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# Genocide documentary as intervention

ADAM TYSON

## Abstract

Gifted filmmakers such as Joshua Oppenheimer, director of *The act of killing*, are attempting to use the power of documentary to provoke social and political change in post-conflict settings. What roles do interventionist filmmakers play in processes of national reconciliation and transitional justice? Can *The act of killing* really be a catalyst for change in Indonesia? This article contends that the genocide documentary is a form of antagonistic intervention that warrants systematic and critical re-evaluation. It holds that claims regarding the remedial impact of documentaries such as *The act of killing* are difficult to substantiate, the main problem being attribution, cause and effect. Intervention in the mind of the director seems to follow the logic of a synchronous circuit, where trauma based on revealed truth leads to transitional justice. Each component in the circuit has a corresponding political argument. This article will examine three interrelated arguments linking genocide documentary and political intervention: (1) re-traumatization, (2) power-laden truths, and (3) the narrowing of impunity gaps. This article contributes to debates about genocide and intervention by presenting evidence from Indonesia, including rare interviews with the protagonists in Oppenheimer's award winning film, surveys of Indonesian audiences, and data gathered from a global online petition as well as Chinese microblogs in order to better understand how audiences respond to genocide documentaries and why it is so difficult to generate political action outside the theatre.

## Introduction

Rudolph Rummel, author of *Death by government*, feels he belongs to a world of specialized researchers concerned with the arbitrary foreclosure and systematic termination of human life.<sup>1</sup> The inhabitants of Rummel's special world are not necessarily driven by morbid preoccupation; rather, they seek to discover new mechanisms by which the social sciences can help comprehend, heal and repair fractured societies. Filmmakers such as Joshua Oppenheimer are contributing to this grand project, attempting to use the power of documentary to provoke social and political change in post-conflict settings. During his British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) award speech in February 2014 Oppenheimer claimed that his film *The act of killing*, which takes as its starting point the 1965–66 communist purge in Indonesia, is helping to catalyse change in the country by creating new spaces for Indonesians to reassess their past and take steps toward truth, national reconciliation and justice. The director has repeatedly set out his intention to expose a regime built on criminality and deception on behalf of Indonesian genocide survivors and the international human rights community.<sup>2</sup> The British Arts and Humanities Research Council provided a research grant worth \$650,000 (current US dollars) to support the completion of *The act of killing* in 2010. Oppenheimer won a \$64,000 PUMA BRITDOC Foundation impact award in 2013 for creating what an independent jury referred to as a staggeringly brave film that exposes political injustice and opens a painful dialogue on Indonesia's genocide. Documentary filmmaker A. J. Schnack simply referred to *The act of killing* as 'the film that cannot be ignored'.<sup>3</sup> What roles do interventionist filmmakers—defined here as filmmakers attempting to provoke social and political change and to advance the cause of human rights in post-conflict settings—play in processes of national reconciliation and transitional justice? Can *The act of killing* really be a catalyst for change in Indonesia?

This article contends that the genocide documentary is a form of antagonistic political intervention that warrants systematic and critical re-evaluation. It holds that claims regarding the remedial or healing impact of documentaries such as *The act of killing* are difficult to substantiate,

the main problem being attribution, cause and effect. The historical ‘truth’ of genocide has become a power-laden tool fought over by politicians, activists, lawyers, filmmakers and many others whose competing claims are based on fragmented memories of survivors, perpetrators, witnesses and bystanders.<sup>4</sup> Interventions through film cause ripple effects and have the power to move political questions or strategic goals such as transitional justice into the visual sphere.<sup>5</sup> Given the visual nature of contemporary politics James Johnson argues that the practice of documentary, both filmic and photographic, is central to our understandings of conflict and justice.<sup>6</sup> A brief history of the Indonesian genocide is required before proceeding with an analysis of genocide documentary as intervention.

The People’s Republic of China was celebrating National Day on 1 October 1965 when the first reports of an attempted *coup d’état* in Indonesia began to circulate. A failed *coup d’état* that came to be known as the 30 September Movement enabled the Indonesian military to conduct an internal purge within its own ranks as well as to systematically arrest or murder real or suspected communists. The purge was led by the army but the killings were also outsourced to various nationalist-religious youth organizations such as Pemuda Pancasila and Ansor, with the worst massacres taking place in Java and Bali.<sup>7</sup> The destruction of the once powerful Indonesian Communist Party took place in the context of the wider US war against communism in East Asia.<sup>8</sup> US bombing operation Rolling Thunder was underway in Vietnam, and the US Central Intelligence Agency was active in Indonesia, working with the US embassy to produce lists of communist targets and providing strategic support to factions within the Indonesian armed forces.<sup>9</sup>

Political polarization and social cleavages were extreme in the 1960s, and the very nature of the Indonesian nation—communist, Islamist, nationalist—was at stake. At the height of the communist period in 1964 cadres were mobilizing the countryside, encouraging poor peasants to occupy land and attracting urban supporters by spearheading attacks against Dutch, British and American companies.<sup>10</sup> Clashes ensued between landlords and peasants, religious zealots and moderates, and many ordinary Indonesians saw the temporary lawlessness of 1965 as an opportunity to settle old

scores. By March 1966 the Communist Party was broken and outlawed. Indonesia's first president Sukarno was outmanoeuvred and supplanted by General Suharto, whose triumph led to the establishment of a New Order regime (1966–98) characterized by developmental authoritarianism. The collapse of the left brought an abrupt end to the political differences and cultural polemics that had shaped Indonesian art, thought and creative expression in the post-independence (post-1945) period.<sup>11</sup> From 1966 a new official version of events was imposed upon the public with an intensity and sophistication that left a lasting impression. Contrarian (unofficial) accounts of the communist purge were limited by a combination of total propaganda—the communist treason (as it was presented) featured in schoolbooks, official documents, national rituals, ceremonies, commemorations, films and annual television programs, and national museums—the pervasive climate of fear and the public desire to separate the trauma of the past from the prosperity of the present.<sup>12</sup>

The mystery and horror of the communist purge inspired director Joshua Oppenheimer to spend nearly a decade searching for Indonesia's *genocidaires*. He worked in towns and villages throughout northern Sumatra, infiltrating networks of perpetrators and convincing these 'national heroes' (if we believe the New Order propaganda) to perform for the camera. Oppenheimer's film project is intended to be a shocking and disturbing indictment of a generation of unrepentant killers, yet it centres upon a small group of provincial thugs and gloating gangsters led by Anwar Congo. In the beginning of the film Anwar is shown dancing on a rooftop, the location where he claims to have carried out countless executions (garrotting his victims) while under the influence of drugs and alcohol. The director has been criticized for making little attempt to evaluate the truth of Anwar's testimony.<sup>13</sup> Oppenheimer's core research subjects (who are all male) were tricked, in a sense, into revealing their self-deception on camera; they were given elaborate wardrobes, props, equipment and technical support, and then encouraged to draw inspiration from their favourite Hollywood genres prior to the staging of any re-enactments of the killings of 1965–66. The result is a hallucinatory and nightmarish visual experience; fantasy-driven re-enactments are interspersed with

raw footage from Medan city, exposing the vulnerabilities and paradoxes of the contemporary urban landscape in Indonesia. By the end of Oppenheimer's ambitious and problematic film it is clear that a powerful new method of storytelling had been created; this film will serve as a key reference point for filmmakers for many years to come.

As evidenced by Oppenheimer's 2014 BAFTA speech, intervention in the mind of the director seems to follow the logic of a synchronous circuit, where trauma based on revealed truth leads to transitional justice. Each component in the circuit has a corresponding political argument. This article will examine three interrelated arguments linking genocide documentary and political intervention: (1) re-traumatization, (2) power-laden truths, and (3) the narrowing of impunity gaps. This article contributes to debates about genocide and intervention by presenting evidence from Indonesia, including rare interviews with the protagonists in Oppenheimer's award winning film, surveys of Indonesian audiences, and data gathered from a global online petition as well as Chinese microblogs in order to better understand how audiences respond to genocide documentaries and why it is so difficult to generate political action outside the theatre.

