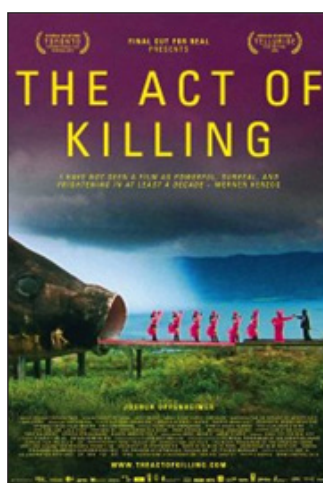


## FILM REVIEW

Joshua Oppenheimer et al., *Jagal/Act of Killing*. [Documentary.] Denmark-Norway-UK: Final Cut for Real, Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), Danmarks Radio (DR), 2012, 159 min.



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To review a long and complex film like Joshua Oppenheimer's *Jagal/ Act of Killing* (2012)<sup>1</sup> in a short essay is not an easy task. As there are already 500 or so reviews out there that deal with the general aspects of its structure – “film within a film” – and the history that it reinvestigates – the killings of 1965–1966 and their continuing effect on the present socio-political status quo in Indonesia – I will concentrate on an aspect of the film that has been covered in less detail:

<sup>1</sup> My review is based on the 159-minute Indonesian version of the film, which has been screened over 200 times throughout Indonesia since November 2012 (my initial reaction to the earlier, shorter, “unofficial” edit/version, where Oppenheimer's presence was less emphasized, was somewhat different than what follows). The screenings have been carried out in universities, at film festivals, and at other non-commercial public and private settings with varying degrees of publicity and promotion due to the sensitive political nature of the film's subject matter. I have attended several such screenings in Yogyakarta and Jakarta in 2012 and 2013, and closely followed, and participated in, the debates and discussions afterward. I have also read a large portion of the reviews and reports following (and some preceding) the film's launching at the Telluride and Toronto International Film Festivals and screenings in Indonesia. This process has been crucial in thinking about the film, its politics, and its impact in various contexts.

While there are several Indonesians, including a co-director, “anonymous”, who have played exceedingly important roles in steering and making possible the production of *Act of Killing*, my review focuses on Joshua Oppenheimer as the main director/filmmaker, as this is in keeping with the structure of the film itself, as well as that of the majority of its publicity, press, and question and answer sessions, where Oppenheimer almost always answers for it. Having had the opportunity to discuss the lengthy production process (in the context of one local screening where the “anonymous” director was present via cell phone) with some of the others involved in the film, I would very much have liked to see a more dynamic representation of its behind-the-scene “authors”, and the various ethical, political, and moral difficulties each of them faced, at least hinted at in the final version.

the problematic of Oppenheimer's position as director and "excavator" of local political secrets.

There is no question that *Act of Killing* is a bold and important film that has brought an unprecedented amount of public and press attention to the issue of re-exploring the history of the New Order. Local activists, journalists, and bloggers have quickly taken to it as a way to push longstanding agendas of political change, transparency, and the realization of unfulfilled promises of *Reformasi*. In this sense, the film can be seen as a kind of "gift" to the people of Indonesia. This is a view that Oppenheimer himself has expressed in a number of interviews, calling it a *surat cinta untuk negara itu* 'love letter to that country' (Mohamad 2013), which aspires to the tasks of local consciousness raising and national development. "Love letter" is a characterization worth reflecting upon, however, as the film holds up a ghastly mirror image of Indonesia. Its message, or "gift", is to reveal the horrors of political life in the Third World to those who live there: a shock therapy session prescribed and carried out by a concerned Westerner.

