



“A Documentary of the Imagination”

The Use of Reenactments in
The Act of Killing

A Master’s Thesis for the Degree
“Master of Arts (Two Years) in
Film and Media Production”

By

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May 2015

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Grader:

LUND UNIVERSITY ABSTRACT
MASTER OF ARTS IN FILM AND MEDIA PRODUCTION
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This thesis will provide a formal analysis of Joshua Oppenheimer’s documentary *The Act of Killing* (2012), by analyzing the different stylistic techniques used in the reenactments such as the cinematography, editing, sound and *mise-en-scène*, and by analyzing the ways in which these documentary techniques affected the film and the people who committed the crimes. This research also reflects the way in which reviewers all over the world have related to and received this film.

Through different reenactments and a unique filming method, Oppenheimer challenges the executioners of one of the worst world genocides, the massacres of Indonesia in 1965, to recreate their crimes in any ways they wanted to. Indonesia’s government has built a regime of terror founded on the celebration of genocide. The perpetrators were never punished; on the contrary, they are celebrated as heroes and still remain in power. The reenactments in the film became a prison from which the perpetrators could not escape, a mirror that forced both the perpetrators and spectators to see themselves.

This thesis will open a discussion about the way reenactments challenge all viewers and on how these documentary techniques can make perpetrators conscious about their crimes. Through documentary history it is possible to see the evolution of the use of reenactments as a documentary technique, from early documentary films through the development of the digital world. The use of reenactments has become one of the leading hybrid forms in documentary. In this context, *The Act of Killing* (2012) opens the possibility of finding a new approach for exploring and evolving the documentary genre and it contributes to further research about reenactment as a technique in documentary film. Therefore, this analysis tries to reveal how this space was stylistically structured and performed. The study of these topics will be analyzed and contextualized with Bill Nichols’ theory on documentary modes and other relevant theoretical works, as well as with reviews and articles written about the film.

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PART 1

1.1. Introduction

Aim, Questions and Relevance of the Research

During the last years, a growing number of documentary films have incorporated reenactments in their documentary practices. Although documentary films have used reenactment techniques since the 1920s, these have not been used as frequently as today. The newly interest in reenactments has not only been seen in film, but as a phenomenon in different cultural media. The discussion about truth and reality is still a debate in documentary, however the use of reenactments has shown that the truth can be revealed in different ways. Reenactments offer many possibilities for understanding documentary and can have different functions and effects.

This thesis focuses on the director's cut 159 minutes version of Joshua Oppenheimer's documentary film *The Act of Killing* from 2012 and on how the different stylistic techniques used in the reenactments such as the cinematography, editing, sound and *mise-en-scène*, affected the final result of the film and the men who committed the crimes. Being one of the films more discussed in the last years, the thesis also reflects the way in which reviewers all over the world have related to and received the film. Therefore, the aim of this research is to make a deep analysis of Oppenheimer's method, studying in detail the stylistic techniques he uses in his reenactments and the implications of his method.

Some of the main questions to answer with this thesis are: How or with what techniques are reenactments created in documentary? How can this kind of documentary technique make perpetrators conscious about their crimes? What are the ethical implications of the reenactments in *The Act of Killing*? This approach opens the possibility to understand and study reenactments from a different perspective. By analyzing the stylistic method created by Oppenheimer, the use of reenactments in documentary can be further discussed and developed.

Theoretical Framework and Previous State of Research

The subject of reenactment has been previously studied and discussed by several theoreticians and scholars. The most prominent and which I use in my research is American film critic and theoretician Bill Nichols, who has done extensive work, books and essays, pioneering as founder of the contemporary study of documentary film. I mainly focus on Nichols' theory of documentary modes and reenactment types and in how they are blended in the different sections of the film. Nichols has published several studies about reenactment in film culture, which is of great relevance for my thesis.

Jonathan Kahana has done extensive research on the subject of reenactment, documentary film and essay film, and his work is also relevant for the understanding and theoretical background on reenactment. I use among others, the work of Film director Errol Morris, who after his documentary film *The Thin Blue Line* has done extensive interviews and articles about reenactments and subjectivity in cinema. This thesis has also been mainly studied with the wide amount of articles and reviews that have been previously published about *The Act of Killing* (2012) since its release, in different film journals, magazines and websites across the media.

Chapter Summaries

In the first part of the thesis, I give an overview of the documentary history and theory, as well as an introduction of the use of reenactment in documentary film. I proceed with an introduction to Joshua Oppenheimer's work and an outline of the background of *The Act of Killing*, for a better understanding of the situation in Indonesia and of how Oppenheimer began working with the perpetrators. The second part of the thesis is the analysis of three sections of the film. The first section analyzed is the opening sequence, the second a reenacted scene and the third the closing sequence of the film. All of these sections contain different types of reenactments that are analyzed through the study of the stylistic techniques: the cinematography, editing, sound and *mise-en-scène*. Finally the main results and discoveries are presented.

1.2. Documentary History & Theory

In the following section of this research, I give an overview of the history and theory of documentary film, in order to understand and discuss the importance of reenactments and specifically on how the stylistic techniques used by Joshua Oppenheimer in the reenactments in *The Act of Killing* (2012) created an unexpected effect on the perpetrators and influenced the interpretation and perception of the spectators with the film.

Documentary has its beginnings early on 1880 when Eadweard Muybridge developed the first sequential photographs in motion. It was until 1920 that Robert Joseph Flaherty filmed *Nanook of the North* (1922), first recognized feature-length documentary and which has also been called the first reenactment in history. Flaherty documented during a year the life of Nanook and his family, eskimals from the Itivimuit tribe. The film uses third person narration and subjective tone and elements from ethnographic filmmaking. Documentary film has been studied for a long time, and has been discussed from many different perspectives, however it has never had a precise definition. In 1930 John Grierson proposed the first documentary definition as the “creative treatment of actuality”. This definition has been subject of many debates since there is an obvious tension between the “creative treatment” which implies a creative and fictional aspect, and the term “actuality”, which reminds of something veridical and of a historical reality.¹ It is the complex relation between the creative and reenacted elements of Flaherty’s film and Grierson’s definition, that Oppenheimer challenges, exposes and develops, by taking advantage of it in a new way.

Film critic and theoretician Bill Nichols analyses different beliefs about documentary and proposes a more complete definition; “Documentary film speaks about situations and events involving real people (social actors) who present themselves to us as themselves in stories that convey a plausible proposal about, or perspective on, the lives, situations, and events portrayed. The distinct point of view of the filmmaker shapes this story into a way of seeing the historical world directly rather than into a fictional allegory.”²

¹ B. Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, Indiana USA, Indiana University Press, 2001, p. 6.

² Nichols, p. 14.

On the other hand, Stella Bruzzi discusses the different documentary genealogies that have been imposed throughout history, such as Paul Rotha's early 'evolution of documentary' outlined in *Documentary Film* in 1936 or Erik Barnouw's genealogy of sorts in *Documentary: A History of the Non-fiction Film* (1993).³ Bruzzi explains that the genealogy proposed by Nichols about different modes of documentary, has been the most influential of all, yet she also emphasizes on how Nichols division, exclude some newer forms of documentary.

Nichols proposed six cinematic modes that characterize documentaries: the expository, the poetic, the observational, the participatory, the reflexive and the performative. The expository mode refers to documentaries that speak directly to the viewer with titles or voices that propose a perspective or an argument. Some expository films use a voice-of-god commentary where the speaker is heard but never seen. Others use a voice of authority commentary where the speaker is heard and also seen. This is the mode that most people associate with documentary in general.⁴ The poetic mode stresses visual and acoustic rhythms, patterns, and the overall form of the film. The filmmaker's engagement is with the film forms much as or more than with social actors. This mode accentuates feelings, moods, tones and affect much more than the factual knowledge. The expressive quality is vivid.⁵ This mode is clearly prominent in *The Act of Killing* and will be discussed further on.

