The study of the 1965-1966 killings in Indonesia, and for that matter the study of the country’s politics more generally, will never be the same again with the recent release of the documentary film *The Act of Killing* (21 August 2012, Toronto International Film Festival), directed by Joshua Oppenheimer with co-director Christine Cynn. The film’s protagonists are leading figures in the local paramilitary organisation Pemuda Pancasila [Pancasila Youth], who were responsible for the killings of hundreds of real or suspected communists in North Sumatera in 1965-1966, as part of a nationwide program that took approximately one million lives. Although testimonies and published analyses of the event have slowly emerged, it is one of those topics that most people have some knowledge about, but prefer not to discuss even in private.

Ariel Heryanto

THE RESULT OF SEVEN YEARS of hard work, involving many hundreds of hours of footage, the documentary radically challenges some of the old and familiar assumptions in the study of politics and violence. It also demonstrates an ingenious method of documentary filmmaking that will be of special interest to students of media studies, history, visual ethnography, and the anthropology of media. Undoubtedly, human rights activists and institutions will have a deep interest in the way this film penetrates the entrenched impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators of one of the worst massacres in modern history. Some of the leaders of the groups responsible for the massacre still hold government offices at local and national levels today.

All currently existing films6 with a focus on the 1965 killings and its aftermath (as distinct from those that present the same events only in the background of their story)7 are dedicated to giving a voice to the survivors and members of their families, occasionally with sympathetic comments from experts. These films have broken the general onscreen silence that has lasted for over a quarter of a century. To my knowledge, a total of 16 such documentaries have been produced, most of them in small circles, by individual survivors, local non-governmental organisations8 and filmmakers,9 in addition to three titles by foreign filmmakers.10

All these documentaries show the ordeals of the victims and the various forms of their victimisation. Made with low budgets and very basic technology, most of these locally produced documentaries feature talking heads from among the survivors and eye witnesses. Frail and aged-looking women appear in many of these films, speaking emotionally about their endless agony and presenting their condemnations against the past injustice and the continued failure on the part of the successive governments to acknowledge it.11

Individually and collectively, these films have merits of their own, and their importance to the fledgling efforts to unearth the buried history cannot be over-emphasised. However, due to their limited circulation, but also to the successful anti-communist propaganda that has been deeply embedded and normalised in the public consciousness since 1966, these documentaries have yet to make any significant impact in public. For now, their impact is certainly too limited to undermine the New Order propaganda. These previous films presented a counter-claim that boldly reversed the positions of the good versus evil evil that were firmly implanted in the nation’s history by successive governments and their supporters, best exemplified in the nearly four-and-a-half hour anti-communist state-produced film entitled *Pengkhianatan G 30 September* (1984). However, a reversal of this kind only reproduces, and does not eliminate or problematise, the fundamental framework of a good versus evil dichotomy that structures the government propaganda and public imagination. While giving voice to the silenced victims, the perpetrators of the 1965-1966 killings did not appear in these alternative films. In government-sponsored propaganda and off-screen statements, whenever these perpetrators (or their sponsors and supporters) speak of the events, their statements consist mainly of denials along with the frequent placing of blame on the victims.

In remarkable contrast, *The Act of Killing* is fascinating as much as disturbing for its radical subversion of the prevailing paradigm, in that it presents a narrative of the killings in a complex story, with multi-layered sub-narratives, rich with ironies and contradictions. An adequate discussion of the significance and problematics that this film brings to the fore is far beyond the scope of this brief article. Here I can only mention in the simplest terms some of the most obvious aspects that will have immediate impact for our current scholarship on the issue.

The *Act of Killing* graphically visualises acts of violence that make the horrors in the previous documentaries (allusions to anti-communist captors, torturers, rapists), as well as in *Pengkhianatan G 30 September* (the evils of an allegedly communist-backed movement against rightist six generals and one lieutenant on the eve of 1 October 1967) pale into insignificance. In this respect, *The Act of Killing* incorporates the perpetrators of the 1965-1966 killings more seriously than any of the preceding films have done. But this new documentary goes much further than simply validating or reinforcing the survivors’ allegations about the cruelty of the military-orchestrated anti-communist pogrom.

