

Sadism, Sontag, and Snuff in The Act of Killing

by [Megan Maxfield](#)

A small Sanyo television on top of an ornate TV stand plays an old western film. On the screen, a cowboy howls in delight as he twirls his lasso in front of the lush Indonesian countryside. Behind him, instead of the roaming horses and cattle typically found in westerns, there are elephants. In front of the cowboy sits another man, dressed much the same, with the exception of his blindfold, gag, and bloodstained shirt. The shot cuts away from the TV's mesmerizingly bizarre scene to reveal the man playing the howling cowboy. Anwar Congo, an executioner for his city's death squad during the Indonesian Genocide of 1965-1966, sits next to Herman Koto, a paramilitary leader, as they watch the technicolor reimagining of their torture. "It's a good family movie," Congo says to Koto and the off-screen director, laughing as he watches — one with "plenty of humor" and "wonderful scenery," that "really shows what's special about this country even though it's a film . . . about death" (01:25:31-01:25:52). The camera cuts back to the television screen. Koto, playing a communist woman, cries over the body of the gagged and blindfolded man of the previous shot. Koto's character looks straight at the camera, staring not only at us, the audience, but also at himself and Congo, who are watching the scene play out on their own TV.

This film-within-a film is inside Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing*. Oppenheimer's acclaimed 2012 documentary is a bizarre, technicolor tour of the political landscape protecting the perpetrators of the Indonesian Genocide. After Indonesia's government was overthrown in a military coup in 1965, "anybody opposed

to the military dictatorship could be accused of being a communist" (00:02:38). This caused a year of political violence and mass killings where paramilitary groups "hunted down" supposed "members of the Indonesian Communist Party": everyone from "suspected communists" and "leftist sympathizers" to "ethnic Chinese" (Kwok). It has been estimated that at least 500,000 and perhaps more than a million people were murdered. Oppenheimer gives the executioners the opportunity to create their own film to represent their murders, and these scenes are interspersed throughout his film with clips of paramilitary rallies, discussions from makeup chairs, their everyday activities, and explanations of their execution process. We, the audience, are dropped squarely into a surreal cultural and political system. By seeing how these power structures operate in a variety of contexts, we gain a nuanced, culturally-aware view into how the people behind heinous acts are protected and justify themselves.

Even in their dramatized recreation, many of these acts are truly heinous. In one particularly painful and violent scene, the executioners recreate the Kampung Kolam massacre, where a 'communist' village was set ablaze. The scene is mostly silent, except for a few pieces of distant dialogue – "Take him away. Kill him" – and an ever-present, high-pitched droning as we watch the decimation of the village (01:58:30-02:03:06). The longer the scene goes on, the higher the flames climb, obscuring our view and intensifying our visceral response every time we do see a shirtless 'communist' being dragged across the ground or dead amongst the weeds. When "Cut!" is finally called, the scene feels far from over. The paramilitary leaders' wives and children, who had been playing 'communist' villagers, struggle to regain their composure. The children continue to cry, and one woman who seems to have fainted slowly comes to. The play-pretend 'communists' look shocked, despondent, and tearful as the cruelty they have been complicit in for years becomes tangible. Meanwhile, the paramilitary leaders who had played themselves mill around the background of the shot, smoking cigars and grinning. They brag about the real 'communists' they killed that day and other exploits

from their time as executioners – notably how they would rape communist women, and often girls, before killing them (01:32:35-01:33:20).

The film has garnered criticism for being ‘snuff,’ a film that has scenes of actual death in it. After the film took home a BAFTA for Best Documentary, Nick Fraser, a journalist and documentary producer, wrote in *The Guardian* that a film that enlisted perpetrators to tell the story of genocide should not take home the Oscar for Best Documentary Feature, the ceremony set to happen a week after the article was published. Fraser likens Oppenheimer going to Indonesia to give a platform to these perpetrators of genocide to visiting Argentina in the 1950s to let Nazis in exile tell their story of the Holocaust. Fraser contends that *The Act of Killing* does not enhance our knowledge of the genocide: “Instead of an investigation, or indeed a genuine recreation,” he claims, “we’ve ended somewhere else – in a high-minded snuff movie.” There is one technicality, though – no one *actually* dies during *The Act of Killing*.

While no one is literally killed on screen, we get many bloody reenactments of the deaths seen through the eyes of the killers, like the burning of Kampung Kolam. The executioners show no apprehension about showing off their kills – most seem to harbor no real regrets. In one scene at the beginning of the film, Congo walks through exactly how he used to kill people. On the roof of a cinema, he calmly shares how he learned by trial and error which method was the easiest and created the least amount of blood: garotting, which he mock-demonstrates in excruciating detail on his friend. The scene ends with him dancing joyfully and his friend turning towards the camera simply to say, “He’s a happy man” (00:08:23-00:11:10). While not snuff, *The Act of Killing* makes its viewer witness to two hours of pain, gore, and high talk of sadism and cruelty.