The observational mode is an attempt to observe aspects of the world as they happen. Usually they have no voice-over commentary, no historical reenactments or added sound or music. Social actors behave as if the camera was not present. In the participatory mode, the filmmaker interacts with his or her social actors and participates in shaping what happens before the camera. It usually involves interviews between filmmakers and the subject, instead of directing to the audience through voice-over commentary. In the reflexive mode, the focus is in the process of negotiation between the filmmaker and viewer. There is an intensified level of reflection and awareness on the problems and meanings of representing the world. The focus of attention is on the spectator. The last mode, the performative, emphasizes the expressive quality of the filmmaker's engagement with the film's subject and addresses the audience in a vivid way. It

³ S. Bruzzi, *New Documentary; A Critical Introduction*, London, Routledge, 2005, p. 1.

⁴ Nichols, p. 31.

⁵ Nichols, p. 162.

raises questions about what knowledge is, and stresses the emotional complexity of experience from the perspective of the filmmaker. It accentuates the mood and tone, more than the arguments.⁶

Currently documentary has evolved in many different hybrid forms, which involve other forms of narrative, different forms of reflexivity, voiceover, and which would be impossible to fit into specific categories, since they coexist creating new forms of documentary. The following section will examine the use of reenactment in documentary.

1.3. Reenactment in Documentary Film

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term re-enactment means to “Act out (a past event)” and “To Bring (a law) into effect again”. Senior lecturer in film studies Dr. Michele Pierson, suggests that the second definition is the most important for a contemporary understanding of reenactment, since the element of performance (by repeating something again), introduces a reflexive dimension. She further says, “In a re-enactment, something is repeated (a past way of living, or doing, or acting), and through the activity of its performance, that which is repeated is also transformed”.⁷ Perhaps the transformation mentioned, also implies seeing things differently, and when used with certain stylistic techniques can have a more powerful effect. This will be further discussed in relation to *The Act of Killing*.

French philosopher Paul Ricœur also makes an interesting formulation of the meaning of reenactment and says, “re-enacting does not consist in re-living but in rethinking, and rethinking already contains the critical moment that forces us to take the detour by way of the historical imagination.”⁸ So both filmmaker and spectator not only re-experience something but they are

⁶ Nichols, pp. 142-211.

⁷ M. Pierson, ‘Avant-Garde Re-Enactment: “World Mirror Cinema, Decasia”, and “The Heart of the World”’, *Cinema Journal*, Vol.49, No. 1 Fall, 2009, pp. 1-19.

⁸ R. Burgoyne, ‘Introduction: re-enactment and imagination in the historical film’, *Leidschrift*, Vol 24, No. 3, 2012, <http://www.isgeschiedenis.nl/archiefstukken/re-enactment-and-imagination-in-the-historical-film-introduction/>, (Accessed 05 March 2015).

transported to the past were they could rethink it in a different way. In this sense, reenactments perhaps create a space for reflecting on past events.

In recent years, reenactment techniques have been re-used in different cultural media as documentary, television, film festivals, museums, galleries and contemporary art. By analyzing the history of documentary film, it is possible to see that reenactments were a common practice since the early years of cinema. Even though they are not new in documentary film practice, they continue creating controversy in relation to matters like the authenticity and credibility of the images presented.

Reenactments were for a long time the most authentic re-creation of past events. However, the vérité filmmakers of the 1960s affirmed that everything except what took place in front of the camera without rehearsal was inauthentic.⁹ Direct cinema or cinéma vérité, was characterized by filmmakers that wanted to capture reality and represent it as accurately as possible, as well as to question the relation between reality and cinema.

According to Jonathan Kahana, Errol Morris is one of the most visible opponents to vérité style and his documentary *The Thin Blue Line* (1988) might be considered as the film that revived the interest in reenactment among other documentary filmmakers.¹⁰ In April 2008, Morris published an article in *The New York Times* about documentary reenactment, as a response to the discussion against his use of reenactments in his films *Standard Operating Procedure* (US, 2008) and in return to the controversy created years earlier with *The Thin Blue Line* (1988). He commented, “Critics argue that the use of re-enactments suggest a callous disregard on the part of a filmmaker for what is true. I don’t agree. Some re-enactments serve the truth, others subvert it. There is no mode of expression, no technique of production that will instantly produce truth or falsehood. There is no *veritas* lens-no lens that provides a “truthful” picture of events. There is *cinema vérité* and *kino Pravda* but not cinematic truth.”¹¹ I agree, since the discussion about reenactments should also develop and move forward, from questioning how truthful events are, to perhaps

⁹ B. Nichols, ‘Documentary Reenactment and the Fantasmatic Subject’, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 35, No. 1, 2008, p. 72.

¹⁰ J. Kahana, ‘What now? Presenting Reenactment’, *Framework*, no.50: 1-2, Spring and Fall, 2009, p. 48.

¹¹ E. Morris, ‘Play it Again, Sam (re-enactments, Part One)’, *New York Times*, 3 April 2008, http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/04/03/play-it-again-sam-re-enactments-part-one/?_r=1, (Accessed 08 March 2015).

questioning more the effects reenactments have when they are used in different ways and how the results can also develop the documentary genre and the meaning of truth.

By the time Morris made *The Thin Blue Line* (1988), different filmmakers around the world also started to experiment with reenactments. Their work used a combination of what Kahana calls a “Freudian technique and method acting” to expose traumatic histories through on-location interviews.¹² Some examples of these films are, Werner Herzog *Litter Dieter Needs to Fly* (1997) and Claude Lanzmann’s history of the Holocaust *Shoah* (1985). By the same time, other filmmakers from the art world and academic circles were working with a different type of reenactment, remaking earlier works of documentary and avant-garde films.¹³

Even though documentary films have always expressed performative qualities, it was until the 1980s that the performative was recognized as a mode of documentary. Eventually films began to use self-representation and autobiographical techniques. At the same time, reenactments also became more subjective and personal.¹⁴

Contemporary documentary historian Brian Winston has paid a lot of attention to the concept of reenactment and has discussed the different levels of reconstruction that goes all the way from the minimum level of intervention by the filmmaker, as it is in natural disasters and situations uncontrolled by the filmmaker, to historically or physically impossible situations that are entirely fabricated by the filmmakers.¹⁵

Following Winston’s ideas and taking them further, Bill Nichols argues that the goal of reenactment in documentary is “to retrieve a lost object in its original form.”¹⁶ He talks about the presence of fantasy in documentary and discusses the presence of fantasmatic elements in reenactments. According to Nichols, the reenacted event introduces a fantasmatic element that an

¹² K. Fuhs, ‘Re-imagining the Nonfiction Criminal Narrative: Documentary Reenactment as Political Agency’, *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies*, No. 38.1, 2012, p. 55.

¹³ Kahana, p. 49.

*Some examples are Jill Godmilow’s remake of a film from 1969 by German Filmmaker Harun Farocki, *What Farocki Taught* (US, 1997) and the remake of a 1967 student, Elisabeth Subrin’s film *Shulie* (US, 1997).

¹⁴ Fuhs, pp. 54-56.

¹⁵ Kahana, p. 51.

¹⁶ B. Nichols, ‘Documentary Reenactments: A Paradoxical Temporality That Is Not One’,

<http://www.dokrevue.cz/en/clanky/documentary-reenactments-a-paradoxical-temporality-that-is-not-one>, 2014, (Accessed 10 March 2015).

initial representation of the same event lacks.¹⁷ He emphasizes in the importance of reenactments being recognized as representations of prior events, not of contemporaneous events, since it is the link between image and historical occurrence, where the reenactment loses its indicative link to the original event and it draws its fantasmatic power from this very fact. The viewer in this sense, experiences the exceptional experience of a repetition of what remains historically unique.¹⁸

In *The Act of Killing*, the reenactments do not exactly mean what the events of the Indonesian massacres originally meant, since evidently time has passed and they do not have the same implications and consequences that they had before. However the complexity of Oppenheimer's stylistic method in the reenactments, where fantasy, memory and reality are merged, creates confusion in the viewers, since it also depicts a world that seems extremely far from what most of us conceive as reality.

