminster and the British Arts and Humanities Research Council, which financed the reenactments)."⁸ These are not unimportant questions, but they also distract from a broader, and arguably far more crucial, inquiry for Indonesians about how the film plays as an actor in local political dramas. Oppenheimer himself has responded to the outpouring of international attention to the film by stressing its activist achievements, stating, "The film has forever broken the silence on the 1965–66 genocide."⁹ In one interview, he says:

Where I really have been more gratified by the reception is in Indonesia itself, where the film is probably the most talked about and loved work of culture in any medium ever made about and come to Indonesia. It's been welcomed and embraced as an Indonesian film. It's a work of Indonesian cinema. The film has come to Indonesia like the child in "The Emperor's New Clothes," pointing to the king and saying, "Look he is naked." In that sense it's an expose on the nature of the regime that makes it possible to say what everybody knew but was too afraid to say. It opens a space for Indonesians for the first time in forty-seven years, starting to really talk about what happened honestly.¹⁰

While the comment is strangely evocative of Anwar's own boasting ("The most loved work of culture in any medium"? Really?), the ease with which the Western media have received these kinds of claims is even more troubling. For example, Alex Woodson, writing for the Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs "Ethics on Film Series," writes, with seemingly no sense of irony, that, "Without *The Act of Killing*, the million or so people who were murdered in Indonesia in the mid-sixties might have been forgotten."¹¹ Deploying a narrative structure at least as old as Homer and worn to bits by colonial historiography, this kind of commentary—like the film itself—risks constructing rigid oppositions between silence and speech, memory and forgetting, and ultimately, "their" barbarism and "our" shocked regard. It is a narrative that positions the Western filmmaker as hero, breaking the silence, speaking for the voiceless, who are always offstage. Again, Yngvesson's critical perspective is compelling. He writes:

The question of ethics, then, arises not in the issue of whether the characters are being duped by the filmmaker but in the construction, and implicit evaluation, of "Indonesia" as both a gangsters' paradise and a citizenry in the dark regarding the facts of their own history. As [*The*] *Act of*

8. Rohter 2013.

9. International Blvd. 2013.

10. Documentary Channel 2013.

11. Woodson 2013.

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 this way, *Act of Killing* uses its sensitive information to engage in a cinematic form of “*babasin*”: it makes real Indonesians disappear.¹²

And this brings me to my most serious concern with Oppenheimer’s film. In portraying the Medan thugs as vested with an unchallenged power to script their own and others’ history, in editing out the counter-narratives of victims and human rights activists that circulate, however haltingly, through Indonesia’s public culture, and in portraying Indonesia’s past as an unbroken, undifferentiated continuity from 1965 to present, *TAOK* ventures outside of what Oppenheimer calls a “fever dream”¹³ toward falsity. Because in fact Indonesians have not been silent about the violence of 1965–66 and its aftermath. They have not been silent for forty-seven years, waiting for an American filmmaker, with the best of intentions, to “open a space” in which they can be “honest.”¹⁴ The survivors of violence, their children, and their grandchildren, have hardly “forgotten,” although their memories do not always take on easily digestible testimonial forms. Oppenheimer himself clearly knows this—in several of his interviews he mentions the work of Indonesia’s National Human Rights Commission to investigate the massacres—yet he positions himself otherwise, as a lone explorer through a landscape of nightmare. Shades, however unintentional, of Joseph Conrad, and of what, in referring to a different piece of representational violence, “Kony 2012,” Teju Cole provocatively calls the “white savior industrial complex.”¹⁵

TAOK is a brilliant film. But its brilliance risks overshadowing some very real questions about how best to support visions of justice in post-1965 Indonesia. Some suggestions: work in solidarity with Indonesian human rights advocates, survivors, journalists, academics, and artists who are authoring their own portrayals of the rocky terrain of Indonesian politics. Open the frame of representation to acknowledge the diverse experiences and perspectives of survivors of the violence (as Oppenheimer has indeed promised to do in his next film focused on victims). And challenge not only the killers’ easy consciences, but their arrogance in seeing themselves, or their filmic vision, as the only characters with the capacity to act or make meaning.

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12. Yngvesson forthcoming.

13. Documentary Channel 2013.

14. Dwyer 2009.

15. Cole 2012.

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