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Paper:

Tyson, AD (2014) *Multiple acts of killing*. *Critical Asian Studies*, 46 (1). 157 - 161 (5).

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2014.863583>

Tyson / Multiple Acts of Killing

Multiple Acts of Killing

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The Act of Killing is a fascinating episodic film documenting the personal consequences of Anwar Congo's attempt to tell the tale of his exploits in the 1960s.¹ *Ini lah kita!* (This is who we are!). A self-confessed executioner, Anwar celebrates his innovative killing techniques in the opening scenes of Joshua Oppenheimer's film, before gradually falling into despair. One man's nightmare helps bring to the fore wider social and political conflicts in Indonesia today, making this a unique cinematic achievement. There are limitations and flaws, however, and I agree with Jess Melvin that we should look beyond the film itself, asking "in what sort of society is boasting about participating in crimes against humanity something that is considered to be tolerable and even status enhancing?"² While there is no straightforward answer to this question, the seventy-page *liputan khusus* (special report) published by *Tempo* magazine in fall 2012 is a useful starting point, filling in some of the historical gaps in Oppenheimer's film.

The Film and the Fallout

A spokesperson from the Indonesian Embassy in London referred to *The Act of Killing* as a *tontonan sepihak* (one-sided spectacle), lacking historical merit and any sense of proportion.³ Acting alongside Safit Pardede and the much younger Herman Koko, Anwar Congo claims to have consented only to the making of *Arsan dan Aminah*, a wartime adventure romance, not Oppenheimer's feature film as we see it today.⁴ Former executioner Adi Zulkadry withdrew entirely from the project, warning of the violent fallout that would occur if the case of the 1965–66 communist purges was reopened. "*Bukan PKI yang kejam...tetapi tidak semua kejujuran yang dapat menjadi konsumsi publik*" (It was not the PKI who were cruel...but not all truths are suitable for public consumption). Footage selected by Oppenheimer from a Televisi Republik Indonesia (TVRI) regional broadcast in Medan speaks to Adi's concerns, raising important questions about justice and retribution.

Menurut Jendral Sarwo Edhie ada sekitar 2.5 juta orang komunis yang dibunuh. Kenapa keturunan dan keluarga PKI yang dibunuh tidak pernah melakukan balas dendam pak? Sampai saat sekarang mereka bukan tidak mau membalas dendam, belum ada kesempatan mereka untuk itu.

[Question from Citra, TVRI host]: According to General Sarwo Edhie some 2.5 million communists were killed. Why are the descendents and family members of those who were killed not seeking revenge?

[Response from Anwar Congo]: It is not that they do not wish for revenge, but rather that they have not yet had the opportunity to take revenge.⁵

The TVRI producers are filmed behind the scenes making sardonic remarks about Pemuda Pancasila members who were involved in the 1965–66 purges. For instance, they remarked that many of the killers went mad, and even more of them became wealthy criminals, and yet the TVRI producers did not voice any concerns about impunity. Perhaps, as Tom Pepinsky suggests, this is because memories

¹ I refer to the theatrical version of the film (runtime 1 hour and 57 minutes) throughout. *TAOK* was filmed as part of a £400,000 British Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) project called *Genre and Genocide*, led by Joram ten Brink (as principle investigator).

² Melvin 2013.

³ Personal communication, 22 August 2013. See also Yosef Djakababa's review: Djakababa 2012.

⁴ Gunawan 2012. A poster of *Arsan dan Aminah* is on display during the TVRI "special dialogue" program broadcast in Medan on 28 October 2007 (see *TAOK* 01:24:38).

⁵ The film subtitles here are incorrect, stating that "they can't" take revenge (see *TAOK* 01:24:56).

of the killings and perceptions of victimization have been so heavily conditioned by half a century of Indonesian history, commemoration, and propaganda, exemplified by Arifin C. Noer's 1984 film *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* (Treachery of the Thirtieth September Movement/PKI).⁶ Ibrahim Sinik, owner of the daily newspaper *Medan Pos*, played his part in the propaganda campaign. During a two-and-a-half-minute appearance in *The Act of Killing*, Sinik revealed the interrogation methods he used against suspected communists.