Nichols identified different types of reenactments that vary in levels of self-reflexivity and that can be found in different periods and in different reenactments in *The Act of Killing*. The first type is the Realist Dramatization, which is the dramatic and suspenseful reenactment in a realist style. It is the most polemic, because it is the least distinguishable from both that which it reenacts and the conventional representation of past events in fiction, be it in the form of a historical drama, docudrama, "true story," or flashback.¹⁹ *Nanook of the North* (1922) was the first recognized example of this reenactment.

The second type of reenactment is the one of Typifications, in which there is no specific event to which the reenactment refers to and the sense of separation between event and reenactment fades as a sense of typifying past patterns, rituals and routines increases. In this type of reenactment the suspenseful dramatization of events are presented as if they were present. The viewer recognizes that the authenticity resides in the reenactment of pre-contact activity, staged for the sake of the camera, than in their depiction of present-day activity, carried out despite the presence of the camera.²⁰

¹⁷ Nichols, 'Documentary Reenactment and the Fantasmatic Subject', p. 73.

¹⁸ Nichols, p. 74.

¹⁹ B. Nichols, "Documentary Reenactments: A Paradoxical Temporality That Is Not One", <http://www.dokrevue.cz/en/clanky/documentary-reenactments-a-paradoxical-temporality-that-is-not-one>, 2014, (Accessed 10 March 2015).

²⁰ Ibid

²⁰ Ibid

The third type is the Brechtian distanciation, where the characters perform with a narrative addressing the audience directly, so that the audience knows that they are performing. This reenactment increases the separation of the reenactment from that specific historical moment which it reenacts, giving greater possibility that the fantasmatic effect will happen. The fourth type is the Stylization, which are highly stylized reenactments. The viewer remains in that moment between before and after embodied in signifiers that possess an iconic rather than indexical relation to what has already happened. The last type of reenactment identified by Nichols is the Parody and Irony, in which the parodic tone puts into question the reenactment itself or treat some past event with a comic style, for example in mockumentaries.²¹ Many of these types of reenactments overlap with each other, however they all enhance in different ways the engagement of the viewer with the film by using past events and bringing them to present in different stylized forms.

Kristen Fuhs emphasizes the importance of what participatory reenactments can offer. She says, “They are self-consciously reflexive acts in which re-establishing the conditions for how that event should be viewed and understood in the future” She continues, “Reenactments in which subjects engage with and even re-perform their own experiences represent a conscious performance of self that exceeds the limits of historical inscription. In these participatory reenactments, subjects use their words and bodies to both describe and perform their historical selves. The body bridges temporal and spatial gaps –it is what connects a past event with a present performance.”²²

Similarly, Timothy Corrigan talks about the existence of two layers in cinematic reenactments, one that exposes the event or subject reenacted and the other one that demands rethinking that event or subject. This rethinking according to Corrigan works to determine the truth, falsity, or simply the meaning of the event.²³ And also, beyond whether something is true or false, through reenactments a much deeper recognition can be achieved, which is an area that still needs to be more explored and developed.

²¹ Ibid

²² Fuhs, p. 58.

²³ T. Corrigan, *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 196.

As mentioned earlier, reenactments are not only used in cinema, however their use in documentary has produced and started a new way of studying and understanding the meaning of documentary. Reenactments can produce an effect that no other method of conventional documentary has produced. Through more self-conscious and experimental forms of reenactment, they can provoke a kind of reflection that gives the spectator the possibility to rethink the past. This will be further explained in the following sections.

1.4. Reenactment in *The Act of Killing*

Joshua Oppenheimer

Joshua Oppenheimer was born in Texas and raised between New Mexico and Washington, D.C. He is graduated from a Bachelor of Arts in filmmaking from Harvard University and a Ph.D. from Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, University of the Arts, London. His first film *The Entire History of the Louisiana Purchase (1997)* won a Gold Hugo from the Chicago International Film Festival in 1998. He produced a series of films in Indonesia between 2004 and 2012, but it was until 2012 that he debuted with *The Act of Killing (2012)*, which premiered at the 2012 Telluride Film Festival.²⁴

Oppenheimer co-directed *The Act of Killing* over 10 years with Christine Cynn and a collaborator who, like much of the film's team, chose to remain anonymous. Signe Byrge Sørensen produced the film and the executive producers are Errol Morris and Werner Herzog. *The Act of Killing* has won many prizes and awards including the European Film Award for Best Documentary, a Panorama Audience Award, and a Prize of the Ecumenical Jury from the 63rd Berlin International Film Festival. The film also received the Robert Award by the Film Academy of Denmark, a Bodil Award by Denmark's National Association of Film Critics, and the Aung San Suu Kyi Award at the Human Rights Human Dignity International Film Festival 2013. *The Act of Killing* won the BAFTA for Best Documentary, European Film Award for Best Documentary,

²⁴ J. Oppenheimer, <http://theactofkilling.com/the-filmmakers/>, (Accessed 15 February 2015).

the 2012 CPH:DOX DOX:AWARD, the Asia Pacific Screen Award for Best Documentary, and was nominated for Best Documentary Feature at the 86th Academy Awards.²⁵ Based in Copenhagen and London, Oppenheimer is also artistic director of the Centre for Documentary and Experimental Film at the University of Westminster.

In 2014, Oppenheimer directed *The Look of Silence* (2014), which is a companion piece to *The Act of Killing*.

Background of The Act of Killing

In 1965, the government of Indonesia was conquered by the military. Many gangster's who sold movie theatre tickets on the black market, were promoted to death squad leaders. Anwar Congo, main character in *The Act of Killing*, was one of them and became executioner for the most notorious death squad in the city of Medan. He and many other leaders helped the army to kill more than one million so-called communists, ethnic Chinese, and intellectuals in less than a year. Today, Congo is celebrated as a founding father of a right-wing paramilitary organization that grew out of the death squads and which still today functions as a role model system of young paramilitaries while they continue to do corrupted actions. Congo and many of his executioner friends spent their youth inspired by Hollywood movies about gangsters and crimes. Cinema was an inspiration for their killings. They hated the "communists" for boycotting American films– the most popular in the cinemas. While living in Indonesia and working in different projects, Joshua Oppenheimer examined the way Indonesian death squad leaders are still celebrated as heroes. After working closely with victims of the genocide, he was motivated by the victims to search and meet with the perpetrators. After meeting many of perpetrators, Oppenheimer meets Anwar Congo and challenges him and his friends, to reenact their mass-killings and torture techniques in the style of the American movies they loved.²⁶

Throughout different reenactments in the film, Congo and his friends agree to tell their stories while they dance in musical scenes and act as cowboys and gangsters in the style of *film noir*

²⁵ J. Oppenheimer, http://theactofkilling.com/awards_distinctions/, (Accessed 15 February 2015).

²⁶ J. Oppenheimer, <http://theactofkilling.com/background/>, (Accessed 25 February 2015).

scenes. They explicitly staged their image and methods of murder after their Hollywood idols. The result is a very deep process of the imagination of these men and a clear picture of the corrupted regime and impunity that exists in Indonesia. *The Act of Killing* offers a space to challenge the perpetrators and the viewers. Their filmmaking process and the space provided by Oppenheimer's method, made Congo realize that the killings were wrong, while others worried about the consequences of the story being public. There is a catharsis and unexpected emotional process for Congo, while he confronts for the first time in his life, the implications of what he did.

