DEATH ON SCREEN: SELF-REPRESENTATION AND PERFORMATIVITY IN *THE ACT OF KILLING* AND *THE LOOK OF SILENCE*[1]

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INTRODUCTION: THE INDONESIAN CASE

In January 2023, the President of the Republic of Indonesia at the time, Joko Widodo (popularly known as Jokowi), issued a public apology for the country's bloody postcolonial past (Teresia and Widianto, 2023). His speech referred not only to the persecution and purging of communists and ethnic Chinese civilians in 1965 and 1966 but also to eleven other cases of human rights violations in the country's recent history. The blanket apology drew responses from various non-governmental organisations and survivor support groups, who demanded that criminal cases be opened against the perpetrators, who remain unpunished to date.

Widodo's apology marks the latest step in a series of efforts to recover the memory of one of the most horrific episodes of the 20th century. The systematic mass killings and torture that preceded the establishment of Suharto's pro-Western military dictatorship—the so-called "New Order"—remain in the collective memory, although for decades the Indonesian government denied these events and blocked any initiatives that contradicted the official discourse.[2] This, combined with the lack of documentary evidence, created a climate of silence and intimidation. Melvin (2017: 487) notes another difficulty: the classification of the 1965–1966 killings as genocide, accepted in academic circles since the 1980s, faced an obstacle in the categorisation proposed by the Genocide Convention approved by the UN General Assembly in 1948, which defines genocide victims as national, ethnic, racial or religious groups, while the Indonesian case involved political groups (United Nations General Assembly, 1948). In 2016, the International People's Tribunal in The Hague condemned the events of 1965 and 1966 as crimes against humanity and argued for their classification as genocide against a national group (International People's Tribunal on 1965 Crimes Against Humanity in Indonesia, 2017: 8). The lack of evidence made it

difficult to prove the violence was coordinated and systematic until 2010, when Melvin gained access to thousands of classified military documents in Aceh, northern Sumatra (Melvin, 2017: 488) containing evidence of the participation of the military apparatus in the exterminations, which thus came to be referred to as the Indonesian Genocide Files. Subsequent revelations of the complicity of the US, British and Australian governments during the genocide (Curby, 2016) intensified international pressure on Jakarta and ultimately led to Widodo's official apology.

RETURN TO SUMATRA

The documentary diptych comprising *The Act of Killing* (Joshua Oppenheimer, Christine Cynn, and Anonymous, 2012) and *The Look of Silence* (Oppenheimer, 2014) was released in the period between the discovery of the Indonesian Genocide Files and the symbolic verdict of the International People's Tribunal. The culmination of years of work by its creators, the project marked a milestone in documentary cinema, received critical acclaim[3] and drew attention to the Indonesian genocide, especially after both films were nominated for the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature. This duology is situated within the dynamics of the performative documentary, a term coined by Bill Nichols[4] to designate works that emphasise the subjective or expressive aspects of the filmmaker's engagement with the subject and the audience's receptivity to that engagement (Nichols, 2001: 34).[5] Oppenheimer's approach also supports Stella Bruzzi's idea that documentaries are themselves "performative acts, inherently fluid and unstable and informed by issues of performance and performativity" (Bruzzi, 2006: 11). This flexible nature, open to heterogeneous processes for shaping narratives that offer somewhat faint traces of concrete realities, translates here into two complementary instalments: the first gives almost exclusive attention to the perpetrators, while the second focuses on Adi Rukun, the brother of one of the genocide victims.[6] The two films adopt distinct strategies to examine their central characters; strategies that complement each other, speaking through the bodies and mirrors of their representation to enable a complex discourse on memory and trauma.