Yet, as Indonesian students at a screening in the University of Humboldt commented, because of the sensitive, political nature of the film Oppenheimer has made, a cut must occur as a result: he will never be able to return to the nation he now says he loves (Knight 2013). This is in keeping with Oppenheimer's "appearance" in the film, where he is invisible but present throughout via his questions and commentary from behind the cameras. His voice is consistently even-toned and almost sweet, cajoling Anwar Congo and the other Medanese thugs and killers on screen to supply the historical facts underlying the film *Arsan dan Aminah*, which is produced by them and serves as *Act of Killing's* film within. Oppenheimer and crew, as is stated in the opening credits, "invited" the subjects of *Act of Killing* to produce *Arsan*, which is composed of surreal, highly aestheticized vignettes based on their memories of interrogating and exterminating thousands of accused Communists four decades previously. *Act of Killing* follows the production of *Arsan*. Its greatest strength lies in its detailed investigation of the process of translation of memory and experience into art. But as Oppenheimer's frequent, pointed questions remind us, the film is also very concerned with establishing factual evidence of the killers' guilt.

The euphemistic language of the opening credits notwithstanding, it seems clear that in "inviting" his characters to make a film, Oppenheimer and his producers are also paying for or otherwise facilitating its production, offering equipment, technical support and advice. In exchange for Anwar's and others' opportunity to make and star in their own film, Oppenheimer's camp expects open access to some of the most sensitive information Indonesia, or Medan, at least, has to offer.

In one particular instance, the nature of this transaction emerges more clearly: a newspaper editor who helped plan and order the killings carried out by Anwar and friends, urges them to ask Joshua to "share his luck," meaning to hit him up for money. After all, he implies, Oppenheimer is a

foreigner carrying a bunch of expensive cameras, and he is making a film that relies completely on the killers' participation. With the filmmaking process temporarily placed at a more basic level of exchange, Joshua shoots back by politely asserting the filmmaker's right to "collect": "*Bagaimana cara Bapak untuk memeriksa komunis di kantor redaksi waktu itu?*" (What methods did you use to interrogate communists in the newspaper office back then?)

No one, however, appears naïve as to what is at stake, or ignorant of the information economy that facilitates the entire project, binding filmmakers and *preman* (gangsters or thugs – this is how Anwar and friends generally refer to themselves) together in an involved and intimate relationship. Jumping in to answer Joshua's question to the editor above, Congo reflects, perhaps without realizing it, on the similarities between the process of information gathering that occurred in the editor's office in 1965, and the one occurring in the film's present tense. In the former, accused communists were brought into the editor's office to extract testimony that would enable the establishment of their "guilt." The information gathered was used, via the mass media – including the editor's newspaper and others – to paint the Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI, Indonesian Communist Party), along with other left-leaning groups at the time, as public enemy number one; the left was said to be a powerful, purely evil, force that would destroy the nation if it were not killed first. After they got enough information – often through torturing the accused PKI members brought in for "questioning" – as Congo explains, "*kita habisin saja*" (we'd finish them off/make them disappear).

Turning the tables on the historically established categories of good and evil, hero and enemy of the people, *Act of Killing* gathers information that shows the New Order, and the "reformed" political structure following Suharto's downfall in 1998, to be founded on terror, not heroism, its rise to power carried out by coldly calculating killers. Oppenheimer's act of love for Indonesia, then, is to create a miniature cinematic version of the archipelago in which the concept of *musuh* (enemy), long established by the state as synonymous with the term *Komunis* (Communist), is cut and reattached to the word *jagal* (killer), referring to those who carried out the elimination of the left. (*Jagal* is, of course, the Indonesian title of *Act of Killing*.) The result is a sweeping new discourse of the Enemy, encompassing nearly everyone previously claimed to be safe or "clean". The ghastly reflection that the film provides shows a nation that is the polar opposite of its own democratic claims and ideals: where vicious enemies of justice continue to live and thrive, unpunished and embedded at every level of social, political and economic control. Further, with the help of an unseen American, the thugs and killers now make movies that revel, in highly complex and fascinating ways, in their own power and "freedom" from the laws and state structure that control and punish others.

