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The Act of Documenting. Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing*

The main aim of this article is to interrogate the political aesthetics that are at work in Joshua Oppenheimer's documentary *The Act of Killing* (2012) as an effective tool for the construction of national and transnational cultural memory in relation to the slaughter that took place in Indonesia during the Sixties, which resulted in the mass murders of a vast number of Indonesians estimated at around two millions. What we want to argue is that, by addressing what appears to be one of the most dreadful, and yet not well known, let alone represented, massacres of last century, *The Act of Killing* disrupts the dynamics of collective forgetting of a country that never completed a thorough democratization process and where, after ferocious dictatorships and mass killings, the very same perpetrators remain in power. In this spectral context, Oppenheimer's film stands as a unique case, as it is virtually the only voice able to recover such frightening past and interrogate lost memories, while also reassessing the victims' rights and exposing the perpetrators' cruelty but also their shame. It is a work that, through the use of different cinematic genres and textual strategies, represents an aesthetic answer to the emptiness of any judicial, forensic, political, moral, ethical, historical and memorial frame of the killings.

Through a Memory and Trauma Studies perspective, reinforced by a semiotic methodology of textual analysis (Marrone 2011; Pozzato 2001), in the following pages we will make an attempt to describe the effects and the affects prompted by the documentary's voices and images, also as a way to answer further questions, which include: Is there any space for a critical reading of the past when what happened has been long denied? What is the possible role of victims *and* perpetrators in a scenario of silenced traumas and erased memories? And how may the voices of perpetrators be listened to without offending the memories of the dead? Is any form of representation actually possible when only the perpetrators' narrative is legitimized, and access to mainstream media remains restricted?

Joshua Oppenheimer made two films on the Indonesian genocide[1]: *The Act of Killing* (2012) was centred on perpetrators, and *The Look of Silence* (2014) focused more specifically on the perspectives of the victims and survivors. In this article, we examine the first of these two films,

[1] Actually, the original project started with another film, staged at the Snake River, an execution site where, 38 years later, Oppenheimer filmed two perpetrators, Amir Hasa Nasution and Inong Syah, re-acting their murders. Scenes of the filmed encounter between the two aging perpetrators can now be seen in both documentaries.

which took over seven years to be completed, and mixes together a number of different registers, different materials and different cinematic genres. The film includes documentary scenes of contemporary paramilitary rallies, interviews with perpetrators/gangsters and their political referents, re-enactment of torture and interrogation sessions, fantasy scenes, quotes from a variety of cinematic genres - noir, musicals, western - and scenes where the actors re-viewed what has been filmed. As such, *The Act of Killing* is certainly a unique film that deserves to be interrogated in its own right. Before moving to the analysis of the documentary's representational and performative strategies, however, a brief summary of the historical context surrounding the shooting and the actors involved may help clarify what this unique film aims to 'document', and how.

The Indonesian genocide

In the early Sixties, the Indonesian communist party (Partai Kommunis Indonesia, PKI) was the largest party of this persuasion in the world outside the Communist bloc, with more than three million members and around eighteen million followers. However, under the government presided by general Suharto, military and communist forces were balanced very precariously. In the fall of 1965, an organization with alleged ties to the political left - the so-called 30th September movement - assassinated six army generals, but ultimately failed in its attempt to put a revolutionary council in power. Suharto profited from it and, soon after his coup d'état on October 1st 1965, immediately initiated a campaign against the communists, whom he accused of being the force behind the killings, although the real murderers of the generals and their final objectives still remain unclear even today (see Anderson, McVey 1971; Budiardjo 1991; Roosa 2006).

A long-lasting period of ferocious repression followed, accompanied by an equally violent and successful campaign by the army-controlled media to convince the population of communists' presumed atrocities. Famous, in this respect, is the four-hour propaganda film *The Treachery of the September 30th Movement of the Indonesian Communist Party* made in 1984, which was mandatory seeing for schools and families, every year for twenty-four years and until 1998, when Suharto resigned. Suharto's prime aim was to destroy the entire communist organisation through the physical elimination of the largest possible number of its supporters, mostly farmers and villagers, in order to establish the 'New Order' of the military dictatorship. To further legitimize the massacre in the popular imagination, the army recruited "both people who had reason to fear

communist power and people who wanted to establish clear anti-communist credentials in troubled times" (Cribb and Ford, 2010, online ref.).

The massacres that followed were what the majority of scholars now classify among the most systematic genocides of the twentieth century (Melvin 2018; Robinson 2018). Indeed, in order to accomplish such a mass extermination, the military forces alone were not sufficient, and civilians had to be involved on a large scale. These were not professional killers and once the massacres were over they returned to their 'normal' lives which for some of them - and in particular those we will encounter in Oppenheimer's film - were made of extortion, blackmail, and 'protection rackets' to the detriment of Chinese small businesses.

