



The Act of Killing Discussion Guide

Director: Joshua Oppenheimer
Co-director: Christine Cynn
Year: 2012
Time: 159 min

You might know this director from:
The Globalisation Tapes (2003)

FILM SUMMARY

Groundbreaking and audacious, **THE ACT OF KILLING** pushes the boundaries of documentary by capturing a film-within-a-film as former death squad leaders re-enact their killings during the 1965–66 mass murders in Indonesia. The ex-executioners eagerly take up the challenge, not to confess their crimes but to portray themselves as heroes and victors because they are regarded as such in the current government’s national mythology.

The film focuses on Anwar Congo, self-confessed killer of over a thousand people, and a few of his friends, including a former executioner who flies in with his family for the movie shoot. They perform their scenes in various styles—a smoky film noir with fedoras and shadows, a neon-colored Western in the Indonesian countryside, and a surrealistic musical with beautiful women dancing out of a fish’s mouth. They are creators of this film, overseeing the script, special effects and costumes, and they are the principal actors. They want to make an enjoyable film, complete with comic relief, beautiful dancing girls, and a glorious ending.

The dissonance between the horrific enterprise and the giddy love of filmmaking is outrageous and troubling. The resulting scenes are at once absurd, farcical, nightmare-poetic and revelatory. But within these extremes are also countless subtleties and honest moments that are recognizably human. The film reaches its most unsettling power, however, when the boundary between fiction and non-fiction is blurred, when we’re no longer certain if the actor can ever stop performing.

FILM THEMES

This film explores how people contend with a personal and communal history that is rewritten or even erased.

MEMORY AND IDENTITY

Anwar Congo relishes the role of a national hero, and yet he is haunted by nightmares. He can't fully confront his past or decide if what he did was wrong because he's part of a grand narrative that says he was supposed to kill for the good of the country, for its New Order. *THE ACT OF KILLING* shows how nations construct their identities with a history that is revised. The viewer may not feel much sympathy for the executioner, but what is to become of this nation whose history of trauma is denied?

PERFORMANCE

Even before Anwar starts filming, he is performing for the camera. On a rooftop, he shows how he killed his victims with wire so there'd be less blood. He later returns to this rooftop and retches violently though nothing is purged. Some may think it's another performance that Anwar expects to give after filming his movie. This ambiguity between fiction and non-fiction runs throughout the film. One actor grieves for his real-life Chinese stepfather who was taken in the night in killed. Adi notes that if their movie is truthful, it will run counter to the official history. "Not everything true should be made public," he says. "Even God has secrets."

FILMS AND FILMMAKING

Anwar says that an Elvis Presley film would leave him happy and dancing long after it was over. The film even infected his mood in the paramilitary office. "I wouldn't be sadistic. I'd give the guy a cigarette.... It was like we were killing happily." His film heroes were John Wayne and the noir gangsters. Anwar plays both hero and criminal in his re-enactments. But who is Anwar playing in the final scene at the waterfall? He seems to get lost in a hall of mirrors that reflect his face through the mythology of rewritten history, his own warped memories, and the fantasies of films.

LANGUAGE AND PERCEPTION

Throughout the film, language is shown to be slippery and mutable. Even "murder," "kill," and "execute" have different shades of meaning. A word can be emptied of all meaning too. During the 1965 purges, anybody considered a threat or opponent to the new government could be condemned as a "communist" and sentenced to die. Adi says that he may be a war criminal by international definitions, but according to his country, he is a hero. That definition is enough. Because of that, he feels no guilt for what he did. A word can sentence a person to die, and another word can justify acts of murder.

“Did the people I tortured feel the way I do here? I can feel what the people I tortured felt. Because here my dignity has been destroyed, and then fear comes, right there and then. All the terror suddenly possessed my body. It surrounded me, and possessed me.”