### **Genocide documentary and re-traumatization**

The genocide documentary genre will always carry the risk of re-traumatization, as visual interventions and the devices of film often work in unexpected ways.<sup>14</sup> One of the earliest examples of documentary cinema is American director Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922). Flaherty 'manipulated reality to give a picture of reality', cinematically restaging events, reconstructing images to match testimony, and radically intervening in arctic Eskimo affairs in order to achieve dramatic effect.<sup>15</sup> Paula Rabinowitz's study was published over two decades ago, although one could replace her analysis of *Nanook of the North* with *The act of killing* and draw similar conclusions. Generally speaking, both Flaherty and Oppenheimer made films with foreign funding, both intervened in cultures other than their own—introducing tools and techniques that would not otherwise have been used in the filmmaking process—resulting in a spectacle of

otherness conforming to Western or, at the very least, non-indigenous patterns of vision and narrative.<sup>16</sup> Oppenheimer created a genre bending film by indulging his research subjects, giving them creative license to reimagine and retell the genocidal story of Indonesia in the 1960s. Two Indonesians, self-confessed executioner Anwar Congo and his younger protégé Herman Koto are filmed as they produce and star in their own wartime drama called *Arsan dan Aminah* based loosely on Cecil B. DeMille's *Samson and Delilah* (1949). Violent scenes of interrogation, torture and execution are restaged, repeatedly and graphically performed by the protagonists in order to fulfil the director's ambition to excite pity and catharsis, although such an overproduced, excessively visceral documentary risks becoming a 'trauma drama' disconnected from the ethical and the good, serving to entertain rather than instruct.<sup>17</sup> The 2014 film *The look of silence* completes Oppenheimer's diptych and features, in a more subdued (but still interventionist) manner, staged confrontations between victims and perpetrators, creating what filmmaker Robert Greene considers to be an emotionally wrenching, cathartic and more illuminating response to the Indonesian genocide than was achieved in *The act of killing*.<sup>18</sup>

Images such as those contained in genocide documentaries have the potential to generate political action outside of the textual event itself. Indeed, Meg McLagan and Leshu Torchin contend that images of suffering, torture and human rights violations make ethical claims on viewers and construct audiences as virtual witnesses.<sup>19</sup> The visual impact of genocide documentary can however increase the prevalence of re-experience symptoms and arousal symptoms for cohorts of victims, with potentially destabilizing consequences.<sup>20</sup> In a critical review of Claude Lanzmann's Holocaust documentary *Shoah* (1985), Brian Winston argues that documenting a formative historical trauma is justified only if bearing witness to or remembering history will be therapeutic for the traumatized.<sup>21</sup> Lanzmann is praised for the combative journalistic approach that enables him to entrap and film unrepentant Nazi perpetrators, but is equally criticized for ethical lapses and reckless sensationalism when filming Holocaust survivors. Winston's analysis of *Shoah* appears in a co-edited book by Joram ten Brink and Joshua Oppenheimer, and so it is important to judge *The act of killing* by the

same standard. I participated in two film screenings at Indonesian universities in Java in December 2013, observing students as they watched and discussed *The act of killing*. I then conducted research in January 2014 in Medan, the Indonesian city where the film was made. Judging from audience responses in Java and the general lack of awareness of the film in Medan I am inclined to argue that Oppenheimer's radical documentary intervention in Indonesia is not therapeutic for the traumatized. Nor is the film satisfying for those interested in reclaiming history by challenging official versions of the 1965–66 genocide, or those determined to seek truth, national reconciliation or transitional justice.

Oppenheimer's film is an attempt to reveal how perpetrators and executioners deal with guilt, or more specifically, how they suppress or lie about the true meaning of their actions. Referring back to Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*, Oppenheimer manipulates reality to give a picture of reality, inviting perpetrators from Medan to feverishly recreate and reimagine their violent past, to perform their violent fantasies in reckless and sensational ways. Ethical lapses occur in the film casting, the framing of the genocide and the filming of ordinary people in Medan city without their consent, such as the Chinese Indonesian shopkeepers and traders who are threatened and extorted by thugs in Medan's Sukarame market. Oscar nominated documentary filmmaker Jill Godmilow insists that Oppenheimer has breached certain classic codes of ethical filmmaking.<sup>22</sup>

In September Oppenheimer was named among the 2014 class of MacArthur Fellows, receiving a stipend of \$625,000 for having redefined the paradigm of documentary film. The director may have won the MacArthur 'genius grant' although a small but influential coterie of filmmakers and critics has launched a counteroffensive against his work and techniques used in *The act of killing*. The shortest and in some ways most damning review comes from Peter Rainer, who argues that Oppenheimer 'allows murderous thugs free rein to preen their atrocities, and then fobs it all off as some kind of exalted art thing. This is more than an aesthetic crime; it's a moral crime'.<sup>23</sup> Nick Fraser, a respected voice from the *BBC*, shares Rainer's dislike for both the aesthetic and moral premise of *The act of killing*. Fraser highlights the scenes where killers are encouraged to retell their



murderous exploits with ‘lip-smacking satisfaction’.<sup>24</sup> These scenes are upsetting to Fraser because they reveal so little of importance to the audience about the history of Indonesian genocide and the wider political context of the Cold War. Jennifer Merin suggests that the insufficient historical background and political context explains the film’s failure to become the serious indictment that it was intended to be, creating instead a sensational misrepresentation of the past, an ‘obscene treatment of genocide’ that risks re-traumatizing victims.<sup>25</sup>

The repetitious re-enactments of torture and garroting in *The act of killing* have generated mixed reviews ranging from the aesthetic and moral outrage of Rainer, Fraser and Merin to the measured respect and admiration of A.O. Scott from *The New York Times*, Joe Morgenstern from *The Wall Street Journal* and Catherine Shoard from *The Guardian*. Historian John Roosa argues that those who find Oppenheimer’s methods obscene are missing the point: it is precisely through gruesome re-enactments that the perpetrators are provoked into candid reflections and admissions of what they did, thus helping to demystify violence and unmask a corrupt regime.<sup>26</sup> The problem with Roosa’s argument is the lack of attention paid to the degrees of emptiness that follow cinematic intervention. If and when the mask comes off, who will be there to deal with the consequences, to steer and manage Indonesia’s victim-offender dialogue and traumatic confrontation with the past? Clear global guidelines exist for the provision of psychosocial assistance in post-genocide settings—former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Cambodia—based on the replication and adaptation of the Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma. In Cambodia significant care has been taken to establish and monitor outreach and victim support programs.<sup>27</sup> In Indonesia, where Oppenheimer claims to have confronted, provoked and unmasked a regime of terror, there is little information available about reconciliation efforts, the provision of psychosocial assistance or outreach programs for victims and survivors.

## Power-laden truths and the reclamation of history

Historical truths are, as Charles Maier writes, always plural and political, always interpretive and subjective, derived from different questions asked by different individuals at different points in time.<sup>28</sup> The social science imperative is that these truths are based on triangular relationships between researchers, data, and readers (or viewers). Maier concludes that historians are best positioned to use data in the attempt to eliminate that which is not true, that which does not abide by the normal rules of evidence, that which is based on nothing more than fancy, prejudice or imagination. Janet Walker, a specialist in ‘trauma cinema’, notes that the evidence gathered from protagonists in *The act of killing* is of questionable value for those concerned with the separation of truth from lies. The fantasies of the *genocidaires* and their performances do not conform to ‘conventional truth-seeking documentary practice’, and yet Walker believes that there is a role, however paradoxical, that fictive film strategies can play in processes of truth and justice.<sup>29</sup> Parker Tyler’s timeless critique suggests that political documentary has always existed on the borderline between art and actuality. Filmmakers are expected to aim for the logical arrangement of a given order of facts, although the most imaginative documentaries rearrange and distort facts, wilfully or as a consequence of submerged prejudice, in order to create a glorified poetics of truth.<sup>30</sup> Documentaries concerning the Indonesian purge in the 1960s, the Cambodian killing fields in the 1970s and the more recent ‘no fire zones’ in Sri Lanka contain varying degrees of factual rearrangements.<sup>31</sup>

Biologist Tanguy Chouard, writing for the esteemed journal *Nature*, argues that an estimated 200,000 free downloads is evidence that *The act of killing* has been diffused throughout Indonesia, shaking the country’s bedrock of violence and ‘brutal regime of impunity’, and jolting the country’s collective conscience into ending nearly half a century of media silence.<sup>32</sup> Criminologist Nicole Rafter believes *The act of killing* breaks through decades of silence in order to perform two key functions. First, the film leads to the formation of collective memories of the Indonesian genocide, and second, it constitutes ‘a form of public criminology through addressing monstrous crimes in

ways that push us toward ethical action', ultimately bringing an end to impunity.<sup>33</sup> As discussed below, these conclusions are incorrect. During an interview with John Roosa in January 2014 Oppenheimer explained that the decision to film Indonesian executioners was made in order to shatter the myth of the heroic national triumph against communism. The American director and his anonymous Indonesian film crew encouraged perpetrators to boast about the gruesome methods they used against defenceless civilians, so as 'to make a film that would *intervene* in this economy of impunity, fear and glorification'.<sup>34</sup>

So why are Chouard and Rafter wrong, and why is Oppenheimer's intervention failing? First, the testimony and re-enactments came mainly from Anwar Congo, a marginal member of the Pemuda Pancasila youth gang living in a state of exception, with Medan city being one of the only remaining 'ethics-free zones' in Indonesia.<sup>35</sup> Anwar's foggy recollections and obscurantist claims are anecdotal and viewers certainly cannot extrapolate from the particulars of Medan. Second, the only other perpetrators directly involved in the purges of 1965–66 who appear in *The act of killing* are Adi Zulkadri, who passed away in 2013, and Safit Pardede, who is remorseless and apathetic in the extreme. The remaining cast members recruited by Oppenheimer to re-enacting village massacres and scenes of torture were sifted from a cocktail of local criminals and extortionists, journalists and amateur actors from Medan who are generally too young to have played any serious role in the communist purge. Their boastful, obscene and often dubious confessions will not end impunity, will not shake bedrocks of violence, will not shatter national myths, and will not bring truth and reconciliation to Indonesia. Third, Oppenheimer's intervention has not ended national silence about the genocide because there is no national silence to end. In the years after the purge a repressive censorial regime emerged and yet citizens spoke out against the crimes of the 1960s and victims carried out searches for missing family members. Unlike the situation in Cambodia, where nearly twenty-five per cent of the population was slaughtered or died of starvation in the period from 1975–79, the majority of Indonesians survived the communist purge and knew all about the

activities in their neighbourhoods. In both Indonesia and Cambodia, as David Chandler notes, the hole into which the past is buried has only been partially dug and will never be fully filled.<sup>36</sup>