But what is probably the most striking feature of the Indonesia case, one which makes it peculiar and different from any other more or less recent genocide, is that the perpetrators remained in power and the New Order controlled the country's political life for more than thirty years. Nothing changed much even after Suharto's resignation, as he was forced to abandon power because of the high level of corruption that set apart his government and his closest entourage, rather than on account of the crimes for which he was responsible. No complete process of democratization took place (Bahkti 2004: 195; Sen and Hill 2007; Mietzner 2012), no memorials or sites were dedicated to the memory of the victims, no trials, special tribunals, or other forms of transitional justice were established. None of the authors of the slaughters were prosecuted; instead, military officers were promoted or entered the ranks of government, and civilian perpetrators were able to benefit from a regime of total impunity and often even benefited from material advantages and higher positions in society (Anderson 2012). The only existing narrative of that period is the one written by the victors; the victims are either dead, or are still, even today, silenced by fear. This predicament is explicitly mentioned in *The Act of Killing* when, during the filming of a real television interview to the perpetrators selected by Oppenheimer, one of them - Anwar Congo - is asked by the cheerful moderator if he feared revenge from the victims' relatives. Congo answers: "They can't. When they raise their heads, we wipe them out!". The audience in the television studio applauds enthusiastically.

Witnessing acts of violence

Oppenheimer's film has received over sixty awards, including Berlin and BAFTA, and was nominated for the 86th Academy Awards in the documentary category. Regardless of its international awards, *The Act of Killing* is of interest for a number of reasons, since it raises, first of

all, questions of semiotic concern on the issues of representation, performance and violence, not only challenging the usual stereotype of the impossibility of representation in the case of extreme violence, but also choosing perpetrators as witnesses. As a revised theory on trauma and its possible representation is consolidating (Buelens, Durrant and Eagleston 2014), there still exists a widely shared assumption among Memory and Trauma Studies scholars that typically consider a traumatic event as a failed experience that cannot be represented. Hence, how does one witness an event that by definition is without a witness, as the only possible one is the dead? (Demaria 2012).

According to Trauma Studies, such a crisis of testimony primarily overwhelms, and even annihilates, the "subject" involved as a supposed witness, a subject whose words are inhabited by the awareness of a radical loss of the self. When the subject speaks, his/her story is but a re-enactment of the traumatic event which, as such, remains a failed experience, that is, something that cannot be fully worked through: "the event can only be experienced in the repeated acts of re-appropriation performed by the subject [...] each re-awakening of the trauma remains a traumatic re- awakening: in respect to reality it always comes too early or too late" (Busch 2007: 550; our translation). A trauma cannot, in other words, become knowledge, and its repetitions do not imply an overcoming or an objectification of the event: on the contrary, they must be understood as a sort of acting out which interrupts the very rules of representation. The truth of the past can be performatively transmitted to a community only thanks to the suffering of whoever recognizes and welcomes the story of the victim, thus collecting his/her legacy and becoming, through the act of hearing, a witness (Felman, Laub 1992). This means that the testimony of trauma appears, paradoxically, as ethically necessary but in the end impossible: one must bear witness, but cannot really describe what happened, because trauma in itself is a crisis of representation (Caruth 1996s and 1996b). However, *The Act of Killing* can also be seen as a visual meditation on this very impossibility, turning it into a peculiar representation which chooses to convene the voices and the bodies of the perpetrators and their performance of violence, turning them into very particular agents of memory.

Jean Luc Godard said once that "forgetting extermination is part of extermination" (in Didi-Huberman 2004: 4), alluding to the ethical and political functions of remembrance that this documentary tries to exercise. Even though the film's director and its production are not Indonesian, and neither *The Act of Killing* nor *The Look of Silence* were ever officially released in Indonesian theatres, since they were banned by Indonesia's national Film Censorship Institute,

both had a huge impact on many sectors of the Indonesian population. Special screenings were organized for film producers and directors, artists, human rights defenders, journalists, actors, educators and historians among other groups. In this respect, *The Act of Killing* reassessed the rights not only of the victims, but also of memory itself, and of the very possibility of a historical account of a violent past. Although a documentary certainly cannot substitute a process of democratization, it might very well help by both demonstrating and challenging the possibility of a political aesthetic response *in the absence* of such a process, at least when it comes to the acknowledgment of past atrocities, and to the possibility of a shared public memory.

Documenting absence between reality and fiction

It is precisely the difficulties of a democratisation process in Indonesia that raise some crucial semiotic questions in relation to the very act of documenting. When we speak about semiotic questions we refer to meaning-making processes, that is to the study of how verbal, visual, and audio-visual languages function in order to produce signifying practices; and how these practices – as cultural objects like the film we are analysing – demand to be interpreted, that is how they might produce certain meanings, and *not* others (see, amongst all, Eco 1979). As in the case of a film, how is are the text and its languages structured? What is the narrative that is told, and through which form, which point of view, and with reference to which discursive genres and topoi (Basso Fossoli 2003; Casetti, Di Chio 1990)? This methodological framework - that, in itself, interrogates semio-aesthetic processes and the ways they are inscribed in a text - allows us to suggest possible answers to broader political questions, such as: *How* it is possible to document, and *what* is it possible to document of an event whose traces have been cancelled and removed, of which there are no reports, or alternative narratives to those of the perpetrators, and whose victims are dead or threatened to silence?

