



## The Look of Silence Discussion Guide

Director: Joshua Oppenheimer

Year: 2014

Time: 103 min

### You might know this director from:

The Globalisation Tapes (2002)

The Act of Killing (2012)

## FILM SUMMARY

In 2001, Joshua Oppenheimer set out to make a documentary about the struggles of Indonesian palm oil workers. Yet the more he understood about Indonesia, the more he understood that an entirely different beast was rearing its head. In his words, “I felt as though I’d wandered into Germany 40 years after the Holocaust, only to find the Nazis still in power.” With this knowledge, he spent the next 10 years investigating Indonesia’s 50-year-old secret.

The first of the resulting films, **THE ACT OF KILLING**, boldly reveals the shocking mentality of the perpetrators of the 1965 Indonesian genocide, who are living as heroes. The follow up, **THE LOOK OF SILENCE**, unbuttons the victims from their caged-in trauma through one Adi Rukun. Born as a consolation to his mother’s grief over the loss of her son Ramli in the anti-communist purge, Adi can no longer live his life in darkening silence as his family and country struggle to swallow the pain and carry on, still under the thumb of the men who committed these acts decades earlier.

With optometry case in hand, Adi confronts his brother’s killers, enduring the awkward, aching aftermath that follows. Faced with the humanity of their long-ago reign of terror, the killers are stunned into edgy ambivalence and frustration as we become uncomfortably aware of the extent of Rukun’s bravery in these confrontations. Yet both Rukun the camera remain, until silence once again reigns. Very little sound is introduced to counteract the sheer beauty of the Indonesian landscape on the screen, as Oppenheimer, calm and collected, allows the veneer to crack as victims, perpetrators, and their families begin to reveal the truth and lies surrounding this long buried history to the world.

## FILM THEMES

By achieving the unconceivable - enabling a victim to directly confront the all-too hidden past - Oppenheimer reopens the wound of a nation, addressing admittance, repentance, and 50 years of injustice.

### FIRST COMES DENIAL...

Having spent the past 50 years living beneath a veil of widely accepted injustice, the status quo of silence is omnipresent. Everyone is in a state of denial, both killers and survivors teetering on the edge of sanity, excused from digesting the events of 1965. Future generations, on the other hand, are being force-fed untruths and the cycle of lies carried on. Yet, once confronted with the horror everyone was quick to deny the accusations, shunt off responsibility. "We did this because America taught us to hate communists," averred Amir, a death squad leader, while yet another simply declared, "Your questions are too deep." Denial has worked this long. Why challenge the silence now?

### ...THEN COMES REGRET?

As long as the killers remain in power, living luxuriously while the survivors remain imprisoned by their grief, everything remains the same. Fear reigns. If no one is judged and no one is held accountable, regret is an inaccessible emotion. And without regret, there can be no forgiveness, no healing. The wounds stay put. If a killer considers himself a hero, if he is granted complete immunity from any sort of punishment and never told that what he did was wrong, what is there to regret? Adi took the first brave step to break the silence, forcing the perpetrators to face up to their past actions, lifting the veil so that the healing process for both the victims and the perpetrators can begin.

### EXPLAINING THE UNEXPLAINABLE

In the name of propagandized politics, regular Indonesians killed their own. Being told that all communists lacked religion, morals, and integrity, inhumane acts were justified, and uncountable people were brutally slain in the name of the military state. Once the blood had dried and the horror faded, how do killers live with the battlefield of images populating their minds? "If we didn't drink human blood, we'd go crazy," explains a death squad leader. As his unknowing daughter listened on, tears fill her eyes. Did such superstitious insanities explain away such horror? Was senility a viable excuse, or did sanity take its exit with the first brutal act?

### THE NATURE OF GRIEF

Without an outlet, grief becomes a pent-up entity barricading an individual from a full life, of which THE LOOK OF SILENCE provides ample proof. Ramli's mother is forever grieving his death, reliving the moments of 50 years gone as if they were yesterday. Not only did the victims suffer in silence, grief is visible everywhere Oppenheimer films, and it takes so little to push the pain buttons of anyone embroiled in the events of 1965. Wives of generals, prison guards, death squad leaders, families of the deceased, those who escaped the machete of death - an entire nation is held hostage to the events of its past. Now that the pain has been acknowledged, it can search for its release.