PART 2

2.1. Analysis

2.1.1. Opening Sequence

Cinematography

In this section, I analyze different elements of the cinematography in the opening sequence of *The Act of Killing*, like the photographic aspects, the framing and the duration of the shot.²⁷ The opening sequence is developed through a strong and unconventional visual style. The first scene sets a surreal tone through an extreme straight long angle of a landscape that is totally unexpected for the viewer. The camera focus is on a colossal sculpture of a goldfish on the shore of a lake and in the back some mountains and a lake. The distance between the immense fish sculpture contrasts heavily with the background landscape, which looks peaceful and harmonious (See figure 1). The film stock and color tonalities emphasize the contrasts and the strangeness of the scenery, while inviting the viewer to a dreamlike world. Joshua Oppenheimer mentioned in an interview, “One of the very important principles in the shooting and in the editing, and in the color correction and in the sound design, was to make it seductive whenever possible, although

²⁷ *The cinematography was made by Carlos Arango de Montis, Lars Skree and an anonymous author.

it's tacky and garish. Whether it's the fish or the waterfall at the end that looks like one of those things you see on a table at a tacky Chinese restaurant in the Midwest—if you could step inside that plastic universe, it ought to be beautiful.”²⁸ The scenery introduces the viewer to a fictional landscape, which exaggerates and visually distorts the aesthetic qualities of the image, while creates a surreal space. This is similar to Nichols' poetic mode, where the engagement is with the visual elements and from an artistic angle invites the viewer to see the world in a poetic way, rather than only facts.

All of a sudden, a row of six women dressed in golden dresses comes out dancing sensually from the open mouth of the fish. The women movements and the stillness of the background create a feeling of vitality and include an emotional content to the perception of the image. The straight long angle and long shot remain and the focus is on the female dancers, which is the only element moving on frame as their movements begin to tell a story.

After the first scene, there is a cut to a straight close up of water falling heavily. Slowly the camera tilts down and Anwar Congo, former executioner in 1965, appears on frame with an overweight man by his side, Herman Koto, gangster and paramilitary leader. Through a straight medium shot, both of them appear slowly in front of the frame, from the waist up, while their gestures and expressions become more visible. They move their arms and look into to the sky, while following the off-screen instructions of someone yelling at them with a megaphone to be happier, natural and less fake. The scene is comical and humoristic while simultaneously unexpected and surreal.

Afterwards, the camera moves diagonally to the right upper side, while we see different women who are at the same scenery as Congo and Koto. The women stand distributed throughout the hill, with the waterfall in the background, while also following the orders of the same off-screen voice that orders Congo and Koto what to do; the voice of someone we do not see. The off-screen voice is part of the narrative, the *mise-en-scène* and it makes us as viewers, to understand, that what is happening behind the camera is also part of the story. At this point the viewer's attention is on the off-screen voice, which makes us understand that there is someone filming what could be a movie scene. The voice says happiness! Smile! Peace! And the camera captures the tension

²⁸ N. Rapold, 'Interview: Joshua Oppenheimer', *Film Comment*, July 2013, <http://www.filmcomment.com/entry/interview-joshua-oppenheimer-the-act-of-killing>, (Accessed 13 March 2015).

and the forced smiles of the women. Suddenly the camera pans to the left, focusing back on Congo and Koto who look at the sky and move their arms open to the air. The camera begins to pan horizontally to the right, back to a medium long shot of Congo who is in front of the frame. The off-screen voice continues screaming Okay! Peace! Peace! Towards the end of the opening sequence we see a long straight shot of the scenery; the waterfall in the background, Congo and Koto and the women positioned in different parts around them. After a while, the off-screen voice screams Cut! Cut! Cut! And different people come to the set to give the women, who seemed to be freezing, some towels to cover themselves. This is the end of the opening sequence, which is altogether around 2 minutes.



Figure 1: Surreal Landscape in Opening Scene.

Editing

The Act of Killing uses a unique editing style.²⁹ The first image seen is the extreme straight long angle of the enormous fish sculpture, the blue river and the mountains in the back. Suddenly a row of six female dancers exits the mouth of the giant fish dancing to the rhythm of a choir of melodic female voices. The music continues and introduces us to the next shot of a waterfall occupying the entire frame. The way the music is carried from the first shot to the second shot creates a sense of continuity. During this shot, Anwar Congo and Herman Koto appear on frame and through different transitions, the women that are standing around them are also seen on

²⁹ * Editing was done by Nils Pagh Andersen, Charlotte Munch Bengsten, Ariadna Fatjò-Vilas, Janus Billeskov Jansen and Mariko Montpetit.

frame, while doing different movements in accordance to the sounds, which creates continuity in the scene. The way this part of the opening is edited, builds Congo and Koto as center figures.

The rhythmic relation between these shots creates an abrupt visual contrast, however the sounds carry us from one shot to the other. The way the sequence is edited, creates a special interest in Congo. While we do not know much about him at this point, it is clear that he holds a different position than the other characters in the scene. The rhythm between movements creates a feeling of stress that is perceived through the forced face expressions of the women, the off-screen voice and the rhythm. The combination of the images establishes a surreal narrative. As spectators we do not really understand what is happening, while at the end we understand through the off-screen voice that there is someone filming a scene. The way the shots are joined together, with the off-screen voice and *mise-en-scène*, constructs a space outside of screen, which we cannot see but is a strong part of the narrative. The cuts are not necessarily coherent, and just as unfamiliar as the images seen; the contrasts can also be abrupt and unfamiliar. The opening of the film is completely different from usual openings in documentaries, making the first images difficult to conceive.

Sound

The sound in the opening sequence enhances the surrealistic style and the mystery that characterizes these first scenes.³⁰ The introductory landscape is accompanied by the strong and diegetic sound of nature. The sound is like a combination of wind, birds and water, which creates a peaceful feeling. While the six women dancers come out of the mouth of the fish, the non-diegetic music of a female choir is heard in the background. The music goes together with the movements of the dancers, while the musical rhythms have a playful style that intensifies the weirdness of the scene. In the background the nature sounds can still be heard. While the dancers are finishing their steps and before the next shot is introduced, the loud sound of a waterfall anticipates us to the next shot. The strength of the sound produced by the waterfall gives an imposing force to the two men, which are in the center of the frame.

³⁰ *Sound was made by: Anonymous (Dubbing / recording engineer), Henrik Garnov (Sound editor:Gilyd (as Henrik Gugge Garnov), Gunn Tove Gronsberg (sound editor: storyline), Elin Oyen Vister (original sound designer), Ray Quintana (commentary re-recordingist (uncredited)).

Suddenly, the Indonesian music fades away and an off-screen diegetic loud voice on a speaker begins to scream Peace! Happiness! Smile! The disembodied voice or what Bill Nichols called “Voice of God”, emphasize the subjective quality of the opening scene.³¹ At the same time, some of the elements of the participatory documentary mode are present, like the voice over and the way space and time are connected through the Indonesian historical references shown in the locations and through the costumes of the characters. The first sequence is highly emotional and subjective which are also qualities of the performative mode.

The sound of the waterfall is strong and persists during the scene making the relation between the sound and the image extremely strong. It absorbs us into the surreal and unconventional nature of the image or perhaps the fantasmatic aspect, which did not exist before, that Nichols refers too. It gives strength to the unexpected and unfamiliar of what we see on screen, but also to the off-screen space we cannot see. The sound of the nature has a strong presence all over the opening of the film, which together with the off-screen voice make us focus on the voice and the place it comes from, in the people and what could be happening behind the camera. These techniques are characteristic of the documentary reflexive mode, which makes the viewer conscious about his or her relation to the scene. The scene reveals the way it was made, by allowing the viewer to listen to the off-screen voice of somebody coordinating and ordering the characters in the scene what to do, while also letting the viewer see some of the film crew, who bring towels to the women at the end of the scene. By showing the viewer the filmmaking process, we understand that the scene was a reconstructed reality.

Mise-en-scène

Setting

The setting of the opening scene is highly surreal and picturesque. The main prop in the first part of the scene is a colossal noticeable sculpture of a goldfish beside a lake and which is actually a restaurant near Lake Toba, in Indonesia.³² The sculpture is made of some sort of rusty metallic

³¹ Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, p. 59-60.

³² S. Dollar, ‘In ‘The Act of Killing,’ a Filmmaker Gives Murderers a Strange Platform’, *The Wallstreet Journal*, 2013, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887323848804578610091596141774>, (Accessed 22 March 2015).

material, it looks decayed and it has five windows. The mouth of the fish is open and there is a passage to come into it. The size and visible characteristics of decay of the sculpture, together with the female dancers coming out of it, amplifies the surreal aspect of the setting.