No less than fourteen films of all variety have been made about the Indonesian genocide, and numerous memoirs and short stories have been published by Indonesians in the past few decades related to the trauma of 1965–66.<sup>37</sup> Indonesia's democratic transition created new spaces for public debate about the past and lifted many of the restrictions on free speech and the press. President Suharto's abrupt resignation in May 1998 set Indonesia on a turbulent path to reform and enabled journalists to publish articles and editorials questioning the official version of the 1965–66 communist purge.<sup>38</sup> Katharine McGregor found at least two Indonesian magazines, *Adil* and *Tajuk*, featuring special reports on the attempted 30 September 1965 *coup d'état*. C.W. Watson examined a series of autobiographies published by Pustaka Utan Kayu in Jakarta featuring Indonesian exiles and victims of New Order repression, including former communists and one woman from the left-wing organization Gerwani (Women's Movement).<sup>39</sup> Mary Zurbuchen witnessed a flood of commentary and criticism coming from Indonesia's reinvigorated media in the reform period, led by prominent national newspapers such as *Kompas* and *Tempo*.<sup>40</sup> An amnesty was declared in 1999 allowing the release of all remaining political prisoners from 1965 and enabling previously exiled activists to return to Indonesia. In March 2000 Indonesia's fourth president, Abdurrahman Wahid, publicly apologized for the mass killings that occurred in 1965–66 and encouraged citizens to reopen the debate about history and human rights in order to reclaim truth.<sup>41</sup> After the apology and amnesty John Roosa was able to interview hundreds of former political prisoners and create an archive in Jakarta. The archive serves a truth-telling function but Roosa nevertheless warns that this is impressionistic evidence at best.<sup>42</sup> There is no way of establishing what a representative sample would be because no one was counting the losses during the communist purge. By approaching the issue with sensitivity and caution Roosa draws a clear line between his qualified empirical work and Oppenheimer's 'apocalyptic fever dream' project.<sup>43</sup>

## **Narrowing impunity gaps through intervention**

Joshua Oppenheimer secured a Marshall Scholarship in 1997 after graduating from Harvard that allowed him to work on a commissioned documentary about militia and extreme right movements, with the young director setting out to ‘identify with the most extreme forms of hatred’.<sup>44</sup>

Oppenheimer’s earliest Indonesian film *The globalization tapes* (2003) contains his first cinematic encounter with a boastful executioner named Sharman Sinaga. This event clearly shook the director and marked the start of his ‘singular mission’ to intervene in Indonesia, infiltrating in and documenting the lives of genocide perpetrators and survivors from the 1960s.<sup>45</sup> Moral imperatives are used by Joshua Oppenheimer to justify his protracted intervention in Indonesia, one of the goals being the narrowing of impunity.<sup>46</sup> The filmmaker is a fraternal member of the international human rights and transitional justice movement, and is deeply committed to the victims and survivors of the 1965–66 communist purge in Indonesia that claimed millions of lives. Oppenheimer includes fragments of interviews he conducted with provincial and national level politicians in his film in order to reveal contemporary linkages between criminal networks and the political establishment in Indonesia.<sup>47</sup> The relative success or effectiveness of cinematic intervention, or indeed any form of antagonistic intervention, depends to varying degrees on the timing and conditions within which the intervention takes place. In other words, interventions designed to challenge impunity are highly contingent and contextual.

Robert Lemkin and Thet Sambath, the British and Cambodian co-directors of *Enemies of the people* (2009), released their documentary at a time when the hybrid tribunal formally known as the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) was actively prosecuting former Khmer Rouge leaders for their roles in the 1975–79 genocide. The hybrid UN-Cambodian tribunal was set up near the capital Phnom Penh in an effort to bring proceedings closer to the public and to engage ordinary Cambodians in controlled debates about the horrors of their collective past. Lemkin and Sambath’s ground-breaking documentary footage of Nuon Chea, who was second only to Pol Pot in the Khmer Rouge high command, was released around the same time that Nuon Chea was

being investigated by the ECCC. In February 2010 co-investigating judges You Bunleng and Marcel Lemonde requested a copy of *Enemies of the people* to assess whether the film contained material of evidentiary value that could be used in criminal proceedings. The trials risk generating fresh trauma because of the political interference of Cambodian elites close to Prime Minister Hun Sen who are shaken by the erosion of impunity.<sup>48</sup>

Cinematic intervention can be considered in conjunction with debates about the politics of memory and forgetting. The point is well captured by Andreas Huyssen, who contends that forgetting is not necessarily a disorder, a capitulation or a failure of memory, and differentiates between the types of forgetting that play out strategically in the political and public sphere.<sup>49</sup> For instance post-WWII Germany and post-Dirty War Argentina relied on years, even decades, of public forgetting (or at least silence) in order to help transitional regimes forge a new national consensus regarding the crimes of the past, for which so many people were implicated. In Cambodia, after years of negotiation, Prime Minister Hun Sen endorsed the ECCC's agenda to end impunity but only under very specific terms of reference. Callum Macrae's documentary intervention in Sri Lanka exposes the military onslaught that took place during the final months of the civil war in 2009, a genocide that was cleverly dressed up by the government as a counterterrorism operation. The timing of Oppenheimer's controversial attempt to prise open the debate about Indonesia's genocidal history appears arbitrary by comparison.

For the sake of wider comparison, the 1986 *Historikerstreit* is the most explicit and publically contested examination of the Nazi period to have taken place in post-war Germany. Leading German historians and philosophers such as Jürgen Habermas and Ernst Nolte debated the moral meaning of the Holocaust and addressed 'the problematic relationship between historical consciousness and contemporary self-understanding'.<sup>50</sup> John Torpey believes that the framework and very foundation upon which post-war Germany rests requires a certain minimal consensus about the past. The *Historikerstreit* was more than a historical quarrel; it was a highly politicized struggle between liberals and conservative revisionists to shape contemporary popular discourse

and achieve broad consensus. In Indonesia the context is very different. When Joshua Oppenheimer and his unnamed collaborators took it upon themselves to ignite an important global debate about Indonesia's formative historical trauma there was no tribunal equivalent to the ECCC in Cambodia, and no grand public reckoning to match the *Historikerstreit*.<sup>51</sup>

In the decades that followed the Indonesian genocide the triumph over communism was celebrated, propagandized and memorialized, and the perpetrators of mass crimes evaded formal punishment. Impunity does not however mean that everyone escaped judgment. All of the Indonesian survivors of the purge knew that something had happened in their neighbourhoods; decades after the purge there were lingering suspicions, stigmatizations and sometimes even reprisals, with entire families and villages politically implicated (*terlibat*) in the communist purge.<sup>52</sup> Robert Lifton studied the psychology of genocide and found that Nazi doctors who turned from healers to killers relied on two key neurological traits: doubling (sometimes referred to as the second self) and numbing.<sup>53</sup> The special traits that enabled these scientifically relaxed killers to persist and endure would not have been shared by the large numbers of informal and untrained members of Indonesian death squads caught up in the events of 1965–66. In the absence of doubling and numbing many of the killers would have been consumed by their crimes, and many indeed went mad. Jonah Weiner argues that *The act of killing* engages a group of men 'for whom guilt has no normal way of expressing itself', and that while the film may come across as a jarring and unnerving jumble at times, it constitutes a radical and important departure from the typical investigative documentary.<sup>54</sup>

The transitional justice movement is faltering if we take Cambodia and the ECCC as an example, however there will likely be more experiments in hybrid tribunals in the future. Burma and Sri Lanka are possible testing grounds, and Janet Walker believes that Indonesia's landscape of impunity will continue to be narrowed. Self-confessed executioners such as Anwar Congo can be legally indicted and subjected to court proceedings because 'amnesties can be overturned and international tribunals constituted'.<sup>55</sup> Groups such as ELSAM, the Indonesian Legal Aid Institute

(YLBHI) and the Jakarta based Coalition for Truth and Justice (consisting of forty-seven non-government organizations) are at the forefront of the battle against impunity and pledge to continue to engage with the public, with or without the cooperation of the Indonesian government.