The objective of this study is to conduct a textual analysis of representative sequences from both works to identify these documentary strategies. This analysis explores how the narrative structure operates, from complementary perspectives, to recover the memory of the genocide from the standpoint of both perpetrators and victims. It also aims to contextualise the significance of the films within the series of events that has highlighted the urgent need for this recovery in recent years, as well as public reparations and the criminal prosecution of any perpetrators who are still alive today. The initial hypothesis is that the two films employ distinct strategies to represent the opposing parties in the genocide, and that the reinterpretation of the historical violence broadcast on the television screen provides a unifying theme for both sides: in one case, to align it with the performativity that shapes the hegemonic narrative (while using irony to become a commentary on that narrative); in the other, to expose it as the encapsulated image of a historiography that disregards and marginalises the victims. The origins of this research date back to 2016, when I first explored the figure of the perpetrator and the inscription of the memory of historical violence in body language through a comparative analysis of *The Act of Killing* and *S21: The Red Killing Machine* (S21, la machine de mort khmère rouge, Rithy Panh, 2003) (Revert Gomis, 2016). In this article, the focus is on the complementary nature of Oppenheimer's Indonesian diptych[7] and the dialectic it establishes between perpetrators and victims, with the aim of further exploring documentary strategies in order to delve more deeply into the nuances of the Indonesian case and the range of resources drawn on to examine it.

NOTES FOR A DOCUMENTARY ON GENOCIDE

The origins of the techniques used in the duology can be traced back to the early collaboration between Christine Cynn and Joshua Oppenheimer, co-directors of *The Act of Killing*. Shortly after graduating from Harvard in 1997, this creative duo began "experimenting with the space between documentary and fiction," with a particular interest in "how fiction and fantasy makes up what appears to be our factual reality" (Oppenheimer, 2013). A little later, Cynn and Oppenheimer moved to London, where they continued working with performative methods. In 2001, a friend invited them to participate in a project with workers at a Belgian-owned palm oil plantation in Indonesia. The result was the collaborative film *The Globalization Tapes* (Various Artists, 2003), composed of segments that offer different creative perspectives on the harmful effects of globalized capitalism on local workers, such as wages too low to live on, a lack of labour protections, or early deaths due to chemical exposure. Although the experience of producing this film made the urgent need for a union clear, the workers themselves dismissed this idea for fear of a repeat of the reprisals of 1965 and 1966, when their grandparents, who were union members, had been accused of being communist sympathisers and were murdered. In 2003, Cynn and Oppenheimer returned to Indonesia to undertake another project, intending to interview survivors of the genocide. Members of the army, however, shut down the interviews, forcing them to abandon the initial plan. It was then that locals they had worked with on the first film suggested they speak to some of their neighbours whom they knew had participated in the purges and were responsible for disappearances. Oppenheimer later explained, in an interview, his initial bewilderment at the perpetrators' reaction:

> To our horror and astonishment, these men would, all of them, open up with these grotesque, boastful, shocking stories of mass killing, they would tell you, in front of their wives, their children, sometimes even their grandchildren. And suddenly there was this huge question of why are they boasting? For whom are they boasting? We weren't getting testimonial, sober efforts to remember. We were getting performance. And performance is somehow always oriented towards a spectator. And the question was, who is the spectator? And performance always is meant to somehow have real effects in the world. And what were the effects they were trying to achieve through these performances? (Oppenheimer, 2013).

These are, in fact, the issues that motivated the representational approach adopted in *The Act of Killing* and Oppenheimer's subsequent exploration of the relationship between performativity, violence and memory. In light of the initial impossibility of obtaining an account from the victims' perspective, the perpetrator's testimony becomes the focus of attention for what it reveals about the past through a memory suspended between reality and the fictionalised, violent fantasy of the subjugator. It is both a means of documentary exploration and a framework for self-representation, whose performative nature takes the same form adopted by the official discourse, like a reflection. One of the main pillars of this official discourse is the propaganda feature film *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* (Penumpasan Pengkhianatan G 30 S PKI, Arifin, C. Noer, 1984), a docudrama about the kidnapping, torture and murder of six Indonesian army generals in the early hours of 1 October 1965, in what has traditionally been described as a failed coup attempt by the 30 September Movement, a military faction aligned with the PKI (Partai Komunis Indonesia, or Indonesian Communist Party).[8] Made during the Suharto dictatorship, the film was mandatory viewing until the dictator's resignation in 1998,[9] serving to assign blame to the communists for the coup attempt itself and, indirectly, for the subsequent violence that spread across the archipelago. To this end, it focuses on depicting the

events in exhaustive detail, with a graphic use of violence[10] that is particularly brutal in the torture scenes, where it flirts with the aesthetic conventions of the slasher and gore genres. At the same time, it adopts the tone of a political or espionage thriller, with a meticulous reconstruction of the conspiracy. This blend of genres, Oppenheimer and Uwemedimo note, serves the historiography of the New Order, clearly and explicitly portraying PKI members as sadists, while also depicting them as a spectral threat (Oppenheimer and Uwemedimo, 2012: 289). And yet, such extreme violence is an inextricable fact of the massacres that the film attempts to justify without ever explicitly referring to them:

> the film is able to depict genocide without directly citing it, then, because the genocide is the violence that continues to constitute the film's iterative condition. Thus the film conjures a violence as *spectre*—the extermination of the entire PKI (a group itself rendered spectral)—by not mentioning it explicitly. It is in this way that *G30S* is a *performative* instrument of terror—it does violence (Oppenheimer and Uwemedimo, 2012: 290).

In this sense, the authors add, it is "a history in the performative register: history as a histrionics of terror" (Oppenheimer and Uwemedimo, 2012: 290). The logic of performative terror thus takes root in Indonesian society, which has experienced neither reparations nor catharsis, particularly in the narrative of perpetrators who know they are protected not only by an official narrative but also by a storytelling mode grounded in power and intimidation over those who fear reprisals.

THE LOGIC OF PERFORMATIVE TERROR THUS TAKES ROOT IN INDONESIAN SOCIETY, WHICH HAS EXPERIENCED NEITHER REPARATIONS NOR CATHARSIS.

THE PERPETRATORS' PERSPECTIVE: *THE ACT OF KILLING*

The Act of Killing thus appropriates this performative dynamic that comes naturally to the perpetrators. It is in the context of this regime of impunity, and the narratives emerging from it, that Oppenheimer proposes an unusual starting point: they are invited to participate in the filming of a purported fiction film in which they are actors and stars. In this process, they are also encouraged to draw on their experience as torturers and murderers to achieve greater realism in their roles, which are reimagined using recognisable codes of various genres (war films, Westerns, horror films, gangster films and political thrillers). Previous research (Revert Gomis, 2016) already directly identified the ultimate aim of the performative device, which is to reverse the dehumanisation in the executioner's gaze and (re)activate empathy for the Other. This strategy is realised through an extension of this role-playing that results at a certain point in a reversal of identities, in which Anwar Congo or Herman Koto[11] embodies a victim and is subject to a simulation of violence and abuse (Image 1).

This is therefore not a typical reenactment in which the subject's memory is revealed through the repetition of past actions.[12] This incorporation of historical violence into present-day fiction entails not only the memory of gestures but also the perpetrators' self-perception, which is shaped by



Image 1. The role reversal allows Anwar Congo to experience a simulation of the torture suffered by his victims

the dominant narrative and by the way it unfolds to erase difference.

> This method of archaeological performance entails successively working with and through the gestures, routines and rituals that were the motor of the massacres, as well as the genres and grammars of its historical recount, typically moving from interview and reenactment with the historical actors, such as that of Amir and Inong on the Snake River, to increasingly elaborate restagings of the events related in the interviews. Between a buried historical event and its restaging with historical actors this method opens a process of simultaneous *historical excavation* (working down through strata), and *histrionic reconstruction* (adding layers of stylised performance and recounting) (Oppenheimer and Uwemedimo, 2012: 304–305).

This method inevitably opens up a referential gap which, far from producing a distancing effect in the recounting of the events of 1965 and 1966 (which are never directly shown in any photographs or footage), recreates their essential violence so that what is left out of the frame is completed by the spectator through their own subjectivity and background.

> In other words, the absent documentary invoked by the ironic documentary enjoys a psychic reality that depends on what the spectator imagines or fantasizes it to be—a psychic reality partly based on previous experience and partly invoked by the specific strategies a given filmmaker utilizes. It is, in fact, not so much absent as missing: we hold out an expectation of the absent film's potential appearance, which is quite different from merely noting something that is not present (Nichols, 2013: 28).