During this scene, the grass looks vividly green, unnatural and it contrasts with the brown rusted appearance of the fish. There are mountains in the back and a beautiful lake. The image of nature with the bright colors contrasts strongly with the purple/grey colors of the sky, which create the feeling that a catastrophe could happen. However, there is some sense of peace in the environment. After a few seconds, a line of Indonesian female dancers emerges from the open mouth of the fish, walking through a visible red passage. The setting contains a short amount of props and objects, letting the fish sculpture and the women dancers, to be the center of attention.

In the following part of the scene, we see the waterfall, Anwar Congo and Herman Koto as well as the different women following the orders of the off-screen voice. The characters, their costumes and strong presence, as well as the nature surrounding them mainly compose the setting. The style of the opening sequence blends different modes of documentary, and different types of reenactment. On the one hand as mentioned earlier, it has a strong poetical quality, while the overdramatized landscape and the dramatization of the subject's feelings refer to the fourth type of reenactment recognized by Nichols, the "Stylization".

Space and Composition

The notion of space is crucial in the perception of the opening sequence. At the beginning of the scene, the size of the fish sculpture contrasts enormously with the rest of the elements that are visible on frame. The proximity to the camera and the audience, establishes certain closeness to the elements shown, while it also creates a sense of something totally unknown. Our sense of space is shaped by the whole *mise-en-scène*, the colors and compositions.

* Joshua Oppenheimer explained, "It's a former seafood restaurant that Anwar chose as a location for a musical number based on his favorite song, "Is That All There Is?" by Peggy Lee, and we shot the musical scene there, and it was amazing and surreal and strange." (<http://collider.com/joshua-oppenheimer-the-act-of-killing-interview/>).

The opening reminds of Bertolt Brecht's "Theatre of Alienation", which is often described as a style that promotes anti-realism and is also recognized by Nichols as a reenactment type; the "Brechtian Distantiation".³³ The characters instead of addressing each other, address the audience. Lucia Nagib argues, "This opening, and indeed *The Act of Killing* as a whole, is the living proof of the vital reality principle inherent in Brecht's anti-illusionistic method. Brechtian to the root, the film is entirely structured on the principle of systematically preventing the formation of a plausible fictional or narrative world in the name of the reality of the profilmic event."³⁴ During the opening sequence it is hard to get involved emotionally since we have constant reminders of the artificiality of the performance, which makes us as audience to be distanced.

The proportions of the fish are clearly meant to step out, while the mountains and the lake look far and in depth. In the following scene, Congo and Koto are located in the middle of the frame, and the women are positioned around them in different parts of the hill. This composition determines a hierarchy within the characters. Even though Congo and Koto are in the center of the scene, they are also under the orders and control of that off-screen voice, which seems to also have a high position in the hierarchy. The compositions during the opening give a sense of distortion, unbalance and unexpected scenery. The off-screen space is of great importance in the opening scene, it makes the viewer intrigued and to realize that there is something happening behind the camera that is also a part of the story.

Lighting

The intensity of the lighting and the way it is manipulated is a remarkable feature of the opening sequence. The costumes of the women and their makeup are intensified with the direction of the light, as well as Herman Koto's dress, which shines tremendously while he stands in front of the waterfall. The contrasts are strong, and the lighting and colors of the nature and costumes of the characters, are a strong reference to what could be a Hollywood musical. The bright lights of the

³³ Nichols, 'Documentary Reenactment and the Fantasmatic Subject', p. 85

³⁴ L. Nagib, 'Regurgitated Bodies: re-enactment as the production of reality in *The Act of Killing*', *Keynote speech at the "World Documentary Film and TV Conference"*, Falmouth University, 4-6 September, 2014, <http://filmplatform.net/regurgitated-bodies-re-enactment-production-reality-act-killing-2/>, (Accessed 17 April 2015).

setting and the costumes of the characters, make Congo's black costume get a special attention in comparison to the rest of the scene, since he doesn't shine out as the other characters.

Costume and Make up

The costume and makeup of the characters is extravagant and colorful. At the beginning of the film, a line of six female dancers comes out dancing from the mouth of a giant fish sculpture. They all have the same golden dress and long dark hair. The dress has a sensual connotation and it shows one of their legs while they dance. In the next shot, Anwar Congo wears a long black cape that looks like a priest cassock, while Herman Koto, looking like a drag queen, wears a light blue turquoise satin, extremely shiny and exaggerated dress. It has a sarcastic style and long ruffles on the sleeves, as well as a hat made of the same fabric with a burlesque bow at the top. The makeup of the latter character enhances the exaggerated tone with his accentuated red cheeks and lips.

The women in the hill wear long silver skirts and shiny strapless red tops. They have pearl necklaces and long feathers on their heads, as well as exaggerated clownish makeup. While they move around, their skirts reflect an extreme glow, as same as the extreme colors of the nature which illuminate the scene. The make up contributes enormously to the delusive world. All costumes have an exuberant theatrical style, which also seems to be part of a fantasy world (See figure 2).

The costumes have many elements that draw the viewer's attention, while they give the characters special roles. In the case of Koto, when seeing him wearing a woman dress, it gives him a comical role while ridiculing him. Congo on the contrary gets a more serious role while wearing a dark and long cape, which refers to a priest and has a religious overtone, however still the feeling of an ironic scene. The costumes coordinate with the setting through the strong colors, which contribute to the overall narrative of the opening scene. The exaggerated costumes and make up in the opening sequence are characteristics that could be related to Nichols' reenactment type "Parody and Irony". The landscape represents the idealized exotic image of Indonesia to the world but in the form of a musical parody, which is also deconstructed by the end of the scene,

when the off-screen voice says Cut! And we realize that the women were freezing and that it was a fabricated reality.



Figure 2: Women with silver skirts.

Acting

The style of the acting in the opening sequence recalls of a theatrical style or a staged musical. The actors do not speak, but they follow different choreographies. Throughout the first scene of the opening sequence, the six women come out dancing from the mouth of the fish. It is impossible to see their face expressions because of the distance, but it is evident that they follow a staged walk while they let one of their legs visible as they walk. They hold their golden dresses with their left hands as they position their right arms by their heads in a seductive style.

In the waterfall shot, the women face expressions look happily forced and unnatural, while the face expressions of Congo and Koto are also staged and somehow false as they remind of someone wishing for something to happen. The women touch their hearts while moving softly from side to side and Congo and Koto look at the sky with their arms open like hoping for a miracle (See figure 3). The characters do not interact with each other. By using this technique of acting, where the actors do not speak, the off-screen voice and the intensity of the sound become the focus of the scene too. The choreography of the characters follows with the camera movement and the viewer's attention. The way they move creates ambiguity and uncertainty of what will happen, which together with the setting creates a bizarre and playful scene.

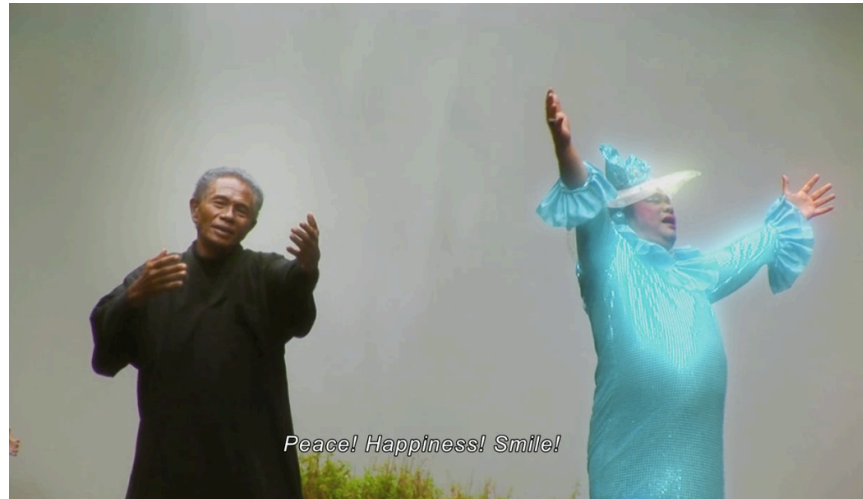


Figure 3: Anwar Congo and Herman Koto during opening.