Anwar Congo

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. The film is bookended by the scene in front of the waterfall. What was your initial reaction to this scene? How did it change when you saw this scene again at the end?
2. What was your first impression of Anwar Congo and how did that change over the course of the film? The film was shot over eight years. Do you think he changed through the course of the film?
3. If history is written by the victors, how do we uncover the other stories? Who should be responsible for seeking these other stories?
4. What happens to a nation (or a person) whose history of trauma is perpetually denied? Can there be any hope of reconciliation or wholeness if no one will validate the suffering that was experienced?
5. Do our memories shape who we are, or do we shape our memories to support our desired identities?
6. Are the executioners responsible for how they view themselves when they are treated as national heroes? What kind of society and culture does the government create by shrouding their past and these men in mythology?
7. Anwar and his friends choose to film scenes in the style of American noir and American westerns. What is the effect of this stylization? How are the nightmare scenes different? What about the waterfall scene? Will fantasy grant Anwar an end to his nightmares?
8. When the participants address Joshua, the filmmaker, he responds in their language. What dynamic is revealed between them? What are your feelings toward the filmmaker as he films these old men re-enacting their killings?
9. How much control do the participants have in the movie they are making? Is there some dissonance between the Hollywood movie they hope to create and the actual documentary?
10. How do you feel about children being recruited to act in Anwar’s movie? Oppenheimer doesn’t seem to reject this, though he does interject when Anwar wants his grandsons to watch certain scenes. What is the responsibility and role of the filmmaker in such cases?
11. The film’s co-director, cameramen, and producer list themselves as Anonymous in the credits. Why do they fear being known? Is this film about the tragedy in the past or the trauma that continues today?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- The official language is Indonesian (locally known as Bahasa Indonesia), a variant of Malay, which was the lingua franca used in the archipelago since the first century C.E. (A.D.)
- In Indonesia, THE ACT OF KILLING is called Jagal, which means “Executioner” or “Execution.”
- In the 1930s Dutch East Indies census, ethnic Chinese in Indonesia were registered separately as “foreign orientals.” After Indonesia became independent, citizenship was granted to the ethnic Chinese in 1946, but they still faced difficulties in legalizing their citizenship for some years after.
- Indonesia’s 2010 census reported more than 2.8 million self-identified ethnic Chinese: 1.2 percent of the country’s population.
- Repeatedly, throughout the film, Anwar and his friends say that “gangster” means “free man.” The modern word for gangster in Bahasa Indonesia is ‘preman,’ which comes from the Dutch word ‘vrijman’ (free man). The “free man” did not work for the Dutch East India Company, but was allowed to be in the Indies and trade for the Company. Thus the preman was somewhat independent and given certain liberties to operate outside the normal laws.
- Suharto’s government made a docudrama called The Treachery of G30S/PKI, which is mandatory viewing for students. The film depicts how the Communists orchestrated the coup in which 6 Indonesian army generals were assassinated. This is also taught in the official textbooks. The students are not taught about the mass killings. In 2007, the government burned new textbooks that did not blame the Communists for the coup.
- In 2000, for the first time, U.S. officials admitted that they provided 5,000 names of Communist operatives in Indonesia to the Indonesian army. According to U.S. officials, the names of those killed or captured were crossed off the list.
- Joshua Oppenheimer worked on this film for 8 years. He speaks Bahasa Indonesian.
- Before THE ACT OF KILLING, Oppenheimer and co-director Christine Cynn went to Indonesia to help produce The Globalization Tapes (2003), a documentary made in collaboration with the Independent Plantation Workers Union of Sumatra. Oppenheimer learned that the plantation workers were survivors of the mass killings. Their family had been accused of being pro-communist in 1965. They were terrified of sharing their past and suggested that Oppenheimer speak to the killers instead, since they had nothing to hide and nothing to fear.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film. Give others a chance to experience this powerful documentary.
2. Support Joshua Oppenheimer’s second film on the 1965 Indonesian genocide: [THE LOOK OF SILENCE](#), and sign [the petition](#) telling the U.S. Senate to acknowledge the 1965–66 mass killings and support peace in Indonesia.
3. Buy the memoirs and published testimonies of survivors and relatives of victims. Support the publishers and NGOs who seek to gather more testimonies and protect those who fear about speaking out.
4. Watch the Globalization Tapes online and share it with others. It’s a film made by workers for workers, through a collaboration between the Independent Plantation Workers’ Union of Sumatra (Indonesia), the International Union of Food and Agricultural Workers (IUF), and Vision Machine Film Project.

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.