**"It is up to God to punish those who hurt our friends and families. It is not for us to punish."**

Kemat, survivor

**"It's over. Everything is safe now. The past is past."**

Inong, death squad leader

**"We did this because America taught us to hate communists."**

Amir Siahahan, death squad commander

## FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. Have you seen **THE ACT OF KILLING**? If so, discuss how **THE LOOK OF SILENCE** works as its companion. If you have not seen it, are you interested in watching it?
2. How much did you know about Indonesia prior to watching the film? Had you ever heard of the 1965 genocide?
3. Director Oppenheimer has stated that after releasing both the films, he no longer feels welcome in Indonesia. How do you think he was able to film for 10 years without his intentions being suspected? Why do you think the killers so willing to reveal the facts about their actions?
4. Are there any recurring motifs summoned throughout the film that feed into the film's title, **THE LOOK OF SILENCE**?
5. Define communism. Discuss how you were taught the notion of communism in school. Was/Is communism a good, bad, or neutral term in your community?
6. Do you think the international community was complicit or unaware during the 1965 Indonesian mass killings? What, if anything, should happen now on an international level to address Indonesia's history?
7. Many of the perpetrators of the 1965 Indonesian mass killings are still in positions of power and in Indonesia they are seen historically seen as heroes. Do you believe that history is objective, or do you give weight to the argument that history is written by the winners?
8. Is there anything happening in your community or country now where a minority voice might be being silenced?
9. Is it possible for a survivor of such atrocities to ever truly heal? Does time heal all wounds?
10. Discuss forgiveness. Will Adi Rukun and his family ever be able to forgive Ramli's killers? What has been the most difficult situation in which you have ever had to forgive - or be forgiven?

## NOTES:

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## FILM FACTS:

- Since its world premiere at the 2014 Venice Film Festival, *THE LOOK OF SILENCE* has been met with critical acclaim and granted multiple accolades, including five awards at the Venice Film Festival and a nomination for the Golden Lion, winning an Audience Award at the SXSW Film Festival, Best Nordic Documentary at the Gothenburg Film Festival, and a Peace Film Award at the Berlin International Film Festival.
- Born in Texas, director Joshua Oppenheimer received a BA from Harvard and a PhD from Central St. Martins College of Arts and Design, London. He currently lives in Denmark, where he is a partner at documentary film company Final Cut for Real, and lectures in documentary film at the University of Westminster, London. He received a MacArthur “genius grant” in 2014.
- Survivors of the Indonesian genocide of 1965 are still fighting for their names to be cleared. Anyone accused at that time of being a communist is still banned from working as a teacher, civil servant, or puppet-master – the most respected Indonesian profession.
- Released in 2012, *THE ACT OF KILLING*, won nearly 60 awards and received numerous nominations, including for a 2014 Oscar.
- Since the film’s release, Adi Rukun and his family moved to an undisclosed location in Indonesia, where he has set up an optometry shop.
- Comprised of 17,508 islands, of which 6,000 are inhabited, Indonesia’s population of 252 million makes it the world’s fourth most populous country. 87% of the population practices Islam, followed by Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism. After 350 years of Dutch control, Indonesia declared independence in 1949. Sukarno became the first president in 1945, and held office until he was ousted in 1965 by the military force responsible for the mass killings. General Suharto assumed control at that time and ruled as a dictator until 1998. The first democratic presidential elections were in 2004.
- Director Oppenheimer first went to Indonesia in 2001 to make a documentary about palm oil workers’ struggle to form a union. By collecting footage for that film – “The Globalisation Tapes” (2002) – he learned about the source of fear in the community, extending back to the 1965 anti-communist purge. The name Ramli kept surfacing, as he was one of the only victims to have escaped only to be later killed, serving as proof that this did occur. Oppenheimer returned in 2003 and spent the next 10 years filming.
- In 1965 the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) had around 3 million members.
- The number of people killed in the 1965–66 genocide ranged between 300,000 and 1 million.
- Both *THE ACT OF KILLING* and *THE LOOK OF SILENCE* have been screened in Indonesia.

## WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Share** this film, and watch *THE ACT OF KILLING* the film director Oppenheimer made prior to *THE LOOK OF SILENCE*. His company in Denmark – [Final Cut for Real](#) – produces a whole host of compelling documentaries. Find out more!
2. [Sign the petition](#) to help end the silence and create positive change in Indonesia.
3. **Support** the cause of the [1965 Tribunal](#) – an international people’s tribunal on 1965 crimes against humanity in Indonesia – functioning as a formal human rights court demanding justice for the victims.
4. **Support** [United to End Genocide](#), an international organization working to stop genocide in its tracks.

## 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.**