Seeing the effects of genocide can be genuinely shocking. However, as Susan Sontag explains in her essay “In Plato’s Cave,” the more frequently and less tactfully we are shown images of war and suffering, the less effective they become at inciting action and

empathy. By rewatching tragedies like the Indonesian Genocide, we gain “a certain familiarity with atrocity, making the horrible seem more ordinary – making it appear familiar, remote (‘it’s only a photograph’), inevitable” (21). Thus, photographs that are meant to shock us into action have to become significantly more violent and grotesque, which, ironically, makes us feel even more distant from the problem.

Nonetheless, certain films try to step over lines of comfort to provoke a reaction from the audience. As a result, our tolerance for violence is pushed further into a grotesque and often voyeuristic observation of others’ pain. One of these films, Mauro Andrizzi’s 2008 *Iraqi Short Films*, pushes the audience deep into this disturbing territory. The film is a collection of footage from war zones in Iraq, where the only break from death and destruction is an interlude of anti-war messaging. In the film, cars explode, bombs fall from the sky, and people burst into flames. In one scene, an Iraqi man straps an ambiguous package onto the back of his bike. We watch him pedal away until he is no longer visible to the camera. Our perception of him returns as a cloud of smoke plumes into the sky from the bomb with which he had ridden away (00:57:47-00:59:27).

In his article “The Pleasure of Flinching,” Nick Sautin wrestles with the cruelty he saw during a screening of *Iraqi Short Films*. He points back to Sontag and her book *Regarding the Pain of Others* to understand the ethics of what he calls “digital atrocity footage.” To Sontag, “Perhaps the only people with the right to look at images of suffering of this extreme order are those who could do something to alleviate it . . . or those who could learn from it. The rest of us are voyeurs, whether or not we mean to be” (qtd. in Sautin). Both *Iraqi Short Films* and *The Act of Killing* beg one important question: Do we have the right to be looking at this? Sautin grapples with this by exploring how the Internet has crumbled the walls between atrocity and us, and thus, our right to view. All of the footage in *Iraqi Short Films* was gathered from YouTube and other video sharing platforms, and to Sautin’s knowledge, the director, Mauro Andrizzi, never visited Iraq. In contrast, Oppenheimer’s footage in *The Act of Killing* is original. There is no archival

footage from the Indonesian genocide of the '60s, so the film consists of naturalistic footage, interviews, and the executioners' reenactments – all without the real victims.

While the film's execution scenes are based in historical truth, they are still colored by how the executioners wish to be perceived. The film strays further and further from reality as it delves into the killers' fantasies of starring in American westerns and crime flicks. But even as we know no one is literally being harmed at present, the question still stands: Do we have the right to look at this? Is it voyeuristic to watch a *recreation* of suffering? Bill Nichols gives some guidance on this question in his article "Irony, Cruelty, Evil (and a Wink) in *The Act of Killing*": "Reenactments do not mean the same thing as what the events they represent meant: they evidence a passage of time, the gaining, or failure to gain, insight, and they do not carry the same consequences" (25). For Nichols, the genocide that took place in the 1960s is about the tragic and unwarranted death of so many people, but the reenactments, and thus the film, may mean something else.

Originally, Oppenheimer was going to take a more traditional human rights documentary approach. In his director's statement, he shares that for three years before beginning development on *The Act of Killing*, he had been filming the stories of survivors. But Indonesia varies from many other countries with genocidal histories because the perpetrators there remain in power to this day: Under the power of this political regime, "The concept of crimes against humanity – let alone principles of due process, trial by jury, and habeas corpus – simply does not exist" (Nichols 25). Throughout the film, we are exposed to paramilitary rallies that support and glorify the executions over forty years later. Even in schools, children are shown a propaganda film to the same effect. Much like *The Act of Killing*, it has vivid scenes of torture – eye-gouging, cigarettes being stubbed out on skin, and whippings – but the victims are not ethnic Chinese or members of the Indonesian Communist Party, as real history would suggest, but actors portraying them from the anti-communist party (Emont).

Complacency and acceptance of the genocide are deeply engrained in the most important systems of power in Indonesia. Because of this power, Oppenheimer and his crew encountered many obstacles trying to film the stories of the victims, and most importantly, they feared for both their safety and the safety of the victims. So, the film changed. Oppenheimer worked with former executioners, who were more than willing to share their story of the genocide. And thus the film became about perpetrators and the systems that maintained them instead of the victims. It is violent and uncomfortable, but not quite voyeuristic. Oppenheimer states: "I have developed a filmmaking method . . . to understand why extreme violence, that we hope would be unimaginable, is not only the exact opposite, but also routinely performed" ("Director's Note").