Oppenheimer's answer is a highly provocative one, running counter to the usual aesthetics of most contemporary documentaries, although, as we will see later, he was also inspired by some of the most thought-provoking and innovative examples, such as Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* and Rythi Panh's *S21- the Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*. The filmmaker decided to stage the slaughters with the very same perpetrators as actors in a fictional movie, re-enacting the actions of torture and murder, which they actually had carried out in reality. The perpetrators believed they were shooting a real film on what they did during the 1965-66 massacres, a cinematic love story which

even had a title: *Arsan and Aminah*. A poster of this non-existent film is shown in Oppenheimer's own documentary, during an interview of Anwar in a television program in 2007, when Oppenheimer was making *The Act of Killing*.

Representing vs Performing

Through this 'film-within-the film' narrative device, voice is given directly to the perpetrators, making them perform and, literally, stage the past. However, here *perform* has to be interpreted in the two senses of the word, the one related to theatrical and cinematic acting, the other to the linguistic sense of "performative act", developed by the philosopher of language John Austin (1962). According to Austin a performative act is a linguistic form that by its very utterance *does* something, realizes an action, producing an effective change in the state of the world. Austin's idea has long since developed and has been extended to theorize the possible impacts of texts and their effect on the world. Amongst not only scholars of semiotics, but also discursive analysis and media studies researchers, texts such a documentary film are, in themselves, forms of actions that shape cultures (Lorusso 2015). Representations, as in all practices of witnessing that attempt at working through traumatic memories, all of them now filtered and translated through the ever changing cultural and media scape – intervene in the very meaning situations of violence are given, in the post-memories they trigger and in the ways they are transmitted.

This second interpretation is advocated by Oppenheimer when he claims that historical discourse can be a way to "exercise a power":

> Eschewing an epistemology of representation, we avoid considering historical narration as mediation of a past that can be made coherently and fully present; instead we consider historical narrative as a performance whose staging produces effect. It is these historical and contemporary effects that are our primary concern here. (...) It is less a matter of producing effective counter-*representations* than intervening with counter-*performances*, that is, interventions capable of countering the spectral powers of history as terror. (Oppenheimer and Uwemedimo 2014: 290-291).

As it has been noticed by Swedler (2014: 245 Kindle position), even the very title of the film reflects this double reading, since it evokes both the action, the real execution of the deed of killing, and the play-acting of a role. Similarly, also the word 'actor' can be read both as a performer in a representation, or as an historical agent, a subject of doing. In its durable performative aspect, the film is not only about the past, but has effects on the present too.

If remembering has always something to do with the present, since it makes the past actual and alive, the performative character of *the Act of Killing* adds something even more powerful to memory, showing the persistence of the trauma and linking together the past and the present, the act of documenting and the act of watching.[2] In this way the re-enactment of the past, problematic though it may be, can operate as an active agent in democratisation processes. The result of such a choice is a highly complex operation of a *metalinguistic kind*, which goes far beyond the disclosure of a terrible and removed past to become a theoretical investigation on the medium itself, the power of cinematic and textual mediation, and at the end also query on what a documentary is, along with its semiotic status and, ultimately, what it means to document.

What is real?

Joshua Oppenheimer's political and aesthetic answer to a non-consolidated, and still very much stagnating, democratisation process favoured by "non reformist political elites" (Mietzner 2012) thus becomes a meta-narrative investigation on the possible forms of representation, challenging not only the dominant national narrative, but also the very possibility of making a documentary. *The Act of Killing* is based on a complex intertwining of different fictional and documentary narrative strategies, blurring the borders between reality and fiction, in a constitutive ambiguity about the cinematic genre to which it belongs.

An estrangement effect results from the shifting of different levels of 'reality', as it is staged from the very first scenes: the movie opens on a quite surrealistic and musical stage where, from an enormous fantasy construction in the form of a fish, exits a series of female dancers who start singing and dancing as if they were in a cheap version of a Hollywood musical. Two main figures are on the stage: a man dressed in black, who will turn out to be Anwar Congo, the main character of the film, and a man dressed as a woman, in a very coloured dress and heavy makeup, who is the other main character Herman Koto. In such a totally explicitly fictional stage, they sing "This is not a fiction!".

Immediately after such a surrealistic scene, the titles appear, projected onto the background of still photograms representing first urban images of a run-down city street (that we will discover to be Medan where the documentary was filmed), then a very modern cylindrical

[2] It can also be said that the film refers to the present in that it describes today's Indonesia, not only making reference to the actual political situation but also showing how the extermination of leftists, workers, trade unions and political associations opened the way to global capitalism and the law of a ferocious free market. In an interview with Raillan Brooks in the Village Voice, Oppenheimer claimed that *The Act of Silence* is not so much about a distant killing on the other side of the world, but about "the brutal underbelly of global capitalism" (Oppenheimer 2013) .

commercial building with advertising for a fruit juice and a McDonald's hamburger bar. Over these significantly contrasting images of Third World poverty and capitalistic wealth, a long text scrolls narrating the historical events that happened in Indonesia from 1965 onward. From the very beginning, the two registers of fiction and truth appear intertwined and blurred. Their sequence is also significant: if the first images are blatantly fictional and almost oniric, the written words of the slowly scrolling explanatory text with its realistic background operate as a discursive frame for the whole movie, setting the historical, and truthful, perspective under which the film has to be read.