Instead of submitting new ‘facts’ or a set of serious ‘evidence’ about the crimes against humanity in 1965-1966, the *Act of Killing* presents an abundance of extravagantly-styled self-incriminations by the 1965 executioners themselves, as they speak proudly to the camera about how they pushed their cruelty to the extreme when killing the communists and members of their families, and raping their female targets, including children. In front of the camera, they go on to demonstrate step-by-step how they carried out the killings at the original sites of their actions in 1965, thus making the survivors’ allegations of their crimes redundant. The *Act of Killing* exposes in a most obscene fashion what the successive Indonesian governments since 1966 have erased from official history and government pronouncements.

More than one of the perpetrators in this film observes perceptively that ‘their’ film will outdo the government’s infamous *Pengkhianatan G 30 September* in portraying scenes of horrendous violence. They remark that the general public is utterly wrong to assume (in line with New Order government propaganda) that the Communists are cruel or brutal; “We are crueler and more brutal than the Communists”, they claim. They elaborate what they mean in great detail, both through words and re-enactments on camera. The film contains some of the most violent scenes and language I have seen or heard, on or off screen, from or on Indonesia. Viewers need to have a strong stomach to watch this film.

Questions raised

However, violent scenes and perverted language are only a part of the image that this film presents. *The Act of Killing* is unusual in the series of documentaries on the theme to date; it is the first long film on the 1965-1966 killings to feature the perpetrators, instead of the survivors or their sympathisers, as the main characters. This is only possible with the consent of those individual executioners, especially as they appear without their identities being concealed. They recount their own crimes, most of the time laughing, singing and dancing, and only occasionally with remorse and reported nightmares.

Three closely-related sets of questions came up in my mind when I first saw two earlier and shorter versions of the film in 2010 and 2011. Some clues began to dawn on me after watching the final and longer version in 2012, and after having further conversations with Oppenheimer, the director.

The first set of questions concerns methods. How did the filmmakers manage to persuade these perpetrators to speak so freely, and in such self-incriminating way? Since it was evident...
that there was no hidden camera involved, I wondered if some strategy of deception was being cleverly used. However, if we presuppose that these individuals were active participants in the filmmaking project, the question can be formulated differently from their perspective, viz-à-viz the professional filmmakers: why would these perpetrators want to make all these serious self-incriminations, and liberally so, presumably knowing full well that their statements would eventually be widely disseminated to the public? What did they wish to gain for themselves or give to the audience? While they might have been extremely cruel in their youth, could they possibly, some 40 years later, be so foolish as to not be aware of the risks involved in making their self-incriminations the way they did?

The second set of questions relates to ethical issues. Regardless of the political aptness and risk-awareness of these actors, I wondered for a moment if the filmmakers had given them viewing access to the recordings, so that they could judge reflexively for themselves how they appeared on screen, and could gauge the potential impacts both on themselves and on their audience. Had the filmmakers actually discussed these issues and confronted the actors with the kind of questions that the film audience would likely raise? is it a relief to see in the long version of the film affirmative answers to these questions.

The third set of questions interrogates issues of truth. Regardless of what these perpetrators have said about what they did to the Communists in 1965-1966, to what extent do their statements and re-enactments represent the actual events of 1965-1966? How do we know and assess this? How much fact and/or fiction have gone into the narrative in this film? Does it matter? The remaining space below is devoted to preliminary answers to these questions.

Boastfully self-incriminating One immediate, if partial, answer to the first set of questions is evident throughout the film: these executioners enjoy the patronage of their fellow executioners and other anti-communist politicians who have climbed the political ladder, and before the general public. The filmmakers are careful not to do so about absolutely anything, at any time, and before the general public.

So the boasting thesis prompts further and more important questions. Under what conditions – real or perceived – did these 1965-1966 executioners have the pleasure and the privilege of boasting so liberally about what they admit to as their ‘crimes’? What circumstances made it possible for them to enjoy a long and extended period of impunity? Selected scenes in The Act of Killing provide some answers. The perpetrators in this film enjoy the patronage of their fellow executioners and other anti-communist politicians who have climbed the political ladder, and who have been running the country or provinces in the past several decades. Top national and local politicians who serve as their patrons appear in the film, demonstrating their close relations with members of the local paramilitary, including the film’s protagonists.