Apa jawabnya sedikit sedikit kita tambah. Sesuai kepentingan kita menghantam komunis, karena sebagai orang koran kita membangun perasaan masyarakat benci kepada dia.

Whatever answers they [the communists] gave, we changed them. All that mattered was that we, as newspapermen, crushed the communists by spreading feelings of public hate toward them.

Ibrahim Sinik added—rather indifferently—that it took just one wink from him to have suspects taken away and killed by the likes of Anwar Congo.

In a ninety-second cameo appearance the governor of North Sumatra, Syamsul Arifin, reflected on his youth—when Anwar Congo used to look after him—and commented on the living legacy of communism and the indispensable role of Indonesia's *preman* (thugs, gangsters).⁷

Hari ini anak cucu mereka bangun. Yang mencoba memutar balikan sejarah. Ada yang tulis aku bangga jadi anak PKI. Saya pikir ini tidak akan lama, karena juga nanti rakyat akan bangkit. Ajaran komunis itu tidak bisa diterima di Indonesia, karena disini banyak istilah orang preman. Saya banyak dia nilai positif juga dari preman. Preman ini kan bahasa Inggris, free men, lelaki bebas. Orang muda itu ingin bebas, ingin berbuat walaupun dia salah. Tapi kalau kita sudah tahu genetiknya, kita tahu jiwa dia, kita tahu semangatnya. Tinggal ngarahinnya aja.

Today the descendents [of communists] are waking up. They are attempting to reverse history. Some have written that they are proud to be children of the PKI. But I do not think this will last long because the people will rise up [against them]. The communist doctrine will not be accepted in Indonesia because we have so many gangsters. These “free men” have many positive attributes. Young people desire to be free even if their actions are wrong. As long as we know their genetics, their soul and spirit, we can direct them.

Representations of *preman* as “free men,” repeated throughout the film, are incredibly inane. The actions of unencumbered and highly encourageable free men—supposedly doing their duty for the nation—are directly commissioned or quietly condoned by state security forces. Politically well-connected Pemuda Pancasila members are positioned as defenders of the nation against deliberately vague and open-ended threats, when in fact it is the *preman* themselves who use violence, extortion and intimidation against ordinary Indonesians on a regular basis. Safit Pardede's brutish encounters with Chinese-Indonesian traders in Medan is one example.⁸ Provincial parliamentarian Haji Marzuki responds to a direct question from Oppenheimer by listing Pemuda Pancasila's illegal activities, while, as indicated below, landowning elite Haji Anif casually reflects on Pemuda Pancasila's method of land acquisition.⁹

⁶ Pepinsky 2013. *Tempo* 2012 (Dari) finds that the New Order way of thinking about the killings “*belum sepenuhnya pupus di masyarakat*” (has not yet vanished from people's minds).

⁷ Syamsul Arifin was elected to serve as governor of North Sumatra from 2008 to 2013, but his term was cut short when he was found guilty of corruption on 3 May 2012 (see Supreme Court Decision No. 472/K/Pid.Sus/2012).

⁸ See *TAOK* 00:31:20. This scene draws parallels with Anwar Congo's extortion techniques from the 1960s.

⁹ The dialogue with Haji Marzuki begins at *TAOK* 01:05:43, while Haji Anif's cameo starts at *TAOK* 01:17:58.

Pemuda Pancasila ini kalau mau dikatakan jujur sangat ditakuti. Umpamanya ada pengusaha, dia mau bebaskan satu area, di sana ada masyarakat kalau langsung, pengusaha itu dia akan membayar sangat tinggi, jadi Pemuda Pancasila ini dipakai, dianggap bisa menyelesaikan masalah pengusaha itu. Jadi biar masyarakat itu takut, dia ada Pemuda Pancasila di sana kuat-kuat dia bilang dengan kita terserah lah bagaimana itu katanya.

To be honest, [everyone] is terrified of Pemuda Pancasila. For instance if a businessperson acting alone wants to clear land [for an investment project], it will be very costly, so Pemuda Pancasila is recruited and then [the case] can be resolved. Since the public fears Pemuda Pancasila, any forceful demand will be accepted by the people, they will just leave it up to us.