Oppenheimer is exploring the same anesthetization as Sontag was. But in Indonesia, the anesthetization has already occurred. Within the governing cultural and political system, the historical brutality toward 'communists,' 'communist sympathizers,' and any opponent of the military dictatorship, remains unimportant, unreal. Because of the general desensitization to the genocide, it has become a source of pride to the executioners. The film the executioners sought to make is a glorification of their actions. Oppenheimer juxtaposes their vision glorifying their sickening and saddening actions with viewers' discomfort about those actions in order to suggest that "the most powerful insights in *The Act of Killing* probably come in those places where these two agendas radically diverge" ("Background"). Following the logic of Sontag, things are shocking insofar as they show us something *new*. Watching the violence and gore of the executioners' actions on its own might seem commonplace – and thus unreal – to viewers. However, when their reenactments are contextualized with the clips of the executioners' everyday political activities and their running commentaries explaining why the genocide was actually a good thing, their acts of violence appear more novel and startling, triggering viewers to think harder about the surreal world into which the film takes us. Oppenheimer ultimately argues that *The Act of Killing* is not snuff, as

Fraser alleges, but “a film about history itself, about the lies victors tell to justify their actions, and the effects of those lies; about an unresolved traumatic past that continues to haunt the present” (“The Act of Killing”).

During *The Act of Killing*, many Western viewers—at least those who may think they believe in human rights—are placed in the midst of a political and ethical landscape where the men who contributed to the death of hundreds of thousands, or millions, of people have never been punished and likely never will be. These viewers are thrust into a world where genocide is excused and those who execute it are valorized. According to the executioners, we should look upon the communists’ suffering as legitimate and right: the communists were in the wrong, and their suffering is unimportant, if not desired. It is an entirely uncomfortable, topsy-turvy landscape for many viewers. Oppenheimer actually places us in this environment, however, to create in us “a more visceral, perturbed state of reception” (Nichols 29).

The Act of Killing is undoubtedly an uncomfortable film to watch, but to truly understand it, viewers have to grapple with their relation to the anesthetized world of the executioners. These are men that proudly show off their crimes against humanity, with only fleeting moments of remorse—they should be punished. *But they won't be punished.* Viewers can and should believe that these are bad people who have done unspeakable things, but we gain nothing from watching the film if our sole takeaway is that the executioners should be punished. If we only watch the film in this way, we do become the voyeurs of whom Sontag warns. We learn nothing if we cannot acknowledge, no matter how begrudgingly, our own relation to systems like the ones that permeate so much of Indonesian life. Those structures are what excuse the genocide and protect the men who commit it. By dropping viewers squarely in this political and ethical world that is so at odds with our notions of human rights, Oppenheimer makes attentive viewers contend with the systems of power and belief that uphold and valorize human rights violations, in both Indonesia and other

countries. Only by exploring a political and ethical world that seems so surreal and incomprehensible on the surface can we begin to understand more fully how such systems of violence endure and perpetuate themselves there and elsewhere.

Works Cited

The Act of Killing. Directed by Joshua Oppenheimer, Final Cut for Real, 2012.

Emont, Jon. "The Propaganda Precursor to 'The Act of Killing.'" *The New Yorker*, 24 Oct. 2015, www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-propaganda-precursor-to-the-act-of-killing.

Fraser, Nick. "The Act of Killing: Don't Give an Oscar to This Snuff Movie." *The Guardian*, 22 Feb. 2014, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/feb/23/act-of-killing-dont-give-oscar-snuff-movie-indonesia.

Kwok, Yenni. "The Memory of Savage Anticommunist Killings Still Haunts Indonesia, 50 Years On." *Time*, 30 Sept. 2015, time.com/4055185/indonesia-anticommunist-massacre-holocaust-killings-1965.

Nichols, Bill. "Irony, Cruelty, Evil (and a Wink) in *The Act of Killing*." *Film Quarterly*, vol. 67, no. 2, 2013, pp. 25–29.

Oppenheimer, Joshua. "Background." *The Act of Killing*, theactofkilling.com/background.

–. "Director's Statement." *The Act of Killing*, theactofkilling.com/statements.

–. "The Act of Killing Has Helped Indonesia Reassess Its Past and Present." *The Guardian*, 25 Feb. 2014, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/feb/25/the-act-of-killing-indonesia-past-present-1965-genocide.

Sautin, Nicholas. "The Pleasure of Flinching." *Guernica*, 15 Feb. 2010, www.guernicamag.com/the_pleasure_of_flinching.

Sontag, Susan. "In Plato's Cave." *On Photography*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977.