A detailed study in English of the political roles of militia groups and gangs of thugs (locally called preman, from the Dutch word vrijman [free man]) in New Order Indonesia and their mutually beneficial relations with the state apparatus, especially the military, is available in the work of Loren Fryer. Focusing on Perumda Pancasila, Fryer emphasizes the salient role of the branch in Medan, the birthplace and the strongest organization in the city of Medan.

The Act of Killing is not a documentary with a straightforward narrative structure of the kind that characterises all the preceding films on the 1965-1966 killings. It is a documentary film about historical agents and also about how these agents make films about themselves, based on their remembered actions in 1965-1966. Even as it presents an oral history investigation of that murky period, and first-hand recollection from some of the executioners, it is also about these executioners’ consciously drafted fictions and re-enactments as a medium through which they articulate their memories and comment on those memories. Therefore, instead of re-legating the perpetrators to an object of someone else’s recording camera, the directors allow them to co-author their own self-incriminating narratives, which they do with considerable liberty, wit, laughter and pleasure.

Frame as such, the selected interweave with consciously invented fiction, memories of the past, and the experience of narrating before the camera to converge into an extraordinarily fascinating account of the complex story, with moments of horror, laughter, singing and dancing, full of ironies and surprising slippages. Ultimately (in relation to the third set of questions), the final outcome is no more or less instructive than any of the preceding films on the subject, including those with solely documentary (or testimonies) or with liberal fabrication (as in the government propaganda). They are all highly instructive in different ways; not so much for the specific, crude, empirical ‘facts’ of what happened in the past in coherent and('\n\n2) Below: Three ‘free men’ revisiting the sites of their roles in the 1965 killings, in the city of Medan. Courtesy of the copyright owner who wishes not to be named.

Towards the end of the propaganda? One can never be fully sure of what the protagonists might wish to achieve from the project. On screen, they all claim that they simply want to “tell history truly as it is” to the world, not just to Indonesia, but while deconstructing the truth as presented in Propaganda: The Making of the 1965 Killing, featuring the same murderers. But The Act of Killing is not a story of repentance. While Oppenheimer is careful not to give the protagonists the comfort of absolution in the end, neither does he make them look complete fools or monsters. Apparently fully unscripted, one of the most senior, boastful and brutal executioners was unable to contain his own emotion, or the guilt that befell him by virtue of acting and re-enactments with his fellows, in which, they in turn, took on the roles of tortured communist captives.

The propaganda about the 1965-1966 killings has outlived the New Order government that authored it. The Act of Killing promises that we may soon see the demolition of that sanitized propaganda, if and when a copy of the documentary finds its audience among millions of Indonesians: through youtTube on the Internet.

Notes
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2 Examples include The Year of Living Dangerously (1983), Gie (2005), and Some Sorrow (2008) of Indonesia. Lembaga Kreativitas Kemanusiaan (LKK) [Institute of Creative Humanity], led by poet-cum-novelist Putu Oka Sukanta, is to date the single largest producer of documentary films that revisit the 1965 violence. Putu and several members of LKK were political prisoners for their active membership of the Institute of People’s Culture [Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat, LKBR], which was affiliated with the PKI. The six titles that LKK has produced are, chronologically, Menyembuhkan Harapan dalam Kerukunan (oasis of living together) (2006); Perempuan yang tertindas (The assaulted woman) (2005); Tumbuh dalam bumi [Growing in the storm] (2007); Seni ditingkat jamban [Art that will not die] (2008); Tidur 79; after the street address of the LEKKA office in Jakarta (2009); an untitled documentary on the condition of the state-owned television network has done (shown in 2010); and Terlena: Breaking of a nation (2011).


5 They are ‘The Shadow Play’ (2001), Sirenis: Breaking of a nation (2004); and 40 Years of Silence: An Indonesian Tragedy (2009).

6 In 2001, significantly on his personal capacity, President Abdurrahman Wahid offered an apology to survivors and the families of victims of the 1965-1966 killings. His statement provoked an uproar. Early in 2012 there was a news report suggesting that President Yudhoyono intended to make a public apology for state complicity in the past human rights abuses, with no reference to any specific incidents.