A general wariness about communism still exists in Indonesia today, although the public has come to view preman with equal measures of fear and loathing, undermining the *pahlawan* (hero) narrative surrounding groups such as Pemuda Pancasila. One of the main messages contained in the *Tempo* report detailed below is that the spectral threat of communism has vanished, meaning that Indonesians can now move on and focus on more pressing concerns. “*Tak selayaknya kita alergi terhadap komunisme. Sudah lama ideologi itu bangkrut*” (There is no reason for us to be allergic to communism. The ideology has long been bankrupt).¹⁰

The *Tempo* Files

Prior to the premier of *The Act of Killing* at the Toronto Film Festival in September 2012, a number of private screenings were held in Indonesia. Screenings took place on university campuses throughout the country, as well as private venues such as the Salihara Theatre and Teater Utan Kayu in Jakarta, where journalists were formally invited. One of the outcomes was the comprehensive special report published by *Tempo* in October 2012.¹¹ Inspired by Oppenheimer’s film, *Tempo* strove to see the events of 1965 from the perspective of the executioners themselves, taking care to verify the stories they were told by corroborating evidence and crosschecking sources at all times. With Cambodia, Germany, and Russia in mind, journalists revisited Indonesia’s *ladang-ladang pembantaian* (killing fields), *kamp konsentrasi* (concentration camps) and gulags, where tragedy still hangs in the air.

Hundreds of confessional reports were gathered from across the Indonesian archipelago, directly implicating the military in the communist purges, along with the mass-membership Islamic organization Nahdlatul Ulama and their affiliated *pesantren* (boarding schools) and youth movements (Ansor being the most notable).¹² While many stories featured the city of Kediri, East Java, the most terrible and sadistic massacre of PKI members and sympathizers is believed to have taken place in the village of Mlancu, in East Java’s Jombang District. The acts of killing in Mlancu were prompted by long-standing conflicts linked to the implementation of the Agrarian Law of 1960, which called for pro-poor land redistribution, but in practice often led to unrestrained “*perampasan tanah*” (land grabbing).¹³ PKI administrators and cadres disrupted local power relations by rapidly recruiting new members, drawing attention to labor grievances and the exploitation of sugarcane farmers. They also staged theatrical performances in order to cast doubt on the moral and spiritual authority of *kiai* and *tuan guru* (religious leaders, teachers).¹⁴

¹⁰ *Tempo* 2012 (Dari).

¹¹ I refer to the Bahasa Indonesia report throughout. The English-language version is missing a number of vignettes, as well as stories focusing on the military, columns by M. Imam Aziz, Robert Cribb, Ariel Heryanto, Yosep Adi Prasetyo, and Hermawan Sulisty, and articles featuring Benedict Anderson and Poncke Princen.

¹² *Tempo* 2012 (Tentara).

¹³ *Tempo* 2012 (Setelah).

¹⁴ *Ibid.* One of the more controversial PKI performances was entitled “Tuhan Sudah Mati” (God is Dead).

Oppenheimer makes very little effort to link the homicidal fantasies of the actors in his film to the actual historical events surrounding the massacres of 1965. The *Tempo* report helps in this sense by addressing many of the film's ambiguities and oversights. In addition, we learn that the main protagonist was actually born Anwar Matulesy and received the nickname "Congo" while assisting Indonesian soldiers who were being deployed to the Democratic Republic of Congo for peacekeeping purposes.¹⁵ In September 2012 *Tempo* journalists met with Anwar and his wife Salmah at their house in Lingkungan (Area) 17 Medan. When *The Act of Killing* was mentioned Anwar became agitated and was clearly very uneasy about his newfound celebrity status. Salmah hails from Banten, Java, and while she is aware of Anwar's preman activities, she insists that her husband of twenty years is really just a hopeless romantic. "*Suaminya itu sejak muda suka bunga. Enggak peduli berapa harganya, dia beli*" (Since he was young my husband liked flowers. He would insist on buying them no matter how much they cost).¹⁶ As a senior member of Pemuda Pancasila North Sumatra chapter, moreover, we are told that Anwar is highly sought after by thesis students and scholars interested in history. In light of the forthcoming release of Oppenheimer's follow-up film, *The Look of Silence*, which focuses on the victims of violence (past and present) rather than the perpetrators, the interest in Anwar and his accomplices is unlikely to subside.

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¹⁵ *Tempo* 2012 (Algojo).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*