Like the song of Congo, the title frames too suggest that 'this is not a fiction', although it is constructed as a fictional storyline: *The Act of Killing* tells the story of the production of a (fictional) movie - hence its meta-narrative nature - on what happened (in reality) fifty years earlier. Historical reality is here staged as a fictional representation, performed by non-fictional characters, since the actors are the real protagonists of the historical facts that are fictionally re-enacted. Instead of documenting reality through historical sources or footage as in more traditional documentaries, a representation is performed by non-fictional actors that re-enact their own real experience. In a number of passages in the movie the actors-perpetrators underline this element, explicitly claiming that "this is a true story. Everything has to be true".

At the same time the fictional nature of the 'true' representation is emphasised: in almost all the re-enacted scenes of violence, torture and killing, the cinematic device of film-making is constantly exhibited showing the fictional construction of the film-within-the-film stratagem: we can see the camera, the backstage, the clapperboard etc. A chiasmatic relationship is thus established between the fictionality of the representation and the truth of what is represented. In the re-enacting scenes of torturing and killing, perpetrators disguise themselves as victims, and are fictionally killed in precisely the same way real victims were killed in reality by them. Koto voices this paradoxical knot in the most explicit form when he says: "I killed in real life. There has never been a movie that did it, they were only fiction. No movie was real. We did it in reality."

From the eyes of the perpetrators

Despite its international recognition, *The Act of Killing* has been also object of many controversies, first of all for its being centred almost exclusively on the perpetrators. Oppenheimer's decision to give voice to the perpetrators while making those of the victims almost completely absent has been severely criticized as condescension and manipulation (see Cribb 2013). It could be answered to this criticism that, after all, the second film dedicated to the Indonesia genocide, *The Look of*

Silence (2014), is entirely from the perspective of the victims and survivors. Not only that, but it is well known that Oppenheimer originally started his project with a community of survivors, but the situation was still so difficult and dangerous for them, that the survivors themselves were reluctant to talk to him and suggested that Oppenheimer talked to the paramilitary leaders responsible for the mass killings, who had better knowledge on what had really been done.

In any case, the question remains: to what extent is it acceptable to give voice to the perpetrators, making them the main actors of the script? Is there not a risk, in such a move, of legitimizing and indirectly supporting, or even advertising, their actions? Can perpetrators voice their narrative without being confronted openly by the victims, their reactions, emotions and pain? This is all the more so, given that in Oppenheimer's movie the perpetrators exhibit an almost obscene jubilation, laughing and showing, at least on the surface, no concern whatsoever for their victims.

However, other readings are possible, and the film's message might be more complex and subtle than that. First of all, the movie is so disturbing and thought-provoking that it is hard to see it as presenting the perpetrators' perspective unproblematically. Precisely their (apparent) lack of any remorse or afterthought on what they did, together with their display of totally incongruous emotional reactions such as laughing, dancing and singing, are responsible for a strong effect of distancing and estrangement that challenges the spectator's own stance. But the most powerful estrangement effect is obviously due to the decision to have the perpetrators re-enact in a fictional form what they did in reality: the acts of killing and torturing are carefully reproduced on the stage of the film-within-the-film, with the most obsessive attention to the simulation of even the smallest detail, included a blatantly false make up of blood and injuries in the perpetrators impersonating victims.

Such a fictional re-making of those terrible events was also criticized and questioned, although, in some ways, it is precisely such a re-enactment that makes the genocide real. Not only that, but the very act of re enacting in such a detailed way the same actions performed in the past could be seen as a form of confession, although of a very particular form, a confession performed mainly with and through the body, rather than words. The very last scene of the movie is particularly significant in this regard; after the last recollection of violent acts, Anwar Congo is shaken by extremely violent and prolonged retching, that seem like yelling and screaming. The body appears to be the only place where it is possible to take charge and, somehow, assume responsibility for what has been done, in the absence of any mental process of conscious thinking.

Meaning as such is thus embodied in the most literal sense: what is not said in word, is shown in the bodies. As is well known from the trauma theories we mentioned above, trauma is precisely what exceeds the possibility of being mentalized, of being elaborated as an abstract function reaching access to consciousness. Traumatic events are foreclosed from any process of semiotisation, that is they cannot make sense but merely represent themselves in form of repetitive fixations on the body or in dreams. Indeed, on some occasions Congo mentions the fact that "phantoms" appear to him, and in one scene these spectral presences are represented as monsters that bring to mind the imagery of a horror movie. The body and the oniric realm, that is to say the hallucinatory moments he claims to experience, appear to be the only places where the terrible crimes committed can be effectively approached and, perhaps, even confronted.