This is what Oppenheimer himself has come to call *the documentary of the imagination*, a concept that resists traditional categorisations, in which individual subjectivity and its relationship with reality cannot be confined to a real/unreal binary. Rather, it is a matter of documenting "the ways we imagine ourselves, the ways we know ourselves" (Hill, 2021: 802). It is only from this hazy space that we can cross the threshold of astonishment and bewilderment induced by a first viewing of *The Act of Killing*—Why do these men boast of their crimes? What motivates them to celebrate their cruelty? Why have they gone unpunished?—and begin to understand that their actions stem from a self-representation rooted in: 1) the official discourse of the New Order, whereby the alleged cruelty and violence of the 30 September conspirators—illustrated in *Pengkhianatan G30S PKI*—demanded an even crueller and more violent response, leading to their complete (and justified) annihilation; 2) the elevation of the exterminators to the level of national heroes—as part of the celebrated *Angkatan 66*, or Generation of '66—confirmed in public ceremonies and institutional interactions; and 3) a new reframing, in the form of simulation, that confers upon them the status of movie stars in the classical sense of the Hollywood star system, leading them to identify themselves as performers and to adopt generic codes of hegemonic American cinema. Decisive to the construction of identity and morality resulting from the convergence of these three factors is the media component, whether articulated through the mouthpieces of power, public forums or the mass media, particularly film and television, which constitute the focus of this analysis.

Several scenes highlight the centrality of these media forms and their role in discourses of power.[13] In this regard, the figure of Anwar Congo establishes a direct connection between cinematic imagination and the violence of the genocide, as during the years of the massacre he worked at a cinema in the heart of the city of Medan. A few minutes into the film, he is interviewed inside the now-abandoned building, accompanied by an attentive Koto. Later, outside the cinema, he explains to the camera that at the height of their power the communists advocated for curtailing screenings of American films, a move that for gangsters like him would have meant reduced box office revenue, since Hollywood titles were the most popular. As the interview continues, Congo recounts

coming out of the cinema dancing with joy after watching Elvis Presley films. Together with Koto, he recreates the mood as they cross the street, remembering the elation he felt until they reach the paramilitary office where torture and killings took place. Upon reaching the door, a visibly cheerful Congo remarks, "I'd see the guy being interrogated. I'd give him a cigarette. I'd still be dancing, laughing. It was like we were killing… happily!" This is no mere trip down memory lane; on the contrary, the scene carries strong symbolic weight, illustrating how the imaginary constructed by Hollywood's modes of representation becomes inscribed in the individual, permeates him, and how this assimilation in turn is ultimately adapted to genocidal violence. In *The Act of Killing*, this hegemonic cinema—with its suppression of other cinematic forms, which itself establishes a power dynamic—shapes the perpetrator's fantasy when he tortures and kills, creating a single subjective space where the factual is merely one of the narrative layers that make up his identity.

The above is not the only reference made in the film to cinema. In various scenes, Congo enthusiastically expresses his love for films, such as when he names Al Pacino and John Wayne among his favourite actors, or when he recalls how as a young man he would watch and imitate Hollywood movies. In parallel with these recollections is a revealing evolution of his self-perception as a star: early on we see him watching his first screen tests on a television set and fiercely criticising his own performance. However, his acting in successive simulations eventually leads him to define himself as *an artist* and to deny that status for Koto. In another scene, he sits in front of the same TV set watching *Pengkhianatan G30S PKI*, a film from which he will later recreate scenes, playing the role of one of the victims. This operation clarifies the filmmakers' strategy: the gaze intrinsic to the performative violence that has forged the dominant narrative of the genocide is turned back onto the perpetrators themselves in simulated conditions, creating a grim game of mirrors.

The most significant scene, however, takes place later in a television studio. It is a talk show titled *Special Dialogue*, featuring Ibrahim Sinik, a newspaper editor who also participated in the massacres, the paramilitary leader Ali Usman, along with Congo and Koto. The audience consists exclusively of members of the Pancasila Youth, and a disturbing set design features a table draped in a red cloth positioned in front of the presenter, on which three sculptures of heads with expressionless faces are displayed as props. The host introduces her guests as "movie theatre gangsters who are making a film to commemorate the extermination of the communists." After interviewing Sinik, the host asks Congo who his favourite movie star is. He replies, "The one who looks most like me. There was a Black star named Sidney Poitier." After a round of applause, the interview continues, and Congo remarks that the meaning of the word for "gangster" in Indonesian is *free man*,[14] which is why they have included the song "Born Free" at both the beginning and the end of their film (Image 2).