Reenactment

The Act of Killing uses different types of reenactments throughout the film and in different forms. The opening sequence is a reenactment of how Anwar Congo would have liked to be seen, of his dreams and imagination. As Oppenheimer said “When you are working closely with people, inevitably they start staging themselves. And they start staging themselves in ways that reveal how they imagine themselves.”³⁵ Oppenheimer gave these men the space to recreate their imagination and fantasies. It is a very stylistic reenactment, which reminds of a Hollywood musical and which carries the elements of stylization further, while diminishing the realist dramatizations.³⁶

During the opening, Congo is shown with his arms expanded, celebrated as a central figure in the center of the frame. The characters are interwoven in the narrative and as it is typical of musicals, the setting or landscape is exuberant and the performers move as if there was a live audience watching them. By having used different types of reenactments, Oppenheimer created a multidimensional film. It is through the surreal and highly stylistic scenes, together with all the other types of reenactments that the lines between fiction and reality are blurred. The opening

³⁵ N. Rapold, ‘Interview: Joshua Oppenheimer’, *Film Comment*, July 2013, <http://www.filmcomment.com/entry/interview-joshua-oppenheimer-the-act-of-killing>, (Accessed 13 March 2015).

³⁶ Nichols, ‘Documentary Reenactment and the Fantasmatic Subject’, p. 86.

sequence invites us, through a fictionalized scenery of enjoyment and happiness, to the very traumatic and violent events of Indonesia. It is this way, perhaps the only way we can be immersed into something so violent and understand a part of it.

As quoted by Bret Woods, in the words of Slavoj Žižek, “If you take away from reality the symbolic fictions that regulate it, you lose reality itself. [We have] to perceive not the reality behind the illusion, but the reality in illusion itself. If something gets too traumatic, too violent, even too filled in with enjoyment, it shatters the coordinates of our reality. We have to fictionalize it”.³⁷

Through all the different reenactments, Congo constantly tries to distance himself from the pain and from seeing the horror in what he did, this is the only way that he could deal with the past. As explained by Oppenheimer in an interview, “Anwar was using cinematic identification to distance himself from the horrible crimes he was committing. He was killing people right across the street from the cinema and, intoxicated with whatever film he had seen, he would use the identification of the main character he had just seen in the movies to distance himself from what he was doing.”³⁸ The opening sequence is a clear example of this, as it introduces the film through Congo’s imagination and a surrealistic setting, but which at the same time allows him to deal with his past and the audience to be involved with the film and reflect upon it.

The attractiveness of the visual elements in the opening sequence is part of a method to make us as viewers implicated. Oppenheimer explained, “So it was a very important principle: a way of translating, if you like, what’s culturally different into our world by trying to always make it seductive, and therefore implicate the viewer that way.”³⁹ The opening sequence uses elements from Indonesian culture that are perhaps unknown for many people, however, the digitalized colors, the mise-en-scène and the costumes, are so striking that we get involved in the scene. By doing the reenactments in Hollywood styles was also a way to implicate the audience. The

³⁷ B. Woods, ‘The Act of Killing by Joshua Oppenheimer’, *Ethnomusicology*, University of Illinois Press, vol. 58, No. 3 Fall, 2014, p. 562. Available from JSTOR, (Accessed April 30 2015).

³⁸ FilmLinc Daily, ‘Joshua Oppenheimer Dramatically Exposes Genocide in The Act Of Killing’, *New Directors New Films MOMA*, <http://newdirectors.org/blog/new-directors-new-films-joshua-oppenheimer-the-act-of-killing>, (Accessed 4 May 2015). Interview, <http://newdirectors.org/blog/new-directors-new-films-joshua-oppenheimer-the-act-of-killing>

³⁹ N. Rapold, ‘Interview: Joshua Oppenheimer’, *Film Comment*, July 2013, <http://www.filmcomment.com/entry/interview-joshua-oppenheimer-the-act-of-killing>, (Accessed 13 March 2015).

absurdity of the opening sequence is part of his method to make us involved and perhaps to feel some level of humor. He explains “When we laugh, it disarms us, because humor has a levelling effect: we are on the same level. And we are happy. And then something that starts off as funny morphs into something utterly beautiful, shocking, or completely horrifying, and it’s unexpected and takes our breath away. And one of the reasons for this is that the laughter disarmed us.”⁴⁰

During the opening sequence, the viewer doesn’t know what he or she is going to see. By generating some sense of humor, through Koto’s comical costume and the surreal of the landscape, perhaps the viewer can get closer to the following disturbing scenes of the film. However there are ethical implications in this method, since the events of the film are very sad and not comical at all, however is interesting to discuss Oppenheimer’s method as a new form of engaging the viewers to the film. At the same time, the opening sequence with all the other reenactments in the film, force us as viewers to question ourselves and analyze how have we been implicated in this, how we want to be seen and how we distance ourselves from other situations that have happened in the world, similar to the massacres in Indonesia. Once again, the reflexive documentary mode is obvious, as there is a moment of negotiation between what the filmmaker created and the viewer. We are forced to question ourselves and reflect on the situation. We not only observe, we are involved and engaged with both Oppenheimer and the characters.

Conclusion

The opening sequence immerses the viewers into a constructed world. It is at some level complicated and confusing, which makes us wonder if what we are seeing is a documentary or a maybe a staged musical. With the help of a surprising combination of stylistic techniques in the cinematography, editing, sound and all the elements of the *mise-en-scène*, Joshua Oppenheimer created a sequence full of mysteries. The opening sequence builds a peaceful image of happiness. It introduces us to the film through the creation of an ideal world of happiness and optimism, a typical characteristic of musicals. However, the same creation, which Oppenheimer explains, as a constructed lie, also represents what the government in Indonesia has done to cover what happened in 1965.

⁴⁰ P. Cohn, ‘Joshua Oppenheimer’, *Bomb Magazine*, 2012, <http://bombmagazine.org/article/6992/>, (Accessed 1 May 2015).

Oppenheimer explains, “That’s probably why I actually begin the film that way – it’s about false happiness, false joy and the construction of a lie.”⁴¹ He continues, “The off-screen voice shouting “beauty, peace, happiness; this is real natural beauty” – shows that kind of iconic image of cheery optimism that defines the Hollywood musical and then to hear them call cut and see that the dancing girls are all freezing cold, I feel this opens the film with the image with a lie being constructed, and this is a film about how we construct lies and the consequences of the lies that we tell. Most people know Indonesia as Bali and imagine it as a peaceful tropical paradise, and of course it’s a tropical paradise built on top of mass graves.”⁴² The image of Indonesia for the rest of the world has been also constructed. It is certain as Oppenheimer argues, that Indonesia has been known for most of the world as a place of beautiful islands and paradises. This is why *The Act of Killing* is such an important film and maybe the beginning of a change. Not only as a tool for Indonesia, but for the rest of the world.

It is until the end of the film that one can we really understand the importance and significance of the opening sequence and the consequences that denial has had in society. The fantasy world presented in the opening, where we see Anwar Congo and Herman Koto glorified in the center of a perfect world, is also a representation of how society has denied confronting different events. The surreal aspects of the film are a way to represent how we run away from pain and uncomfortable situations and to distance ourselves from it, however it allows us to question our own role in this events.

The opening of the film introduces a new type of documentary film that Joshua Oppenheimer described as, a documentary of the imagination. He says, “I will combine this sort of making-of material with the re-enactments themselves, and so create maybe a new form of documentary” – I did not yet know it would be so surreal, that the dramatizations would become stylized in the way they ultimately did. But a new form of documentary that combines re-enactment with its preparation “as a way of showing what these events mean to you and your society, a kind of documentary of the imagination rather than a documentary of everyday life.”⁴³

⁴¹ J. Elphick, ‘Joshua Oppenheimer discusses The Act of Killing’, 4:3, 2014, <http://fourthreefilm.com/2014/05/interview-joshua-oppenheimer/>, (Accessed 28 April 2015).