### **Empirical analysis**

Genocide documentaries such as *Enemies of the people* and *The act of killing* tell stories, offer visual representations of the cultural other, and create subversive images that can encourage a range of responses from spectators and participants alike. Arguably the most important impact of documentary films is the intellectual debate that they provoke. For instance, when asked whether *The act of killing* can really catalyse change by narrowing impunity gaps and bringing justice to Indonesia, May Adadol Ingawanij, an expert in contemporary Thai cinema from the University of Westminster, replied ‘perhaps insofar as it leads to the promotion of discourse’.<sup>56</sup> Cambodian American filmmaker Kalyanee Mam agrees that the story told by Oppenheimer enables audiences to have deeper conversations about the legacy of the communist purge in Indonesia and to try to understand the culture of impunity that exists today.<sup>57</sup> She is cognizant of the fact that political documentary has always existed on the borderline between art and actuality, and warns that the art of film is being compromised by impact agendas that position films politically as means to an end. *The act of killing* is a technically and stylistically brilliant film that offers viewers a window into another world, and yet Kalyanee Mam has reservations about the characters that are central to the conflict being portrayed by Oppenheimer. The characters are difficult to connect with, their testimony seems embellished, and Oppenheimer’s accusatorial approach puts punishment ahead of understanding and reconciliation.<sup>58</sup>

In 2013 the PUMA BRITDOC Foundation published the first detailed summary of *The act of killing*’s campaign impact and achievements, with reference to discursive and political change in Indonesia. The most important achievement had only an indirect relation to the film itself, this being the decision of *Tempo* magazine to publish an investigative report in the Indonesian language



containing hundreds of confessional accounts of the communist purge and related incidences of mass violence in the 1960s. The evidence of political change compiled by the PUMA BRITDOC peer review committee is rather thin. Oppenheimer reportedly shared information with Indonesian Human Rights Commissioner Stanley Prasetyo, assisting in the publication of an unprecedented report on the destruction of the Indonesian Communist Party in the 1960s, although any calls for further investigation have been blocked by the Attorney General's Office. The blockage may not really matter. Many Indonesians feel there are more pressing human rights concerns such as the political disappearances of 1998, the post-referendum violence in East Timor in 1999, the fatal poisoning of activist Munir Said Thalib in 2004, political prisoners in the resource rich provinces of West Papua, and the Sharia-inspired restrictions on religious freedoms in post-tsunami (post-2004) Aceh.<sup>59</sup>

More than six years have passed since he visited the country, and yet Oppenheimer continues to warn of a prevailing regime of terror in Indonesia. Rightly or wrongly regime of terror conjures images of North Korea or Iran but certainly not Indonesia, a country judged to be 'free' by Freedom House (2006–2013) that remains a desirable tourist destination (welcoming nearly nine million visitors in 2013) and ranks 14 out of 151 countries featured on the Happy Planet Index (as of 2014).<sup>60</sup> The most pressing problems facing Indonesia today include corruption, poverty, the cost of fuel subsidies, deforestation and land grabbing, and yet there is a newfound optimism in the country directly related to the electoral victory of Joko Widodo (Jokowi) in July 2014. Jokowi is the first Indonesian president to come from a non-elite, non-military background. In August 2014 Oppenheimer celebrated the completion of his Indonesian diptych with the screening of his new documentary *The look of silence* in Venice. A reporter from *The Guardian* in Venice quoted him as saying that 'the military dictatorship is still in power' in Indonesia.<sup>61</sup> And yet one month earlier *The Guardian* led with a very different headline: 'Jokowi's [presidential] victory is a decisive break with Indonesia's old order'.<sup>62</sup>

On the night of the 2014 Oscars, after learning that his film did not win the award for best documentary, Oppenheimer told reporters that he still felt like a winner because his film ‘caused a level of change in Indonesia beyond anything we could have hoped for’.<sup>63</sup> The triumphalist view that *The act of killing* has prompted real change in Indonesia is based largely on unfounded assumptions. Perhaps it is a reflection of the inner desire of the film’s supporters to claim to have witnessed, and in a sense to have been a part of, a turning point in Indonesian history. Daniel Kahneman has produced a catalogue of biases and cognitive tricks that are common to humans and found that interpretive errors are often made when people rush or think too fast. The cinematic experience seems to fit this description. When watching *The act of killing* for the first time it is very possible that audiences are guilty of ‘neglect of ambiguity and suppression of doubt’.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, a claim about political impact based on the volume of downloads and number of screenings is unhelpful unless it is accompanied by substantive analysis of audience responses and the content of discursive debates provoked by films. For instance, Oppenheimer reported that there had been 500 screenings of *The act of killing* in 95 Indonesian cities as of April 2013, and the following year it was reported that through a network of underground distributors the film had been viewed by millions of Indonesians, but that only a few (admittedly interesting) accounts from viewers in the city of Yogyakarta were available.<sup>65</sup>

The two film screenings and discussions I attended in December 2013 provided insights into the differential attitudes of university students in Java, Indonesia. I sampled forty students between the ages of 18 and 25.<sup>66</sup> The majority of respondents (65 per cent) are male and all come from relatively privileged backgrounds if we consider that less than one-third of Indonesians are enrolled in tertiary education. 83 per cent of respondents felt that the film increased their awareness of the events of 1965–66, while 67 per cent claimed to be motivated to conduct further historical research after watching *The act of killing*. At first glance the 73 per cent figure representing those in favour of punishing the perpetrators seems low considering the audience’s relentless exposure to sadism and cruelty, as well as the fact that the audience had only a short time to reflect upon the film before

responding to the survey. When asked to rate the film's importance 49 per cent said 'very' and 44 per cent said 'moderate', with a minority of 7 per cent holding the view that the film was only of 'marginal' importance. Applying the same scale to the question of whether the film was confusing for viewers, 13 per cent said 'very' and 33 per cent said 'moderate', while 44 per cent indicated only 'marginal' confusion, leaving 10 per cent with no confusion at all ('none'). Finally, when asked whether *The act of killing* was exploitative, 5 per cent indicated 'very' and 39 per cent 'moderate', while 48 per cent perceived only 'marginal' exploitation and 10 per cent found 'none' at all.

From the qualitative comments I recorded in December 2013 there was a general consensus regarding the merits of historical debate and an appreciation that *The act of killing* presents Indonesians with the opportunity to rethink their traumatic past. One respondent felt that *The act of killing* is proof that the history of the communist purge is still beset by confusion. Another respondent felt that the film helped open the audience's eyes to the fact that the truth has been wrecked by powerful elites in Indonesia. To borrow from Rabinowitz, I would argue that the film is actually wreckage upon wreckage, compounding the multilayered problem of historical distortion and revisionism in Indonesia.<sup>67</sup> One member of the audience I interviewed in December 2013 struggled to come to terms with the conflicting messages in the film, as well as the film's unorthodox, episodic structure and multilinear plot.<sup>68</sup> The respondent expressed unease about the periodic outbursts of laughter prompted by the film, and wondered whether 'this was just a cruel comedy'? 'Is it better to just leave the past alone, rather than make a mockery of it'? Jill Godmilow proclaims that uninitiated foreign audiences will leave the theatre with a 'fantasy degree in Indonesian history' after watching *The act of killing*.<sup>69</sup> Domestic audiences may have fantasies of their own, but the audience members I observed generally agreed that it is time to rectify Indonesian history in order to make peace with the past. The conclusions drawn from the two film screenings I attended are very much in line with the findings of Jane Gaines on the mythology of political

documentaries and the related work of Imre Szeman, who argues that there is ‘only scant evidence of the hoped-for translation of audience awareness of film themes into action outside the theatre.’<sup>70</sup>

### *Trauma, truth and transitional justice*

Carmel Budiardjo was one of many political prisoners detained without trial during the communist purge, a victim of politicide in the context of a wider genocide. Managing to relocate to the UK in 1968, Budiardjo founded the organization Tapol in order to campaign for freedom, justice and truth in Indonesia. In 2012 Tapol organized a Say Sorry for 65 campaign to coincide with the release of Oppenheimer’s film. Sam Gregory contends that human rights videos are most effective when they complement other forms of advocacy. He examines the use of ‘boomerang strategies’ to engage with distant publics and mobilize foreign audiences on the basis of powerful visual evidence for justice.<sup>71</sup> I scrutinized a sample of 526 petitioners from 39 countries who left comments about Oppenheimer’s film on the Tapol Sorry for 65 website from June 2013 to September 2014. A mere 6 per cent of all the petitions submitted to the government of the Republic of Indonesia were written in the Indonesian language. The majority of petitions came from America (29 per cent) followed by Indonesia (18 per cent), Australia (13 per cent), Britain (12 per cent), the Netherlands (6 per cent), Canada (3 per cent), Germany (3 per cent), and New Zealand (2 per cent), with clusters of European, East Asian and Latin American countries contributing the remaining petitions (14 per cent).