Finally, most critics objected (Sweedler 2014) to the absence of an explicit voice of the director in the movie, and the consequent absence of any form of condemnation of the perpetrators, or an ethical and political judgment on what they did. We will discuss in the next paragraph the first of these possible objections, since we will show how the director is continuously present in an indirect way, through his cinematic enunciation. As for the lack of moral evaluation, in our view this is an essential part of the peculiar meta-discourse on documenting that this intriguing film aims to perform. Unlike any other documentary we are more accustomed to, *The Act of Killing* does not sanction the deeds, it rather multiplies references to cinematic practice itself, and frames the narrative of Indonesian genocide within a complex weave of other references, of other movies, of other genres.

The 'genres' of killing

Just as it plays with cinematic genres, *The Act of Killing* also plays, above all, with the rules of the macro-genre of documentary and nonfiction-films (Austin and De Jong 2008; Nichols 2005; Rosen 2001). It does so by questioning not only the ways in which, as a genre, it might restore traces of reality, but also with how it may intervene in the revision of a nation's cultural memory and history.

Performing and counter-performing

We have already commented on how the director clearly rejects what he himself labels as an "epistemology of representation", whereby what is filmed constitutes a kind of testimony that aims at a "truthful" reconstruction of what happened. The kind of epistemology Oppenheimer refuses is summed up in the idea that documentary or cinematic representations may convey

"what really happened": what is at stake in this mimetic conception of representation is whether an image is more or less honest, or seeks to be more or less true to "real facts", aiming at the reproduction of an ultimate truth. On the contrary, instead of creating a linear and consistent narrative that should represents the facts in a supposedly coherent and chronological way, Oppenheimer prefers to engage in "counter-performances" which - as we will try to demonstrate - inhabit what Susannah Radstone (2010) calls the "transitional space" between the *inside* (the film as a text constructed in order to obtain particular semiotic effects) of a film, and its *outside*, the world it is supposed to 'document', in this case both the past genocide and the present political and historical context from which it is told. What we are trying to retrace is how this film produces effects – as in the above mentioned Austin's idea of performativity - that make several forms of agency possible for its viewers in relation to the historical event that it is meant to counter-perform, and the history of violence that it is meant to both re-present and evoke in order for it to be publicly 'seen' for the first time.

The repeated counter-performances and re-enactments of killing that punctuate the film are meant to appear as a routine. They are not the depiction or the description of a *particular* killing of one particular victim, but of the *genres of killing* the perpetrators were imitating in a rather graphic register. As the director explains shortly after having clarified the effects that he wanted to obtain with this project, his aim was to produce a text capable of countering the spectral power of a traumatic history:

> Even the performances that seem most graphic appear not to be rendered as singular explications of specific events, but rather…*as rehearsals of genres whose register is the graphic*. (Oppenheimer and Uwemedimo 2014: 293, our italics).

A mixed Imaginary of violence

As a whole, the film is thus a cunning juxtaposition of different cinematic genres recalled by the perpetrators themselves, such as that of 1960s Hollywood gangsters' movies. Anwar and his partner were indeed "movie gangsters" who, before the massacres, were ordinary thugs who controlled the black market of film tickets, and used the cinema theatres as a base for their criminal activities. Yet, they not only liked cinema, they used it to feed their own imagination. The money they collected during the genocide, often by blackmailing the victims before they killed them, was used to buy fine gangster-like garments and hats, cars and booze, in order to fashion themselves after the movie stars they considered as their role models. Moreover, this genre not

only offered a 'style', it suggested ways to kill. Anwar Congo loved and admired these movies so much that he 'copied' from them a quick and smooth way of eliminating his victims with a metal wire. We are shown this in one of the first sequences of the film when, in an abandoned small detention centre located just in front of a cinema theatre that used to show American films - the former "blood office", as Anwar calls it - he re-enacts how he murdered "communists", employing a sharp metal wire to slash their throats from behind.

By underlining how Anwar's own act of killing is 'borrowed' from black and white Hollywood images, this documentary, and the whole of Oppenheimer's project,[3] questions the semiotic role played by cinematic images in the ways in which political violence is not only perceived and, also, remembered, but also in how it is actually enacted and, as with the scene quoted above, *rehearsed*. How is the imagination of the perpetrators forged, along with that of the survivors? In forcing us to see the fictional 'origin' of the actual act of killing, as Anwar rehearses it again and again in order to be filmed, the documentary urges the spectator to interrogate the limits or, else, the possibilities of its own images and the performance they show as *another kind of textual evidence* for the revision of a history of collective violence that should serve the present, along with its future developments. The re-enactment of their killing is indeed live, but "in as much as this past threatens to return, the re-enactment is a preview". (Oppenheimer and Uwemedimo 2012: 294)