⁴² J. Elphick, ‘Joshua Oppenheimer discusses The Act of Killing’, 4:3, 2014, <http://fourthreefilm.com/2014/05/interview-joshua-oppenheimer/>, (Accessed 28 April 2015).

⁴³ N. Bradshaw, ‘Build my gallows high: Joshua Oppenheimer on The Act of Killing’, *BFI Film Forever*, April 2014,

Oppenheimer was dealing with very complex issues of the imagination that had to do with the perception that the killers had on themselves, with the way they wanted to be seen, in how they thought they were seen by their own families, society and Oppenheimer. However, the opening sequence also raises some ethical questions. Is it acceptable to create a method, which exposes a country's most painful memories to the world like this? Did Oppenheimer cross a line in terms of individual privacy with Congo? Was offering them to reenact in Hollywood styles a fair and respectful way to expose them to the world? These ethical issues will be further discussed in the final conclusions of the thesis.

2.1.2. Reenactment Scene

Cinematography

One of the most remarkable moments takes place when Anwar Congo acts as the victim in one of the reenactments, playing the role of a communist who had tried to ban American films in Indonesia. In this section, I analyze different elements of the cinematography of this reenactment scene, like the photographic aspects, the framing and the duration of the shot.⁴⁴ The aspect ratio used was 1.85:1, a common US widescreen cinema standard, and the duration of the scene is of seven minutes. One of the photographic aspects to analyze is the range of colors that are used in the scene. The film stock highlights the blue, gray and green tones. The image is saturated and there is a dominance of darker colors and shadows, which add obscurity to the scene. The focal length makes the two men in the back look in depth and far back, while Congo is in the center of the frame and closer to the audience.

The scene begins with a medium close-up of Congo seen from the chest up. The camera focuses on his fake wounds and blood, which are carefully created by a man and a woman who put the make up on his face. The framing shows Congo in the middle of the screen, which locates him as

<http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/interviews/build-my-gallows-high-joshua-oppenheimer-act-killing>, (Accessed 23 April 2015).

⁴⁴ * The cinematography was made by Carlos Arango de Montis, Lars Skree and an anonymous author.

the center character of the scene and anticipates the viewer to understand that he is being prepared to perform something. Throughout many of the reenactments in the film the viewer gets to know that different memories are being reconstructed, since the filmmaking processes of the reenactments are shown. This is a characteristic of the reflexive mode, it shows the viewer how the scene is being created, and so the viewer knows that it is a reconstruction of the truth, based on the memories of these men. Immediately, we see a long shot with Congo sitting on a chair by a desk, while a man, seen from the side smokes a cigarette sitting on the other side of the desk. The camera focus is on Congo who is in the middle of the frame while the rest of the elements in the scene are not clearly visible. In the background, two men, Koto and Adi Zulkadry, who are not in focus, make a toast and then walk towards Congo, who plays the role of the victim, looking fatigued, injured and with his eyes closed.

Afterwards, in a straight medium close-up we see Congo with the two men in the back. The camera focus is on his face, and the blood dripping from the top of his head through his cheek, while he appears looking serious and unexpressive. Later, in a long shot, Koto hits Congo's chair. The camera's attention is on the two men and Congo, but mainly in Zulkadry who sticks a knife on top of the desk and hit Congo's back as he yells at him. The knife and the hat are also in focus, which enhance the gangster style of the scene.

In the next part, Koto and Zulkadry threaten Congo, while the power of the scene is in his emotional response, therefore the camera focuses on the sweat, facial expression and his body movements. The room is filled with cigarette smoke that moves around Congo's suffering face and add tension to the moment. There are moments when Congo's expressions, even though they are in focus, are not necessarily credible, since he doesn't seem really scared or as someone under those circumstances would react. However, until the end of the scene these expressions become more real and it is more obvious that he is scared and not able to continue his performance (See figure 4). In that moment, the unexpected off-screen voice of Joshua Oppenheimer is heard when he asks for a tissue to clean Congo's blood that is dripping in his eye. Oppenheimer's reaction caring about Congo's eye, reflects his empathy for him, while also breaking the fiction in the performance and making it feel more real. In that moment, Koto's eyes look to the direction where Oppenheimer's voice seems to come from. The camera focuses in Koto cleaning Congo's

face. Congo seems emotionally affected and there is a moment of silence where we only see the close-up of his face. Koto and Zulkadry continue playing the scene but Oppenheimer's voice interrupts again saying *Cut!* Congo takes some deep breaths, and while the camera focuses on his face, it is possible to see how he is struggling with reenacting the scene and emotionally distressed. Oppenheimer's participation is an example of one of the characteristics in the performative mode, where it is obvious that the filmmaker is so deeply involved in the moment that his personal journey is somehow also depicted.

This reenactment takes the form of the second and fourth types of reenactment Nichols identified, as a stylized typification. He says, "In *The Act of Killing*, the *mise en scène* of historic but unfilmed events derives primarily from the film's subjects—gangsters who formed, at the Indonesian government's behest, death squads to capture and execute alleged Communists in 1965-66. The aging but unrepentant gangsters frankly recount their past exploits, demonstrate their grizzly methods, and reenact their actions through the filter of Hollywood film genres (most notably, western and gangster films). The reenactments take the form of stylized typifications."⁴⁵ The dramatization of events was shown as if it was happening in the present, however they reenacted the typical characteristics of a gangster crime scene, and not of the historical events *per se*. The reenactments are inspired in Hollywood genres and embody the essential characteristics of those genres.

According to Nichols, Congo lives in a fantasmatic representation of his past and present state of mind, aided by a complicit government, which Oppenheimer documents throughout the film. Congo's self image of the present appears as fantasmatic in his past, when he used to see himself as a hero. Additionally, Oppenheimer's off screen comments give some sense of morality to the film, however are absent in most of the reenactments, leaving the viewer with the responsibility of finding its own moral orientation.⁴⁶ This reenactment also possesses characteristics of the documentary participatory mode, since through Oppenheimer's voice, he becomes part of the film and we get a sense of how his presence can affect it. It has also reflexive characteristics since it makes us question the authenticity of the scene, while also showing performative qualities by

⁴⁵ B. Nichols, 'The Act of Killing', August 2013, <http://billnichols.net/tag/documentary-reenactments/>, (Accessed 12 April 2015).

⁴⁶ B. Nichols, 'Irony, Cruelty, Evil (and a Wink) in *The Act of Killing*', *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (Winter 2013), p. 25.

linking Congo's personal experience with the historical reality and the interaction between Oppenheimer and the characters. It recognizes the emotional and subjective aspects of documentary.



Figure 4: Anwar Congo hit by gangsters

The next shot is a medium long shot of Congo sitting on the chair and Koto tying a piece of black cloth covering his eyes. The room is still dark and the camera focus is only on them. A close-up of Congo's face while being covered, and then again the medium long shot of Koto who ties Congo's hands in his back. In the following shot, Koto puts a thin wire around Congo's head while he pulls, simulating that he is killing him and cutting his head. The camera focuses in Koto's body while pulling the wire and Congo's body shaking. This was one of Congo's favorite killing techniques, which he used widely in the real events in Indonesia. Congo's choking sounds are disturbing, while we perceive how his body shakes as Koto pulls the wire simulating the killing.