Congo's appearance on the talk show and the host's description of him as *the star of the film* reinforce the media-driven nature of his persona and his enduring connection to the Hollywood imaginary—which, in the case of the Poitier reference, takes on a paradoxical meaning, as the African



Image 2. The song "Born Free", featuring Anwar Congo and Herman Koto

American actor generally played characters who stood out for their nobility and/or were subjected to racial discrimination. Usman's interview then brings the conversation back to the realm of historiography, as he stresses how important it is for young people to remember their history and that there can be no reconciliation because "the story had to go this way." The scene ends with the interviewer asking about the possibility of revenge by the victims' children, to which Congo replies: "It's not that they don't want to take revenge. They can't!" He has barely finished his answer when somebody off-screen shouts: "Because we'd exterminate them all!" The camera then reveals the speaker: the local paramilitary leader Safit Pardede, who is speaking into a handheld microphone while sitting in a jeep full of Pancasila soldiers that forms part of the studio set. His interjection triggers a new round of applause and concludes the talk show segment, having effectively documented the media's complicity in this performative terror that maintains order through intimidation in Indonesian society. As Oppenheimer and Uwemedimo point out: "Rather it is to recognise that these fatal acts reveal the threat of repetition as a constitutive element of the performance of terror: not merely, 'this is what is done', but 'this is what *will* be done'" (Oppenheimer and Uwemedimo, 2012: 294).

In short, the perpetrator's gaze in *The Act of Killing* is articulated by the mediation of the film or television screen. These media forms serve as a framework that simultaneously enables fantasies and validates self-representations, a site of exchange that transforms experience into performance, in which the violence of the historical world leaves its imprint on the potential simulacra of fiction. The mise-en-scène that the documentary constructs around Anwar Congo thus seems to reaffirm him time and again, culminating in his supposed *moral awakening*, when the images of violence finally seem to make their mark on the perpetrator. This is a sequence discussed in previous research (Revert Gomis, 2016), where Congo watches himself playing a torture victim, when he finally seems to open up to empathy and guilt. In it, the shot-reverse-shot interplay between his face and the television allows for an exchange that frames the device as an everyday object in the room. However, after Congo's grandchildren join the viewing, at the precise moment that the transformation occurs, the reverse shot closes in on the images on the screen so that the frame of the TV set is no longer visible. The shift in "scalarity" achieved through the editing functions here as a suitable marker of the point of no return in the gaze of the perpetrator, who can no longer escape the weight of the violence conveyed by these images, which appeal to him directly.

THESE MEDIA FORMS SERVE AS A FRAMEWORK THAT SIMULTANEOUSLY ENABLES FANTASIES AND VALIDATES SELF-REPRESENTATIONS, A SITE OF EXCHANGE THAT TRANSFORMS EXPERIENCE INTO PERFORMANCE, IN WHICH THE VIOLENCE OF THE HISTORICAL WORLD LEAVES ITS IMPRINT ON THE POTENTIAL SIMULACRA OF FICTION

THE VICTIMS' PERSPECTIVE: *THE LOOK OF SILENCE*

The images in *The Act of Killing* are charged with the absence of that other possible documentary, the one denied to us by the lack of archival material or evidence that could support a direct report on the facts. But they also carry the absence of the memory of the victims, who barely seem to exist outside the executioners' account. Their absence, explained by the fact that Oppenheimer's Indonesian project was originally inspired by the widespread fear among part of the civilian population to speak of what happened, finds its discursive an-



Image 3. Adi Rukun interviews one of the perpetrators



Image 4. Rukun watches footage of the perpetrators on TV impassively

swer in *The Look of Silence*. This second instalment focuses on Adi Rukun, an ophthalmologist whose brother was tortured and murdered in the purges of northern Sumatra. As with Congo in the previous film, there are various sequences showing the protagonist watching television intently (Image 3), which serve as a unifying motif throughout the film. In these scenes, he watches the culprits make statements acknowledging all kinds of atrocities without remorse, or even reenacting them.