It must be said that *The Act of Killing* is not the first documentary to do this, since the actual power of cinematic images has been at the core of the works of many a directors of "post-traumatic cinema" (Hirsch 2004), such as Claude Lanzmann and Rithy Panh, to whom Oppenheimer (2012) himself has referred to several times in his writings. As anticipated, both in Lanzmann's *Shoah* and in Panh's *S21- the Khmer Rouge Killing Machine,* we are shown either a survivor of the Holocaust (the famous barber shop sequence in *Shoah*), or a group of perpetrators (the former guards of the S-21 prison) re-enacting what they did, albeit with some telling differences. In *Shoah* Abraham Bomba recalls how, as a former barber, he was forced to cut the hair of women and children just before they entered the gas chamber; and he does so as he cuts the hair of a customer in a staged barbershop. The Khmer Rouge perpetrators, instead, re-perform their interrogation techniques and the ways they abused the prisoners in the now empty spaces of

[3] It should always be borne in mind that *The Act of Killing* is part of a bigger project that includes not only the already quoted *The Look of silence,* but also an investigation into the role of cinematic images in the actual performance of violence, as testified by Brink Ten and Oppenheimer (2012), an edited volume of essays that engage with other examples of collective violence and their cinematographic rendering.

S-21. However, their re-enactments are not rehearsals which, as we see in *The Act of Killing*, produce counter-performances capable of revealing the cinematic and cultural legacy of an imagery of violence, with all the implications these images and their cinematic genres may have for actual acts of violence. As Oppenheimer states: "One consequence of imagining the trauma of genocide as inevitably exceeding the cinematic image is to neglect the implication of that image in genocide itself" (Brink Ten and Oppenheimer 2012: 2). Moreover, this is a legacy that comes from that very West whose form of capitalism was exported to Indonesia, and which thrived thanks no least to the genocide.

At the time of shooting, Anwar Congo and his henchman Hermann still call themselves "movie theatre gangsters", recruited to exterminate the communists that, in turn, were the ones who did not want "American capitalist movies" to be distributed, as Congo laments in the documentary. They imitated and still imitate the violence imagined by Hollywood and performed by immortal heroes, but they also mix it with their local culture and the ways it translates Western genres into graphic Gothic horror comics and kitschy melodrama. This results in performances that are partly based on older imagery and Indonesian culture, and partly on fantasies that were not available fifty years ago—with the contemporary cinema market having blurred the boundaries between the genres of the heroic war film, the gangster movie and the horror and splatter film.

In addition to this mix of genres, the documentary surprises us with sequences, placed at the beginning and at the end of the film almost as opening and closing shots, that quote the genre of the musical and Indonesian kitschy melodramas. In the mind of its actor and "producers", the musical scenes are meant to represent the after-life of the victims, whom the perpetrators (Congo and Herman above all) believe to have sent straight to Heaven, with torture and killing paradoxically turning into an act of "salvation" that they re-perform as victims. It is Congo that, playing the already dead victim now happily enjoying his own Paradise, sings and dances near a waterfall surrounded by young female dancers in traditional costumes. One of these young women applies a golden medal to Anwar's torso as a reward for "having sent them to heaven". In the same sequence there stands, attempting a clumsy dance, the large and overweight Herman, dressed as a communist woman appearing, as Anderson aptly sums up: "with the depressing glitzy outfit of a well-off, middle-age transvestite in a TV competition […] *there is a kind of despair at work*" (Anderson 2012, pp. 283,4; our emphasis). The whole of the documentary thus becomes an elaborated inter-textual parody that reveals the perpetrators' mixed and perturbing imagination, their rhetoric of violence and, also, their hopes of salvation (with no atonement).

Strategies of estrangement, acts of presence: the gaze of the film

However, the perpetrators are not at all good performers of any genre of their choosing. In the pathetic musical scene re-edited with saturated colours, as well as during the interrogations and acts of torture they re-enact, there are frequent stops due to the poor quality of their acting, or to their constant grinning and giggling. The editing of *The Act of Killing* opts to show all these poor shots and halts, thus creating a peculiar rhythm, a *montage* of the film that dwells on the perpetrators' mistakes and clumsiness, on their lack of competence both as film-makers, since they are made to appear as co-directors of the film-within-the-film, and as actors. Oppenheimer does not attempt to actually direct them: he lets them play, filming their repeated rehearsals; yet he is there, watching and recording, his camera "witnessing" the perpetrators' re-staged banal and meaningless cruelty, or their fragile belief of a heaven in hell. Going back to Oppenheimer's idea of the iterability of performances, the overall effect is that of a theatricality conditioned by a *citational logic* (the way they killed, and the way they reward themselves) that is suspended between a particular past (this is what we did), and an actual present (this is what we are doing), to explore *what has been done*.