By definition all Sorry for 65 petitioners are demanding an official apology for the genocide based on their viewing of *The act of killing*, although many see an apology as merely the first step in what should be a wider process of transitional justice. 17 per cent made explicit reference to the need for justice, with just over a third of this subgroup calling for retributive justice, broadly defined as punishment or sanction. The remaining two-thirds felt restorative justice aimed at compensating and rehabilitating victims to be more appropriate. Eleven supporters of the Tapol campaign compared the communist purge in Indonesian to the Holocaust, a blatant example of

violence blurring, or what Lucy Dawidowicz refers to as the careless disregard for linguistic precision and the glib equation of the murder of the Jews with any atrocity or state of affairs one abhors.<sup>72</sup> In June 2013 Joshua Oppenheimer signed the Tapol petition, stating that his film shows the consequences of a normality built on terror, oppression and lies. The same month, during an interview with Jess Melvin, the director insisted that *The act of killing* is already having a significant impact on human rights in Indonesia on the basis of one positive review from the Indonesian Institute of Sciences and Oppenheimer's own speculation about the intergenerational response to his film.<sup>73</sup> Robert Rosenstone's formulation seems more credible as he focuses on the subsidiary 'contribution' of genocide documentaries to processes of public debate, discourse and social change.<sup>74</sup>

The pressure for an official apology in the UK, led by Tapol, was reinforced by the Indonesian Human Rights Commission (Komnas HAM) as well as non-governmental groups such as the Indonesian Institute for Policy Research and Advocacy (ELSAM). ELSAM shares Tapol's concern for human rights and justice, whereas in China news of Oppenheimer's 2014 Oscar nomination prompted calls for an apology because of an angry backlash against *The act of killing* spurred by rumours about the mistreatment of the ethnic minority Chinese-Indonesian community.<sup>75</sup> I collected a sample of ninety-one Sina Weibo microblog entries directly related to Oppenheimer's film that appeared online between December 2013 and March 2014 and identified the following patterns. Twenty-four bloggers reacted to Oppenheimer's film by labelling Indonesia a rogue state, where impunity is the norm and society is brutal, ignorant and uncivilized. 'How can China continue to sell weapons to Indonesia' was the related question posed by three concerned bloggers, while two more expressed reservations about the increasing level of Chinese investment in Indonesia. For sixteen bloggers the film revealed the vast scale of anti-Chinese (not just anti-communist) violence in the 1960s, while another ten focused on the brutal riots in 1998 when ethnic Chinese Indonesians were targeted in cities such as Jakarta and Bandung.<sup>76</sup> Fourteen bloggers saw *The act of killing* as a profound study and indictment of humanity, helping expose the roots of evil. The leaders of the

Chinese Communist Party (CCP) were also criticized. Four bloggers compared the Indonesian genocide to the devastating famine that resulted from China's Great Leap Forward, two others accused the CCP of cowardice for not intervening in Indonesia in 1965, and one drew comparisons with the tragedy of the Cultural Revolution and the impunity that followed. Most of the comments were political in nature, although there were a handful of film purists concerned with Oppenheimer's cinematic style. Three bloggers characterized the film as an absurdist fantasy, three were swept away by the film's brilliance, and another three felt that the genocide re-enactments were unconvincing.

One particularly sceptical Chinese blogger suggests that the ending of the film is 'artificial', referring to the final rooftop scene that shows Anwar Congo revisiting the site where he claims to have executed many of his victims. Anwar is filmed as he suffers a traumatic reaction, retching uncontrollably for several minutes. It is, according to Oppenheimer, the moment where the mask is off.<sup>77</sup> The scene marks the end of a long and harrowing journey for Anwar Congo, the symbolic finale that proves the whole exercise worthwhile. Oppenheimer's cinematic intervention exposes the cruelty of the killers and forces them to conjure and exorcise their demons in order to prove that there is still hope for truth, national reconciliation and justice in Indonesia. But was it redemptive vomiting, a sign of genuine remorse, or a convenient grand finale? Oppenheimer insists the rooftop scene is authentic. One prominent filmmaker who wishes to remain anonymous is absolutely certain the scene is contrived.<sup>78</sup> Oppenheimer's PhD thesis provides a vital clue. He wrote that the goal of his interventionist project was to use film to inspire a process of remembrance, resistance and redemption carefully assembled through his ethnographic subjects.<sup>79</sup> He makes frequent reference to spirits and séances and gives examples of bodily possession leading to uncontrolled writhing and collapse, in a sense foreshadowing Anwar's own scripted road to redemption. The power of re-enactment makes this possible, encouraging the participants in Oppenheimer's film to revisit the 1960s genocide to great and terrible cinematic effect. I am reminded of the testimony of Francois Ponchaud at the Khmer Rouge tribunal in 2009. Ponchaud, author of *Cambodia year zero*, was an

eyewitness to the evacuation of Phnom Penh in April 1975.<sup>80</sup> He was struck by the cold violence of the Khmer Rouge: ‘The Khmer Rouge were not excitable like they are depicted in the film *The killing fields* [Roland Joffé, 1984], they looked daggers at us with cold determination’.<sup>81</sup> The depiction of excitable killers in Oppenheimer’s apocalyptic fever dream project deserves the same sort of scrutiny, which brings me to the city of Medan.

### *Perspectives from Medan*

Oppenheimer’s cinematic intervention in Indonesia serves to condemn the perpetrators of the communist purge and strikes a resonant chord with international as well as domestic audiences. *The act of killing* however features just five individuals who were directly involved in the purge of 1965–66. Anwar Congo, Adi Zulkadri and Safit Pardede appear as self-confessed executioners from the Pemuda Pancasila youth wing in Medan, Ibrahim Sinik as a provincial newspaper editor, and Soaduon Siregar as a local journalist working for Ibrahim Sinik. The result is a fragmented, uneven historical account that omits references to the international political context as well as the local context where competing youth groups were responsible for much of the violence and mayhem in Medan.<sup>82</sup> The army-backed Muslim militants of Pemuda Pancasila were not simply running amok, raping and killing at will without regard for human life as Oppenheimer’s film suggests. Rather, they were locked in battle with the equally dangerous communist youth wing Pemuda Rakyat and the violent pseudo-Marxist youth wing Pemuda Marhaen.

One of the most detailed accounts of the conflict in Medan is provided by Loren Ryter, who found that the escalation of youth gang violence in the 1960s eventually led to full-blown ideological warfare.<sup>83</sup> The Indonesian Communist Party was mercilessly eradicated in the aftermath of the 30 September Movement, although it is misleading to represent all Party members and supporters as helpless victims. Ryter discovered that communist youths from Pemuda Rakyat organized bloody attacks against rival gangs and even laid siege to the US consulate in Medan. Daniel Lev found that in 1965 the Communist Party was the best organized and most militant of

Indonesia's national political groups.<sup>84</sup> In 1965 President Sukarno was in consultation with Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai regarding the need to create and provide arms for a 'fifth force' in Indonesia consisting of workers and peasants (communist party supporters).<sup>85</sup> Indonesian poet and social critic Goenawan Mohamad remembers the revolutionary fervour of the 1960s and was worried that the uncompromising Communist Party was pushing Indonesia toward a state of totalitarianism.<sup>86</sup> He suggests that if the terrible bloodletting of the communist purge had not taken place, it is conceivable that Indonesia was on course for a political cleansing of a different kind—Stalin's exterminations in the October revolution, Mao's cataclysmic Cultural Revolution, Kim Il-sung's devastating cult of isolationism (*juche*).

The omissions in Oppenheimer's film, as well as the selective findings of the ad hoc executive team appointed by the National Human Rights Commission to investigate the 1965–66 'incident' (*peristiwa*), are the subject of considerable debate in some quarters of Medan.<sup>87</sup> The family of *Medan Pos* newspaper editor Ibrahim Sinik, who during a cameo appearance in *The act of killing* described his methods of interrogation as well as the internal workings of the anti-communist propaganda machine, invited Oppenheimer into their home on numerous occasions. Ibrahim's son Farianda recalls the conversations with Oppenheimer, when it was explained that the communists actually had the upper hand for much of 1965.<sup>88</sup> At one stage Communist Party affiliates forced Ibrahim Sinik into hiding, vandalizing his newspaper office and threatening employees while conducting their manhunt. It seems that the complexity of Indonesia in 1965 proved to be a burden for Oppenheimer—there were simply too many parts to reassemble—and so he narrowed the focus of his art house documentary. The film has raw power and a lavish style, and yet it is drained of political context and has stripped away the international dimension of the Indonesian conflict. Questions as to how high-level political plans (such as those to eradicate the communist threat in Indonesia) converge with national and local plans, and how this leads to extreme violence, are left unanswered. This is problematic precisely because of the repeated claims about political change,



historical revisionism, national reconciliation and transitional justice made by the film's directors and executive producers.