On one occasion, however, the television footage includes a record previously absent from the duology: a 1967 NBC News story on the massacres in the archipelago, reported by a neutral, distant voiceover while the screen shows scenes of the army dispersing civilians: "Sixteen months ago, these beautiful and tranquil looking islands exploded with stunning violence. In many cases, entire families were liquidated, and the purge continues to this day." The narration is interrupted by a reporter who praises the beauty of Bali as he walks alongside a local, who casually remarks: "Now Bali become more beautiful without communists," and then explains that it was the communists themselves who, after realising the error of their ways, had asked to be killed. Another dimension of the official historiography thus unfolds to justify the genocidal violence, framed within an expository document that makes no attempt to question the facts, instead offering an external perspective more inclined toward complicity than critique. Whether the images were taken by NBC or by the perpetrators themselves, the fundamental difference in this film lies in the position of the victim, who watches as the spectator of a spectacle from which he is excluded. This changes the relationship of the gaze with the scopic regime, with which it can no longer be complicit. Far from the emotional involvement of Congo, Rukun observes the images impassively, without any apparent emotional response (Image 4).

This impassivity, however, contrasts with his determination to interview the perpetrators and to try to understand what happened. By presenting this dual aspect of his protagonist, Oppenheimer seems to suggest that the media apparatus—which was essential to the validation of the perpetrator's perspective—is ineffective at engaging with the victim's gaze. As Yago Paris points out, these conversations follow a structure through which the protagonist systematically challenges the perpetrator's narrative:

SEEMS TO SUGGEST THAT THE MEDIA APPARATUS—WHICH WAS ESSENTIAL TO THE VALIDATION OF THE PERPETRATOR'S PERSPECTIVE—IS INEFFECTIVE AT ENGAGING WITH THE VICTIM'S GAZE

> Throughout *The Look of Silence*, every time Adi tries to speak about the past with the different perpetrators he meets, a similar pattern takes place. In the beginning, the questions are not harsh or confrontational, and, as a result, the perpetrators feel comfortable explaining what they remember about the past. This changes when Adi brings up topics that connect to ideas of guilt or responsibility. In these cases, every interviewee reacts in a similar manner, by rejecting the version of the past that Adi offers. There is a fixed idea of the past, and any diversion is immediately canceled (Paris, 2021: 9).

In fact, in his article Paris identifies a series of defence mechanisms used by the perpetrators in an attempt to thwart the possibility of a different narrative that would be beyond their control. Rukun can therefore be seen as the bearer of the silenced perspective of the victims, reclaiming their space and, with it, the right to a different memory. The quest for redress is further symbolised by the optical device used on Inong, one of the leaders of the death squads, as its application to the murderer's own eyes visually expresses the possibility of correcting the gaze (Image 5).

By placing Adi Rukun at the centre of the narrative in *The Look of Silence*, Oppenheimer goes beyond simply giving a voice to one of the victims. From the outset, Rukun is portrayed as an active figure who seeks to counter the discourse of intimidation in various contexts: he explains to his son that what he is taught in school about the failed coup of the 30 September Movement is a lie; he tries to persuade a reluctant neighbour who lived in Aceh to recount what she witnessed; and he even speaks with the family of the late Amir Hasan, showing them a video in which Hasan openly admits his responsibility for 32 deaths, which he proudly recorded in his book, a copy of which Rukun presents to them. In this way, Rukun's efforts to engage in dialogue and present the facts are not directed solely at the perpetrators but involve various groups representative of Indonesian society, thereby revealing the need for a widespread re-education of the gaze. The fact that the final stop on his journey is Hasan's family carries significant dramatic weight, as it was Hasan's squad that tortured and murdered Rukun's brother Ramli. The exposure—both on video and in writing—of the atrocities committed by their now-deceased patriarch shocks his family, eliciting an apology from his wife, and provoking the ire of his sons, who accuse Rukun and Oppenheimer of *opening wounds*. In this sense, one of their reactions echoes the official narrative aimed at burying the past: "Enough! My mother is ill, and this will traumatise her. Forget the past. Let's all get along like the military dictatorship taught us." The meeting ends shortly thereafter with no reconciliation in sight.