The montage, in documentary cinema, is not merely an editing of different sequences that are put in a sort of "cause and effect" order, but a way to "clarify" their meanings (Nichols 2004; Breschand 2010). The citational logic of *The Act of Killing* hence becomes a powerful meaning-making strategy through which we, as spectators, are pushed to engage with what made, and who made, that past possible. Moreover, through the quotations of different genres and their translations and juxtapositions, the narrative developed by the film is fragmented and wilfully incoherent: the same scene is often split with the insertion of images shot in different places, with different people, sometimes, even, in different years. As viewers, not only are we unable to keep up with the plot of the film-within-the-film, let alone the chronology of the whole text, but we are also confused about the time certain scenes have been shot – which present is being filmed? – and about the identity of the main characters. In some of the documentary's sequences, Anwar Congo is relatively young and his hair brown; in some others, which are not edited in a chronological order, he looks much older and his hair is white, bringing us to question whether he is the same person that we have seen in the previous sequence. Thus, by playing with the temporality of the film and its montage, Oppenheimer manages to counter-perform the perpetrators' performance, which has never been, and will never be, a coherent narrative. This is the way in which cinema may become not only a means to interpret and even rediscover histories of political violence, but

also a “tool in itself, an actor that is part of those histories” (Ten Brink and Oppenheimer 2012: 3). *The Act of Killing* becomes a tool that reveals and denounces the perpetrators’ rhetoric, an agent that performs its own counter-rhetoric. With this particular editing and mixing of genres, the film hence explores the tension between cinema’s potential to ‘document’ violence and, at the same time, its proclivity to stylize historical rendition.

In sum, all these strategies are able to deconstruct, we believe, what the same director has called the “deceptively transparent genres of authentic testimonies and historical realism” (Ten Brink and Oppenheimer 2012: 4), opening up the possibilities of that cinematic “transitional” space mentioned above, that is the space that at the same time joins and distances a film and what and how it films, and a space that multiplies the “inside” of the text as a semiotic object - in this case the mixing of styles and genres of this documentary- as it calls into question its “outside”, from the political and cultural legacy of the past to the on-going impunity of the killers. *The Act of Killing* makes *the perpetrators play the victims of their own performance*: a non mimetic representation they cannot control and whose effects of despair, of failed illusion of grandeur, and, ultimately, of terror and violence, are there for the viewers to experience in their own bodies and emotions.

Visions and voices: from represented spaces to spaces of representation

Nevertheless, the film’s montage and mixing of genres are not the sole devices employed in this cinematic rendition of a traumatic past. The absence of a voice-over, of an authoritative disembodied speaker who could anchor the meanings and guide our interpretation of the perpetrators’ performances and confessions, along with the lack of archival footage, is balanced by other visual and auditory strategies, which are able to create a peculiar subject position for the viewer to inhabit. We find them in the few, yet poignant, scenes during which we do hear Oppenheimer’s voice (we never actually see him) interacting with the actors and posing tricky questions, such as “What do you think Karma is?”; or: “Do you think the offspring of the communists will appreciate this film?”; in the very frequent employment of mirrors and screen that multiply the cinematic space and its viewpoints; and in the use of sounds and the soundtrack.

Amongst the sequences in which we do hear the director’s comments, a telling one is that of a dialogue with Adi Zulkadry, the least playful of all the perpetrators, who has come back to his hometown to “act” in the movie but who, since his arrival, declares several times that “we should

not talk", or admits "we were the bad ones". Adi is the one who is more inclined to speak about – and not rehearse or perform – the past, for example when he points out that "it is the government that should ask for forgiveness, not us", or when he voices his concerns and doubts about the whole endeavour: "This movie will show that we are cruel", even though "in order to kill we just need an excuse, and if the excuse is a reward, then to kill is right". As Adi and the director drive back from one of the film's locations, he tells Oppenheimer - whom we can't see but from whose semi-subjective point of view we witness the scene - how important it is for all of the perpetrators to maintain a public image that avoids any truth about the past: "It is a question of image, a question of history… not everything that is true must be public". Here the director does intervene with what is probably the closest he gets to being an "interviewer". He asks this "gangster": "Adi, you say that it was a war, but what do you think of war crimes? What do you think they are?"; and Adi, with the strength and convictions of his long impunity, replies: "Definitions are given by the victors", reiterating that "not everything that is true is good". Yet Oppenheimer presses him: "and what if they bring you to The Hague?". "They won't", he replies, and besides, "I don't feel guilty". Even if Adi's defiance and belief that "what is true is not always good" is not further sanctioned by the director, his convictions have nonetheless been disclosed; the question "what is a war crime?" has been posed, and it lingers, suspended. Adi might not feel guilty, but we, as spectators, do feel that indeed he is.

Hence, although Oppenheimer never appears on stage, and, apparently, his role is not that of the historian nor of the documentarist, but that of a *mere* film-maker, the film's voice resides in what we argued are the potentialities and the limits of cinematic images, in what they make visible, and how such a 'visibility' interrogates both the perpetrators and the viewers. We think here of visibility as not only the field explored by the artist's vision (the "as far as I can see") but also the network of knowledge, the examination and the selection of the *screen images* that organize vision. The film achieves a multiplication of perspectives, and its distancing from the perpetrators' deeds, thanks to the reiteration of semiotic figures (mirrors, screens) of reflected and reflecting images that, instead of augmenting the clarity of what is rendered visible, interpose themselves between our vision and any possible certainty of truth.