Oppenheimer's intention has always been to ensure that 'perpetrators are lured by the apparatus of filmmaking into naming names and revealing routines of mass murder hitherto obscene to official histories'.<sup>89</sup> Anwar Congo and Herman Koto, the two lead actors who were so easily lured into making *The act of killing*, confirmed in separate interviews that they initially agreed to work with Joshua Oppenheimer because they supported his doctoral research.<sup>90</sup> Neither believed at the time that their amateur project would become an Oscar nominated global sensation. Anwar and Herman are still very fond of Oppenheimer although they feel forgotten and to an extent betrayed. Anwar insists that he is satisfied with his portrayal in *The act of killing* even though he has suffered from anxiety and somatic malfunction since the film debuted at the Toronto Film Festival in 2012. Anwar is resigned to the fact that journalists and human rights campaigners from around Indonesia have his mobile number and residential address, and that calls for retributive justice are only growing louder. Herman is determined to defend Anwar against the legal advocates and rights campaigners who are pursuing him.<sup>91</sup> The main message from Anwar is that he feels powerless, like a shadow (*bayangan*), and fears being cornered (*terpojok*) and entrapped.<sup>92</sup>

Herman Koto takes all the credit for the *mise-en-scène*, particularly the casting, choreography and development of *Arsan dan Aminah*, the amateur film-within-a-film that inspired the gruesome re-enactments by perpetrators that Oppenheimer now presents as a kind of therapeutic process of remembrance and atonement. One of the most shocking episodes in Oppenheimer's film is the Kampung Kolam village massacre led by Pemuda Pancasila. Very little is known about the events surrounding Kampung Kolam in November 1965, so in effect the director gave his cast creative license to indulge themselves in scenes of rampaging violence. It is a raw example of destruction for the pleasure of destruction, prompting historian Robert Cribb to accuse Oppenheimer of putting back on the agenda 'the Orientalist notion that Indonesians slaughtered each other with casual self-indulgence because they did not value human life'.<sup>93</sup> The most senior surviving member of Pemuda

Pancasila North Sumatra is H. Yan Paruhum Lubis, known in Medan as Ucok Majestik, one of forty executioners interviewed but then omitted from *The act of killing* by Oppenheimer. Ucok is adamant that he was fighting for God and country in 1965. He was directly involved in the Kampung Kolam incident and claims that Pemuda Pancasila was recruited by the army to spearhead an attack on a communist stronghold twelve kilometres outside of Medan.<sup>94</sup> Stories of the Pemuda Pancasila victory at Kampung Kolam are full of discrepancies, as Loren Rytter discovered when he examined declassified documents and interviewed local villagers in 1998. Two Pemuda Pancasila members, Adlin and Jacob, were reportedly found dead in Kampung Kolam in 1965, casting doubt on Oppenheimer's portrayal of a completely one-sided village massacre.<sup>95</sup>

With so few left in Medan to speak to why did Oppenheimer ignore Ucok's testimony? Ucok played an integral part in the local history of the communist purge, a living witness to the events that inspired Oppenheimer to intervene in Indonesia in the first place.<sup>96</sup> Anwar Congo was the right choice for the director if we think in terms of cinematic effect however the name Anwar is nowhere to be found in the history books. The most notorious killer was the late Effendi Nasution, the lion of North Sumatra, while Ucok Majestik was known to communists as the devil of Medan city. Ucok and a number of journalists currently working for Farianda Sinik at *Medan Pos* pointed out another discrepancy in *The act of killing*.<sup>97</sup> In one of the film's longest and most important re-enactments Anwar Congo tortures and kills the Chairman of the Communist Party for North Sumatra, Djalaluddin Jusuf Nasution. Reports suggest however that Djalaluddin was among a group of fifteen Communist Party leaders put on trial in 1966.<sup>98</sup> Ucok believes that Djalaluddin died while in custody, before a decision about his execution could be rendered by the Extraordinary Military Courts. Oppenheimer seems to belong in the company of director Atom Egoyan, whose film *Ararat* (2002) was never intended to provide a comprehensive history of the Armenian genocide. Egoyan focuses on the question of denial and its repercussions; both *Ararat* and *The act of killing* are interventionist films about the effects of genocide denial and manipulation that are still felt in the present.<sup>99</sup>

## Conclusion

The evidence presented in this article supports the idea that genocide documentary is a complex and antagonistic form of intervention that demands continuous reappraisal. The roles that interventionist filmmakers play in processes of truth, national reconciliation and justice are variable. Joshua Oppenheimer's widely celebrated film *The act of killing* has not become the catalyst for change that many assumed it would. The risk of victim re-traumatization has been given insufficient consideration by the director and his crew, whereas their claims regarding truth and transitional justice are inflated. For the sake of comparison the documentary footage provided by Callum Macrae in *No fire zone* and the corroborative evidence presented by forensic pathologists is being considered as part of the international call for a United Nations inquiry into war crimes and human rights violations in Sri Lanka. Since the release of *Enemies of the people* Robert Lemkin and Thet Sambath have been drawn into both the real and the 'virtual trials' of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, and have facilitated structured dialogue between Cambodian American genocide survivors and Khmer Rouge perpetrators.<sup>100</sup> The circumstances surrounding Oppenheimer's multi-award winning documentary are reminiscent of US President Obama's 2009 'virtual Nobel prize' in that they give rise to the peculiar situation where good intentions are rewarded before they have translated into actual deeds or hard facts.<sup>101</sup>

Reminiscent of Robert Flaherty a century ago, Oppenheimer 'soaked himself in his material', patiently living with his research subjects to the point of intimacy.<sup>102</sup> Unlike Flaherty's arctic Eskimo project, however, *The act of killing* was made on the basis of a highly politicized intervention in a post-genocide context by an outsider using deceptive techniques in order to infiltrate a local Indonesian community. The director seems absolutely certain that his cause is just and methods are sound. In other professions the approach to genocide research is more balanced. For instance Richard Wright found that forensic archaeologists responsible for the impartial investigation of mass graves often reflect upon the morbidity of their work, the psychological

consequences of their research, and sometimes even question their feelings in relation to the process of uncovering the dead and ‘the evil context in which they lie’.<sup>103</sup>

Joshua Oppenheimer claims that it was never his intention to make a film about a particular genocide. Rather, he argues that ‘when terror exerts a terrible hold on the present precisely because it was made spectral by virtue of being obscene to all official narratives and accounts, *imagining becomes the main job of the historian*’.<sup>104</sup> The director, brilliant as he is, fails to compensate for the fact that antagonistic interventions such as those undertaken in the making of *The act of killing* have perverse effects. Cinematic intervention may in fact add to the spectral and the obscene, especially in the case of wildly imaginative art house projects which are theoretically tantalizing but highly obscure, and suffer from deficits of causal plausibility that no amount of imagination can or even should stand to rectify. As Hayden White aptly concludes, imagination that is not disciplined by its subordination to the rules of evidence is dangerous, particularly dangerous for the historian (or the genocide documentary filmmaker challenging official versions of history) who ‘cannot know that what he has imagined was actually the case, that it is not a product of his imagination in the sense in which that term is used to characterize the activity of the poet or writer of fiction’.<sup>105</sup> Perhaps the greatest conceit of all is Oppenheimer’s claim that his interventionist film, made with insufficient regard for methodological or ethical standards in research, has done what all previous research projects failed to do: end impunity, unmask a regime, bring meaningful justice to victims and heal the nation.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Rudolph J. Rummel, *Death by government* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> Katie Kitamura, ‘Joshua Oppenheimer on The Act of Killing’, *Al Jazeera*, 22 September 2013, available at: <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2013/9/22/joshua-oppenheimeronfilmingtheactofkilling.html>.

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<sup>3</sup> A. J. Schnack, 'It came from inside the house: community, criticism and *The Act of Killing*', *Filmmaker Magazine*, 10 March 2013, available at: <http://filmmakermagazine.com/84922-it-came-from-inside-the-house-community-criticism-and-the-act-of-killing/>.

<sup>4</sup> Kevin L. O'Neill and Alexander L. Hinton, 'Genocide, truth, memory, and representation: an introduction', in Kevin L. O'Neill and Alexander L. Hinton (eds.), *Genocide: truth, memory, and representation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), pp. 1–26.

<sup>5</sup> Frank Stern, 'Screening politics: cinema and intervention', *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2000, pp. 65–73.

<sup>6</sup> James Johnson, 'The arithmetic of compassion: rethinking the politics of photography', *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 41, No. 3, 2011, pp. 621–643.

<sup>7</sup> Estimates vary from five hundred thousand to two and a half million killed during the communist purge.

<sup>8</sup> The Indonesian Communist Party may have had up to three million core members and another twenty million supporters from affiliates such as the Indonesian Women's Organization (Gerwani) and the Central Organization of Indonesian Workers (SOBSI).

<sup>9</sup> Helen Fein, 'Revolutionary and antirevolutionary genocides: a comparison of state murders in Democratic Kampuchea, 1975 to 1979, and in Indonesia, 1965 to 1966', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 35, No. 4, 1993, pp. 796–823.

<sup>10</sup> Harold Crouch, 'Patrimonialism and military rule in Indonesia', *World Politics*, Vol. 31, No. 4, 1979, pp. 571–587.

<sup>11</sup> Kenneth M. George, 'Some things that have happened to *The Sun After September 1965*: politics and the interpretation of an Indonesian painting', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 39, No. 4, 1997, pp. 603–634.

<sup>12</sup> C.W. Watson, *Of self and injustice: autobiography and repression in modern Indonesia* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2006), p. 68. Arifin C. Noer's state sanctioned propaganda film *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* (1984) became the basis for general knowledge about the 30 September Movement. The

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film was broadcast by the state-owned television company TVRI every year on the anniversary of the failed *coup d'état* until it was cancelled by interim president B.J. Habibie in 1998.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Cribb, 'The Act of Killing', *Critical Asian Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 1, 2014, pp. 147–149.

<sup>14</sup> Stern, 'Screening politics', p. 67.

<sup>15</sup> Paula Rabinowitz, 'Wreckage upon wreckage: history, documentary and the ruins of memory', *History and Theory*, Vol. 32, No. 2, 1993, pp. 119–137, p. 123.