Image 5. The symbolic correction of the perpetrator's gaze

CONCLUSION: REIMAGINING THE GAZE

The Act of Killing and *The Look of Silence* form a documentary diptych that explores the Indonesian genocide based on a two-phase strategy, with each film addressing a phase. While the first film astutely employs the performative mechanisms of New Order discourse to hold up a mirror to the perpetrators and attempt to reverse the empathy, the second shows how the victims' gaze cannot engage in dialogue within the same discursive framework, as it is founded on power, violence, and intimidation of the *Other*, who fears that history may be repeated. The convergence of these



Image 6. Film genres as a source of imagination and performativity

two gazes on television and cinema screens creates symbolic frames of reference: for the perpetrators, these serve as sources of imagery and performativity (Image 6), while at the same time reflecting back to validate their identity; for the victims, however, these images constitute an incomplete memory that excludes them and requires rectification.

Thus, under the theoretical umbrella of the "documentary of the imagination", the filmmaker has reflected on the use of fiction and autofiction as a means of inhabiting the elusive world of the senses, an idea that is theoretically incompatible with the orthodox notions of expository discourse or the constraints of observational cinema. It is not surprising that his latest venture, the post-apocalyptic feature film *The End* (2024), should abandon all referential reality to observe the human condition through the codes of the musical. What truly matters is not the genre label, but his radical and uninterrupted investigation into how narrative and representation are used to survive unbearable conditions.

From this perspective, the performative and fictional mechanisms studied in this article, particularly those used in *The Act of Killing*, serve as tools for lifting the veil over the perpetrators' gaze. The final stage, which could open up the possibility of a desirable social reimagining, nevertheless requires dialogue between the parties: a confrontation in a context where fear and the imbalance of power have been neutralised, or at least mitigated, as exemplified by the accidental, revealing encounter between the painter Vann Nath and his jailer, Hoi, in *S-21: The Red Killing Machine*. It is in this unmediated presence that the limits of humanity are tested and the baggage and contradictions of the human gaze can be assessed. This is what Oppenheimer—through Rukun—proposes at the end of his duology: public dialogue, without performativity or audiovisual mediation, remains the most plausible option for neutralising discourses of intimidation, healing wounds and rewriting a coexistence that rises above trauma without forgetting it. ■

NOTES

1 This study has been conducted in the context of the research project Transnational War-time Memories in East Asian Visual Culture (TRAMEVIC), code CIGE/2023/066, under the direction of Marcos Pablo Centeno Martín (IP).

2 Jess Melvin documents Minister Luhut Pandjaitan's denial of the massacres in 2016, as well as the Jakarta police's cancellation of an academic debate on the subject, organised by Indonesia's Legal Aid Foundation (LBH), in 2017 (Melvin, 2017: 488).

3 Notable among these is an article by philosopher Slavoj Žižek, whose reading of the film focuses on the concept of the privatisation of public space and the ethical impasse of global capitalism (Žižek, 2013).

4 As is well known, Nichols later added the poetic and performative modes (2001) to the four documentary modes he originally proposed: expository, observational, interactive and reflective representation (Nichols, 1991).

5 Notable figures working in this mode include Michael Moore, Errol Morris, Werner Herzog and Morgan Spurlock, although it actually covers a broad and flexible range of documentary practices that allow for different degrees and forms of involvement and presence on the part of the filmmakers.

6 Rukun discovered how his brother Ramli was killed thanks to both the interview transcripts with the perpetrators and the book *Embun Berdarah* ("Dew of Blood"), published by Amir Hasan in 1994. In it, the author—the leader of the squad that tortured his brother to death—describes the crimes committed in 1965 as "heroic acts" (Marching 2017: 113). Hasan's case is explored extensively by Oppenheimer and Michael Uwemedimo in their essay "Show of Force: A Cinema-Séance of Power and Violence in Sumatra's Plantation Belt" (Oppenheimer and Uwemedimo, 2012).

7 *The Act of Killing* was co-directed with Christine Cynn and an anonymous director. *The Look of Silence*, on the other hand, was directed solely by Oppenheimer. For this reason, this article generally refers to Oppenheimer as the primary driving force behind the two-film project.