Moreover, the perpetrators' "need to show" – as both Anwar and Herman state at the beginning of the movie – that "we need the people to see", so as to remember how powerful they were - is distributed among different screens and reflecting surfaces. We see Anwar and his

friends watching the recording of the scenes they have just shot, with a peculiar *mise-en-abîme*, a reflexive strategy where the content of a medium is the medium itself, of a film-within-a-film that is being watched within the frame of another film. And we also contemplate in more than one sequence Anwar looking at himself in the mirror, questioning his own image, haunted by his own ghosts. We catch his gaze, even if he does not know that there will be spectators looking at him outside his *true* fiction or, better, in the utter r*eality* of his fiction, and in his crumbling need to show. In these close-up shots, one of which is inserted at the beginning of the documentary, it is as if Anwar doubts his own image, and the very history he wants so much to perform. This is what the artistic vision underlying the entire film slowly brings us to question, since, as Adi made clear, "a question of image is a question of history". It is precisely the stylized fictional history the perpetrators are performing that haunts Anwar, as it haunts us as his audience. And it is not by chance that, speaking about his own ghosts, he also happens to say: "I am watched by the dead man's eyes, the eyes that I did not close once he died". Those eyes are provided by the film overall construction of a particular gaze: we are not put in the position of the victims, and we can return our gaze to Congo as spectators, or at least we can inhabit it for a moment, becoming witnesses.

Finally, the 'voice' of this film is hidden in the use of the soundtrack and the sounds, that is to say in how the extra-diegetic and the intra-diegetic music and noises are played one against the other. A telling example is when Congo is playing Amir, the communist male victim of the film-within-the-film, and is eventually 'killed' by Herman, who plays an executioner who beheads him and then eats his organs. The fictional Herman eventually gets bored by having to repeat the shooting, and Anwar's corpse is substituted by that of a mannequin buried in the ground, with a smashed head exuding chunks of brain for real monkeys to eat. The actors' nervous laughter, and the monkeys' screams that we hear at the beginning of the sequence, recede in the background, and a soundtrack made of perturbing electronic and dissonant extra-diegetic sounds begins, a disturbing musical comment that takes us away from fiction and into "this is what was done": a corpse buried in the ground for animals to enjoy. The text here doubles its effects, underlining the harrowing 'reality' of the violence of that image. A distance is created, as the camera moves from a close-up to a medium shot, travelling back and forth between focused attention on the represented space (what is shown), and a more pondered view of the space of representation (how it is shown: from which "point of viewing and hearing"), and the ways in which the latter frames the subjects and their acts. When Anwar watches the footage of this sequence with his nephew (again the use of a screen within a screen), he first declares how proud he feels about the

final cinematic rendering of his own killing, but then he wonders whether his actual victims felt as bad as he did when he was shooting it: “I really felt as if I was dying”. Here is another one of the few moments in which Oppenheimer does intervene, since we hear his voice responding: “they felt much worse than you did, because that was not a movie”.

Conclusions

The film that indeed was, and is, *The Act of Killing* produces a pervasive sense of estrangement and displacement that questions the spectator's own stance. It is precisely this displacement that assumes the role of moral sanction in Oppenheimer's movie, since it reproduces in the act of vision the lack of sense of the very act of killing. Generally speaking, a moral judgment has the function to give the necessary interpretative frame to the facts, to put them into perspective providing the values system that enables the spectators to read them in the 'correct' way. This is impossible in *The Act of Killing*: a similar value frame is absent, and it is substituted by a different kind of frame, which is not a moral evaluation, but a series of references to other cinematic genres, and to cinematic technique itself.

The perpetrator's voice is not put into perspective through an explicit moral evaluation, but rather through a multiplicity of textual references to different cinematic *genres* that operate as a number of framing devices displacing the spectator's point of vision. What are we really seeing? The spectators are seriously disoriented, challenged in their normal practice of watching and making sense of a film through a well-known system of *genres* and corresponding narrative structures and inscribed viewers. The plot is confusing, the narrative lacks a coherent structure, temporality is altered, reality and fictional re-enactment continuously overlap. It is precisely this juxtaposition of genres, this absence of linear narrative and temporality, and consequently the subtle differences of rhythm and pace in the montage, that force us to look at and discover an artistic vision that frames not only the past but the very *nature* of the perpetrators, the obscenity of what they did, their impunity. What they believed was going to be *their* film indeed never existed as such, but it served the purpose of a documentary that provides the audience with an effective aesthetic and political *act of showing* that, as Annette Hill *et al.* (2018) have argued, poses an ethical challenge for audiences around the world, forcing them to become engaged with both the Indonesian genocide and the overall possibility of representing violence and documenting genocides. Through a network of underground distributors and social media, *The Act of Killing* has now also been viewed by millions of Indonesians, notwithstanding the Government’s

and the many anti-communist organisations' on-going attempts to stop its distribution, succeeding in its intent to stand as a political-aesthetic response to the absence of a public memory, and to the presence of a national narrative bolstered by bias and fabrications presented as facts.

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