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

From a structural perspective, *Act of Killing* indeed provides little or no position for Indonesians to inhabit, other than the objectified space inside the frame, or perhaps the silent, spying “ghost” that is the camera itself. Joshua’s position is established by his voice – obviously that of a foreigner, albeit quite skilled in Indonesian – combined with the way the characters often speak when they answer his questions directly: slowly and with lots of hand gestures, as if concerned he will not understand the combination of language and context-based meanings. This effectively blocks the identification of Indonesian viewers with the figure of the altruistic political actor behind the camera, making it linguistically and culturally foreign. (Some Indonesian viewers, however, will undoubtedly identify themselves with Oppenheimer’s position anyway). For foreign, and particularly, liberal Western, festival-going audiences, the effect is reversed: we can more easily place ourselves in the position of consumers of well-packaged information about how the distant, yet fascinating, Third World has yet to become fully “developed”. We often feel emotionally drawn in, sympathetic with and disturbed by the plight of Others, yet simultaneously, if not consciously, comforted by the moral satisfaction that there is still a “need” for us to lead the world in the process of becoming more civilized.

To their credit, the Medanese gangsters, particularly the one named Adi, have few illusions as to the role that Joshua himself plays. Adi questions Oppenheimer’s reliance on specific, heavily politicized discourse – that of the Geneva Convention and Western-sponsored international courts – in order to establish a universal standard of right and wrong regarding the events of recent Indonesian history. While there is no question that Adi, or Anwar, or Herman, have been involved in extremely violent, horrific acts, Adi’s point is nonetheless well taken: throughout history, from the U.S. genocide of Native Americans to the current invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan and beyond, nearly every time the discourse of universal justice, or “development and civilization”, is applied by one nation, or group of nations, to another, the results have inevitably shown that such actions were based on gross distortions of the complexities of local history. In the latter cases, stark, dramatic images of evil perpetrators and innocent victims are deployed in the service of the underlying economic, political, and psychological needs of the invading parties, who must “sell” wars to parliaments, congresses, and voting publics. Adi thus gestures toward the violence of the discourse deployed to frame his own.

It is the gap between the “Indonesia” that is *Jagal* and the politically

fraught, yet dynamic and multidimensional, place in which local viewers exist, that speaks most clearly to the problematic of Joshua's approach. If one of the basic aims of *Act of Killing* is to "open up" the reductive, polarized discourse of Indonesian history constructed and enforced by the New Order, it would do well to avoid the trap of simply turning the tables and reversing the state established polarities of good and evil. To face the ethical and moral complexities of history, including those of the historian, ethnographer, or filmmaker, is not to back down from the truth. Instead, the position of the outside observer is itself split apart and destabilized, stripped not of its eyes and ears or sense of justice, but of its absolute ability to judge. At the same time, it is brought further into a world that can no longer be seen as if it were composed of vibrant colours falsely overlaid on a flat surface of blacks and whites.

By the end of the film, Joshua's "love for Indonesia", inseparable from his activist desire to produce change, is directed squarely at Anwar Congo. Congo, for his part, appears to have gradually accepted his interlocutor's affections, and, to some extent, absorbed his judgments – thus the sense of a transformation. In his final scene, however, Congo's testimony is cut short as he begins retching and breaking wind uncontrollably. It seems that turning around to face the horror of his own reflection in the eyes, and lenses, of Oppenheimer and his crew may literally rip Anwar Congo apart. Joshua, however, is uncharacteristically silent; from this point on, his voice, and, with it, his presence in the film, disappear. As noted above, at the end of the filmmaking process, Anwar and Joshua are severed: Oppenheimer will soon be leaving Indonesia, likely never to return. His rhetorically distanced "letter" will thus be sent from across a significant geographical, cultural and political gap. Like the many Indonesian viewers and reviewers who have returned Oppenheimer's affections via letters of their own, for Anwar, Joshua may indeed be a kind of hero: a *deus ex machina* whose helping hand appears able to bring about a new reality.

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 *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." Joshua 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 Joshua 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.

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