8 Scholars such as John Roosa have argued that the 30 September Movement was used as a pretext for the army to launch a long-anticipated attack against the PKI. He develops his thesis in the book *Pretext for Mass Murder: The 30 September Movement and Suharto's Coup d'Etat in Indonesia* (Roosa, 2006).

9 In addition to being broadcast on television, screenings were organised in cinemas for school groups. In a scene in *The Act of Killing*, Congo watches *Pengkhianatan G30S PKI* on television while explaining, from his experience as a worker at a cinema, how little children were seated in the front rows and how many of them were left traumatised by the screenings.

10 It should be noted that there are multiple edits of the film, with varying lengths and degrees of censorship, although the two versions generally accepted as canonical are the 271-minute version and the shortened 220-minute version. Both versions can be found on YouTube.

11 Unlike other protagonists in *The Act of Killing*, Koto is not a perpetrator, as he belongs to a younger generation that was unable to participate in the purges of 1965 and 1966. He appears in Oppenheimer's film as a gangster and paramilitary leader; in other words, as one of the heirs to the positions of power and intimidation embodied by figures such as Congo.

12 In *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*, also analysed in the previous study, examples are provided of a more orthodox reenactment, in which perpetrators of the Khmer Rouge regime recreate their routines at the Cambodian prison S-21—where victims were imprisoned, tortured and executed—or the bureaucratic procedures associated with each prisoner.

13 The version of *The Act of Killing* referred to in this article is the 159-minute Director's Cut, whose longer runtime—compared to the 115 minutes of the more widely distributed version—allows for a deeper exploration of Oppenheimer and Cynn's performative and staging techniques, as well as the role of propaganda itself.

14 The etymology refers to the Indonesian word *preman*, which denotes a thug or gangster, and which derives from the Dutch term *vrijman*, meaning "free man".

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DEATH ON SCREEN: SELF-REPRESENTATION AND PERFORMATIVITY IN *THE ACT OF KILLING* AND *THE LOOK OF SILENCE*

Abstract

The documentary diptych comprising *The Act of Killing* and *The Look of Silence* constituted a turning point in the past decade in the recovery of the memory of the Indonesian genocide that took place in 1965 and 1966. At the same time, both films, directed by Joshua Oppenheimer, marked a watershed in the evolution of the performative documentary and the representation of violence in the discursive practices of non-fiction memory construction. This article explores the strategies these films employ to incorporate the testimonies of perpetrators and victims, with a particular focus on self-representation, performativity and the role that television and film play in the narrative of the genocide. To this end, it presents a textual analysis of key sequences grounded in visual semiotics, with the aim of determining the effects these strategies have on documentary discourse and assessing their significance in a context of growing pressure in Indonesia to recover its historical memory.

Key words

The Act of Killing; *The Look of Silence*; Joshua Oppenheimer; Indonesian genocide; Self-representation; Performative documentary; Performativity; Representation of violence.

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LA MUERTE EN LA PANTALLA. AUTORREPRESENTACIÓN Y PERFORMATIVIDAD EN *THE ACT OF KILLING* Y *LA MIRADA DEL SILENCIO*

Resumen

El díptico documental conformado por *The Act of Killing* y *La mirada del silencio* supuso, en la década pasada, un punto de inflexión en la recuperación de la memoria del genocidio indonesio acontecido entre 1965 y 1966. Al mismo tiempo, ambas películas, dirigidas por Joshua Oppenheimer, marcaron un antes y un después en la evolución del documental performativo y la representación de la violencia en los discursos memorísticos de la no ficción. En el presente artículo se exploran las estrategias desarrolladas por estos títulos en la incorporación de los testimonios de perpetradores y víctimas, poniendo especial atención a la autorrepresentación, la performatividad y el papel de la televisión y el cine en la narrativa del genocidio. Se aborda para ello un análisis textual de secuencias clave que parte de la semiótica visual, con el fin de determinar los efectos que dichas estrategias tienen en el discurso documental y ponderar la importancia de las obras en un contexto de creciente presión para la reparación de la memoria indonesia.

Palabras clave

The Act of Killing; *La mirada del silencio*; Joshua Oppenheimer; genocidio indonesio; autorrepresentación; documental performativo; performatividad; representación de la violencia.

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