<sup>16</sup> There are also significant dissimilarities between the work of Flaherty and Oppenheimer, not least the complete lack of reflexivity in Flaherty's film projects. Oppenheimer was mentored by celebrated Serbian filmmaker Dusan Makavejev, who supervised his undergraduate thesis at Harvard University and recognized at an early stage that Oppenheimer was a dynamic storyteller and an exceptional talent. See Marios V. Broustas, 'Oppenheimer commands non-linear universe', *The Harvard Crimson*, 5 June 1997, available at:

<http://www.thecrimson.com/article/1997/6/5/oppenheimer-commands-non-linear-universe-pslightly-slouched/>.

<sup>17</sup> Jeffrey C. Alexander, 'On the social construction of moral universals: the Holocaust from war crime to trauma drama', *European Journal of Social Theory*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2002, pp. 5–85, p. 32.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Greene, 'Unacknowledged scripts: Joshua Oppenheimer on *The Look of Silence*', *BFI Sight & Sound Magazine*, 8 January 2015, available at: <http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/comment/unfiction/unacknowledged-scripts>.

<sup>19</sup> Meg McLagan, 'Principles, publicity, and politics: notes on human rights media', *Visual Anthropology*, Vol. 105, No. 3, pp. 605–612. Leshu Torchin, *Creating the witness: documenting genocide on film, video, and the Internet* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

<sup>20</sup> Neuroscientists have discovered the ADRA2B gene responsible for detecting brain chemicals which may influence how vividly genocide survivors recall their experiences. See Kerri Smith, 'Genes influence emotional memory', *Nature News*, 30 July 2007, available at: <http://www.nature.com/news/2007/070730/full/news070730-1.html>.

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<sup>21</sup> Brian Winston, ‘Ça va de soi: the visual representation of violence in the Holocaust documentary’, in Joram ten Brink and Joshua Oppenheimer (eds.), *Killer images: documentary film, memory and the performance of violence* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2012), pp. 97–119, p. 109. For comparison see the recent controversy surrounding the completion of Sidney Bernstein’s long suppressed Nazi death camp film *Night will fall* by the Imperial War Museum in London.

<sup>22</sup> Jill Godmilow, ‘Killing the documentary: an Oscar nominated filmmaker takes issue with *The Act of Killing*’, *Indiewire*, 5 March 2013, available at: <http://www.indiewire.com/article/killing-the-documentary-an-oscar-nominated-filmmaker-takes-issue-with-the-act-of-killing>. *Enemies of the people*, by contrast, is a much more honest and transparent project. Thet Sambath reveals his method and approach, his doubts and concerns, the impact his research is having on his family, and appears to struggle throughout the film with his responsibility to tell the truth to all of his informants, including the notorious war criminal Nuon Chea.

<sup>23</sup> Peter Rainer, ‘The Act of Killing has a repellent film conceit’, *Christian Science Monitor*, 26 July 2013, available at: <http://www.csmonitor.com/The-Culture/Movies/2013/0726/The-Act-of-Killing-has-a-repellant-film-conceit>.

<sup>24</sup> Nick Fraser, ‘We love impunity: the case of *The Act of Killing*’, *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 67, No. 2, pp. 21–24, p. 21.

<sup>25</sup> Jennifer Merin, ‘The Act of Killing: movie review’, *About Entertainment*, 2013, available at: <http://documentaries.about.com/od/revie2/fr/The-Act-Of-Killing-Movie-Review-2013.htm>.

<sup>26</sup> John Roosa, ‘Review: The Act of Killing’, *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 87, No. 2, 2014, pp. 408–410.

<sup>27</sup> Burcu Müünyas, ‘Genocide in the minds of Cambodian youth: transmitting (hi)stories of genocide to second and third generations in Cambodia’, *Journal of Genocide Research*, Vol. 10, No. 3, 2008, pp. 413–439; Jeffrey Sonis, James L. Gibson, Joop T. V. M. de Jong, Nigel P. Field, Sokhom Hean, and Ivan Komproe, ‘Probable posttraumatic stress disorder and disability in Cambodia: associations with perceived justice, desire for revenge, and attitudes toward the Khmer

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Rouge trials', *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, Vol. 302, No. 5, 2009, pp. 527–536.

<sup>28</sup> Charles S. Maier, *The unmasterable past: history, Holocaust, and German national identity*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 12.

<sup>29</sup> Janet Walker, 'Referred pain: *The Act of Killing* and the production of a crime scene', *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 67, No. 2, 2013, pp. 14–20, p. 16.

<sup>30</sup> Parker Tyler, 'Documentary technique in film fiction', *American Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1949, pp. 99–115.

<sup>31</sup> Callum Macrae's documentary *No fire zone: the killing fields of Sri Lanka* (2013) deals with the recent manifestations of a dreadful civil war that was supposed to have no witnesses.

<sup>32</sup> Tanguy Chouard, 'The science of impunity', *Nature*, Vol. 503, No. 7476, 2013, p. 340.

<sup>33</sup> Nicole Rafter, 'Film review: Joshua Oppenheimer (dir.), *The Act of Killing*', *Theoretical Criminology*, Vol. 18, No. 2, 2014, pp. 257–260, p. 259.

<sup>34</sup> John Roosa, 'Interview with Joshua Oppenheimer', *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*, Vol. 18, No. 3, 2014, pp. 413–422, p. 419.

<sup>35</sup> Roosa, 'Review', p. 410. *The Act of Killing* was filmed in Medan, North Sumatra.

<sup>36</sup> David Chandler, 'Cambodia deals with its past: collective memory, demonisation and induced amnesia', *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, Vol. 9, No. 2-3, 2008, pp. 355–369, p. 356.

<sup>37</sup> The most recent films are Robert Lemelson's *40 years of silence: an Indonesian tragedy* (2009), Maj Wechselmann's *The women and the generals* (2010), Ifa Isfansyah's *Sang penari* (2011) and Yayan Wiludiharto's *Jembatan bacem* (2012).

<sup>38</sup> Katherine McGregor, *History in uniform: military ideology and the construction of Indonesia's past* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2007).

<sup>39</sup> Watson, 'Of self and injustice'.



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<sup>40</sup> Mary S. Zurbuchen, 'History, memory, and the '1965 Incident' in Indonesia', *Asian Survey*, Vol. 42, No. 4, 2002, pp. 564–581.

<sup>41</sup> Zurbuchen, 'History', p. 572.

<sup>42</sup> John Roosa, 'The truths of torture: victims' memories and state history in Indonesia', *Indonesia*, Vol. 85, April, 2008, pp. 31–49. For an account of the Syarikat tapes see Adrian Vickers, 'Where are the bodies: the haunting of Indonesia', *The Public Historian*, Vol. 32, No. 1, 2010, pp. 45–58.

Syarikat is a non-government organization in Indonesia that videotaped a series of interviews with former female political prisoners in the early 2000s.

<sup>43</sup> Joshua Oppenheimer, 'Stories we tell ourselves: two films by Joshua Oppenheimer', *Harvard Film Archive*, 4-5 October 2013, available at:

<http://hcl.harvard.edu/hfa/films/2013octdec/oppenheimer.html>.

<sup>44</sup> Andrea Early, 'Eight named Marshall Scholars', *The Harvard University Gazette*, 12 December 1996, available at: <http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/1996/12.12/EightNamedMarsh.html>.

<sup>45</sup> Lusztig, 'The fever dream', p. 51. Oppenheimer seems to have paid particular attention to the work of Cambodian director Rithy Panh (*S-21: the Khmer Rouge killing machine*) and Japanese director Hara Kazuo (*The emperor's naked army marches on*).

<sup>46</sup> Irene Lusztig, 'The fever dream of documentary: a conversation with Joshua Oppenheimer', *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 67, No. 2, 2013, pp. 50–56.

<sup>47</sup> Syamsul Arifin, former governor of North Sumatra Province (2008–13) and close friend of Anwar Congo, makes a brief appearance in *The act of killing*. Syamsul was charged with embezzlement by the Corruption Eradication Commission in 2011 and found guilty by the Supreme Court in 2012. This verdict suggests that Indonesia's democratic institutions are functioning and that not all criminals enjoy impunity.

<sup>48</sup> Duncan McCargo, 'Politics by other means? The virtual trials of the Khmer Rouge Tribunal', *International Affairs*, Vol. 87, No. 3, 2011, pp. 613–627.

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- <sup>49</sup> Andreas Huyseer, 'Resistance to memory: the uses and abuses of public forgetting', in Max Pensky (ed.), *Globalizing critical theory* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005), pp. 165–184.
- <sup>50</sup> John Torpey, 'Introduction: Habermas and the historians', *New German Critique*, Vol. 44, spring/summer, 1988, pp. 5–24, p. 6.
- <sup>51</sup> Over 60 Indonesian contributors to the film, including the co-director, remain anonymous because of fears of reprisals. See for instance Joe Cochrane, 'Act of Killing film fails to stir Indonesia', *The New York Times*, 1 March 2014, available at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/02/world/asia/act-of-killing-film-fails-to-stir-indonesia.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/02/world/asia/act-of-killing-film-fails-to-stir-indonesia.html?_r=0).
- <sup>52</sup> Watson, 'Of self and injustice', p. 69.
- <sup>53</sup> Robert J. Lifton, *The Nazi doctors: medical killing and the psychology of genocide* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1986).
- <sup>54</sup> Jonah Weiner, 'The weird genius of The Act of Killing', *The New Yorker*, 15 July 2013, available at: <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-weird-genius-of-the-act-of-killing>.
- <sup>55</sup> Walker, 'referred pain', p. 17.
- <sup>56</sup> Author telephone interview with May Adadol Ingawanij, 25 April 2014.
- <sup>57</sup> Author Skype interview with Kalyanee Mam, 1 October 2014. Kalyanee's latest documentary is *A River Changes Course* (2013).
- <sup>58</sup> Author Skype interview with Kalyanee Mam, 1 October 2014. Oppenheimer's second film about the Indonesian genocide, *The look of silence*, redresses some of the problems identified by Kalyanee.
- <sup>59</sup> Andreas Harsono, 'Human rights are under attack in post-tsunami Indonesia', *The Guardian*, 27 December 2013, available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/dec/27/human-rights-are-under-attack-in-post-tsunami-indonesia>.

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<sup>60</sup> United Nations World Tourism Organization, *UNWTO Tourism Highlights 2014 Edition*, available at: [http://dtxqtq4w60xqpw.cloudfront.net/sites/all/files/pdf/unwto\\_highlights14\\_en.pdf](http://dtxqtq4w60xqpw.cloudfront.net/sites/all/files/pdf/unwto_highlights14_en.pdf).

<sup>61</sup> Xan Brooks, 'The Look of Silence gets Venice talking, but verdict from Indonesia still pending', *The Guardian*, 28 August 2014, available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/aug/28/the-look-of-silence-gets-venice-talking-but-verdict-from-indonesia-still-pending>.

<sup>62</sup> Alison Martin, 'Jokowi's victory is a decisive break with the old order', *The Guardian*, 23 July 2014, available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jul/23/jokowis-victory-is-a-decisive-break-with-indonesias-old-order>.

<sup>63</sup> Andrew Pulver, 'Oscars 2014: Act of Killing passed over, but leads to change in Indonesia', *The Guardian*, 3 March 2014, available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/mar/03/the-act-of-killing-change-indonesia-oscar>.

<sup>64</sup> Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, fast and slow* (London: Allen Lane, 2011), p. 79.

<sup>65</sup> Kitamura, 'Joshua Oppenheimer on The Act of Killing'. Mette Bjerregaard, 'What Indonesians really think about The Act of Killing', *The Guardian*, 5 March 2014, available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/mar/05/act-of-killing-screening-in-indonesia>.

<sup>66</sup> This is admittedly a small sample size. There is no representative cross-sectional national sample of Indonesians who have watched *The act of killing* to date.

<sup>67</sup> Rabinowitz, 'Wreckage upon wreckage', p. 119.

<sup>68</sup> Galuh Wandita, 'Preman nation: watching The Act of Killing in Indonesia', *Critical Asian Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 1, 2014, pp. 167–170. Wandita watched *The Act of Killing* with about fifty genocide survivors in Sulawesi, Indonesia, one of whom also made the point that the film was confusing and had a circular storyline.

<sup>69</sup> Godmilow, 'Killing the documentary', 2013.

<sup>70</sup> Jane M. Gaines, 'Political mimesis', in Jane M. Gaines and Michael Renov (eds.), *Collecting visible evidence* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), pp. 84–102. Imre

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Szeman, 'Crude aesthetics: the politics of oil documentaries', *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 2, pp. 423–439.

<sup>71</sup> Sam Gregory, 'Kony 2012 through the prism of video advocacy practices and trends', *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, Vol. 4, No. 3, pp. 463–468.

<sup>72</sup> Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *The Holocaust and the historians* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 16.

<sup>73</sup> Jess Melvin, 'An interview with Joshua Oppenheimer', *Inside Indonesia*, Vol. 112, April-June, 2013, available at: <http://www.insideindonesia.org/current-edition/an-interview-with-joshua-oppenheimer>.

<sup>74</sup> Consider for instance Luis Puenzo's *The Official Story* (1985) concerning the *los desaparecidos* of Argentina and Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991) which led to a US Congressional inquiry. Robert A. Rosenstone, *History on film/film on history*, 2nd edn. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), p. 5.

<sup>75</sup> Amy Li, 'Chinese demand apology as Indonesian communist-purge film gets Oscar nod', *South China Morning Post*, 21 January 2014, available at: <http://www.scmp.com/news/china-insider/article/1410271/chinese-demand-apology-indonesian-communist-purge-film-gets-oscar?page=all>.

<sup>76</sup> Chinese Indonesians experienced serious harassment but relatively few were killed during the communist purge of 1965–66. See Robert Cribb, 'A genocide that never was: explaining the myth of anti-Chinese massacres in Indonesia, 1965–66', *Journal of Genocide Research*, Vol. 11, No. 4, 2009, pp. 447–465.

<sup>77</sup> Lusztig, 'The fever dream', p. 52.

<sup>78</sup> Author telephone interview with a documentary filmmaker, 11 April 2014.

<sup>79</sup> Joshua Oppenheimer, 'Show of force: film, ghosts and genres of historical performance in the Indonesian genocide' (PhD thesis, University of the Arts London, 2004), p. 233.

<sup>80</sup> François Ponchaud, *Cambodia year zero*, trans. Nancy Amphoux (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978).

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<sup>81</sup> Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, *Written record of interview of witness Francois Ponchaud by CIJ*, ECCC Document, 13 February 2009, available at: [http://www.eccc.gov.kh/sites/default/files/documents/courtdoc/00333949-00333957\\_E3\\_370\\_EN.TXT.pdf](http://www.eccc.gov.kh/sites/default/files/documents/courtdoc/00333949-00333957_E3_370_EN.TXT.pdf).

<sup>82</sup> Oppenheimer is aware of the historical and international political context and has consulted the available archives, as can be seen in his PhD thesis, although the scope and nature of his film seems to have prevented him from giving this sufficient coverage. These limitations are not fully acknowledged by the filmmaker.

<sup>83</sup> Loren Ryter, 'Youths, gangs, and the state in Indonesia' (PhD thesis, University of Washington, 2002).

<sup>84</sup> Daniel Lev, 'Indonesia 1965: the year of the coup', *Asian Survey*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 1966, pp. 103–110.

<sup>85</sup> M. C. Ricklefs, *A history of modern Indonesia since C.1300*, 2nd edn. (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1993), p. 279.

<sup>86</sup> Goenawan Mohamad, *Sidelines: thought pieces from TEMPO magazine*, trans. Jennifer Lindsay (Jakarta: The Lontar Foundation, 1994), p. 202.

<sup>87</sup> Author interviews and observations, Medan, January 2014.

<sup>88</sup> Author interview with Farianda Sinik, Medan, 16 January 2014.

<sup>89</sup> Oppenheimer, 'Show of force', abstract (np.).

<sup>90</sup> Author interview with Anwar Congo, Medan, 17 January 2014 and with Herman Koto, Medan, 16 January 2014.

<sup>91</sup> Author interview with Herman Koto, Medan, 16 January 2014.

<sup>92</sup> Author interview with Anwar Congo, Medan, 17 January 2014.

<sup>93</sup> Cribb, 'The Act of Killing', p. 147.

<sup>94</sup> Author interview with Ucok Majestik, Medan, 16 January 2014.

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<sup>95</sup> Ryter, 'Youths', p. 19. I found that Adlin and Jacob are buried in the Tanah Wakaf Kaum Muslim Besar cemetery in Medan. There are references to Kampung Kolam on their headstones.

<sup>96</sup> Author interview with Ukok Majestik, Medan, 16 January 2014.

<sup>97</sup> Author interview with *Medan Pos* journalists, Medan, 17 January 2014.

<sup>98</sup> British Broadcasting Corporation, *BBC monitoring service reports (part III: the Far East)*, 1967.

<sup>99</sup> Georgiana Banita, 'The power to imagine: genocide, exile, and ethical memory in Atom Egoyan's *Ararat*', in Kristi Wilson and Tomás F. Crowder-Taraborrelli (eds.), *Film and genocide* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2012), pp. 87–106.

<sup>100</sup> Victor Peskin, *International justice in Rwanda and the Balkans: virtual trials and the struggle for state cooperation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). Peskin referred to the ECCC proceedings as virtual trials, or parallel contests that determine the extent to which the state is willing to cooperate with international investigators.

<sup>101</sup> Christopher Hitchens, 'Christopher Hitchens on Obama's undeserved Nobel Prize', *Newsweek*, 10 October 2009, available at: <http://www.newsweek.com/christopher-hitchens-obamas-undeserved-nobel-prize-81177>.

<sup>102</sup> John Grierson, *Grierson on documentary*, rev. edn. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1966), p. 143.

<sup>103</sup> Richard Wright, 'Where are the bodies? In the ground', *The Public Historian*, Vol. 32, No. 1, 2010, pp. 96–107, p. 106.

<sup>104</sup> Oppenheimer, 'Show of force', p. 249.

<sup>105</sup> Hayden White, 'The politics of historical interpretation: discipline and de-sublimation', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 1982, pp. 113–137, p. 123.