The image is seen from a diagonal angle, since we see Congo slightly from the side, which emphasizes the position of Koto when he pulls the wire. Congo cannot handle this staged moment, and while Koto removes the cloth from his eyes, Congo says, *I felt dead for a moment*. The next shot shows Congo in a medium close-up totally exhausted and overwhelmed. They repeat the scene, but they need to stop it again. In a close-up, Congo says, *I can't do that again*. The rest of the scene shows him sitting in the chair, weakened and devastated. He is unable to complete another take or to say anything. The stylistic choices, including the camera movements and the camera focus, together with the mise-en-scène, make the audience to focus entirely in

Congo's reaction. The paradox of the film as mentioned by Oppenheimer, is that what appeared to be a lack of remorse seen through Congo throughout the scene, is actually according to Oppenheimer a sign of humanity.⁴⁷

Executive producer Werner Herzog expressed,

“For me, none of them are monsters, although their crimes are monstrous. They are monstrous beyond imagination in some cases. However, meeting the perpetrators make it obvious that there is no monster. They are still human. They are still very, very human. We have to somehow accept that within the boundaries of humanity, crimes of that magnitude are still possible. They are not completely exotic. They are not foreign to human nature. That's a hard thing to swallow”⁴⁸

The perpetrators are then just as human as the audience. This is why during the film the spectator is reflected through Congo's remorse. As spectators we are faced with Congo's vulnerability and sensitive side. By seeing this sign of humanity on him, we are implicated in the moment. We feel some level of empathy for Congo, which creates an uncomfortable and confusing feeling in the viewer. As a result, we are mirrored in his reaction and forced to reflect on ours too. In this sense, the reflexive documentary mode is present throughout this reenactment, since it engages the viewer actively with the issues performed and with Congo's reaction. However the poetic documentary mode is still visible at some level, through the transformation of historical material changed into more abstract representations.

Editing

The style of editing enhances our attention to Anwar Congo's emotional and physical reaction and to the audience reaction to the reenactment. The shot-reverse-shots in the first part of the scene, involve us as an audience to the situation. We see Congo's reaction immediately after he has been assaulted. The frequency of the editing goes faster and is enhanced when the violence gets more graphic and the voices are louder. For example, some of the cuts are done exactly when

⁴⁷ D. Fortune, 'Joshua Oppenheimer and Werner Herzog on The Act of Killing', *A.V. Club*, 2013, <http://www.avclub.com/article/joshua-oppenheimer-and-werner-herzog-on-the-act-o-100900>, (Accessed 1 April 2015).

⁴⁸ Ibid

the men hit Congo in the back or when there is a strong noise. The sound is synchronized with the movements and the violence shown. This style of editing creates more tension since there is a feeling of being absorbed into the scene. There is continuity throughout the cuts, and towards the end of the scene, the editing frequency slows down. The shots are longer and the noises are lower, which makes us focus entirely on Congo's breakdown. He is quiet, unable to speak and affected by the situation

Sound

The sound in this reenactment plays a very important role for creating fear and enhancing Anwar Congo's emotional reaction. The sounds and voices are loud and many times they are abrupt and unexpected. At the same time, the silences also have a function, they are long and they contribute to the feelings of angst and fear that are present in the scene. At the beginning of the reenactment, while we see Congo playing his role of the victim, we hear the diegetic sound of the two men in the back doing a toast with their glasses and the sound of the glasses being put hardly on the table. Then the footsteps of the men walking towards Congo, and suddenly an abrupt and unexpected sound when one of the men hits the chair from the back while the other man yells at Congo. These sounds and voices are loud and brusque. They put the audience into an alert state of mind, which gives a sense of continuity to the scene. While Koto threatens Congo, the man sitting at the desk, starts typing heavily on a typewriter. Each press of the buttons creates more stress. Because the room is very dark and it is impossible to see in detail, these strong and abrupt sounds become an essential element in creating tension in the scene. The long silences of Congo are constantly interrupted by the agitated voices and sounds made by the men, provoking nervousness in both Congo and the audience.

After some time, Oppenheimer's off-screen voice is heard which serves as a reminder that it is a staged reenactment and that there is someone in the off-screen space. Even though we do not see him, his voice becomes a part of the narrative.⁴⁹ Towards the end of the reenactment we hear Koto's voice explaining to Congo that he will place a wire around his neck, while he is doing it.

⁴⁹ * The role of Oppenheimer's voice is explained earlier in the cinematography section.

Then the scene is stopped since Congo is unable to proceed. After a while, they do it again, and Congo makes the unpleasant sounds as if the wire was strangling him. Throughout the scene, there is a noticeable sound of the emptiness in the room and perhaps some rain in the outside, which adds roughness to the moment.

Mise-en-scène

Setting

The setting of this scene reminds of a *film noir* movie.⁵⁰ In the front part of the room, there is a wooden table with an old typewriter and a black hat over it. Behind the table to the right side, some metal old drawers with papers on the top. In the back of the room there is a round table with chairs, some metal drawers and a window. The room seems like an office where the gangsters brought their “communist” victims to interrogate them. It looks like an empty and cold place. All the objects visible in the scene play a very important role in the narrative and style of this reenactment, like the gangster hats, the typewriter, the knives and the blood. The darkness and shadows, as well as the smoke in the room are also an important part of the setting. In other words, this is shot in a style that is highly similar and probably influenced by Hollywood gangster crime films. The style of such American films that the tormented communist wanted to ban in Indonesia.

Space and Composition

This scene is characterized by a sense of claustrophobia, which is represented by all elements of the space where the scene takes place. In this scene the space reminds of the style and features of what could be a crime scene in Hollywood. The space is dark and closed and as an audience we are locked too. The scene takes place in the same room, which increases the feeling of anxiety and frustration that characterizes this reenactment. The composition of the scene is formed by

⁵⁰ W. Dixon, *Film Noir and the Cinema of Paranoia*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 2009, 192.pp.

Congo in the center of the frame, sitting in a chair, with the two men standing at his sides. Through the various close-ups, the focus is mainly on his reaction acting as the victim of a torture that he used to do, but also on the reaction of the viewers involved in the scene.

The off-screen space that is introduced in the moment that we hear Oppenheimer's voice becomes an important part of the scene, since it deconstructs the fantasy and brings it to reality. Oppenheimer's voice reminds the spectator that Congo is also human, and shows his empathy for him, which creates a sense of realness. The emotional and subjective content is also characteristic of Nichols' performative mode. Towards the end of the scene, when they prepare Congo to be decapitated, he is positioned in the center, but towards the front part of the frame, slightly from the side. This allows Herman Koto, who is tying Congo's hands in the back, to be seen as well. From a diagonal angle, we see how Koto pulls the wire around Congo's head. Congo is closer to the audience, while Koto pulls from the back. This way we can see both Koto pulling and Anwar reacting to it. The composition of the scenes is accentuated by the strong shadows and the darkness of the room.

Lighting

This reenactment scene is characterized by an obscure and mysterious style. The impact of the lighting in creating this environment is fundamental. The back of the room is darker than the front, which makes the audience focus mainly on Anwar Congo who sits in the front and in the middle of the two men. The faces of the two "gangsters" are not so visible, while Congo's face has more clarity. The light exposure emphasizes the angles of the face of Congo throughout the scene, allowing the blood falling from his forehead, wounds and the sweat on his face to be clearly seen. The end result of the chosen film stock influenced the scenes, since it enhanced the intensity and claustrophobic feeling of the room through the dark colors and contrasts. There are many sharp shadows that add mystery to the scene. The attached shadows are noticed when parts of the face's of the characters are not seen.⁵¹ The smokiness of the room adds anxiety and uncertainty to the moment, while the blue and dark lights suggest that the scene took place in the

⁵¹ D. Bordwell and K. Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 7th. ed, New York, McGraw Hill, 2004, p. 191

nighttime. There is some natural light coming through the room, however it seems like the lights in this scene are mainly artificial. The white color from Congo's and Koto's shirts stand out against the blue and dark tones in the room (See figure 5).



Figure 5: Anwar Congo reenacts as a victim.

Costume and Make up

The clothes in this scene are extremely similar to the 1950s gangster style clothes. Anwar Congo wears a dark suit with a white shirt under and a dark tie. Herman Koto wears a light beige suit with a dark tie and the classic gangster hat while Adi Zulkadry wears dark trousers, light shirt, hat and suspenders. The make up is mostly visible in Congo's face. He has red shiny blood dripping from his forehead and top of the head, as well as some bruises on his head. The sweat in Congo's face is distinctly visible, which also transmits his nervousness. The fake blood and wounds look extremely unrealistic and are obviously a deliberate decision of Joshua Oppenheimer's method for enhancing the surreal aspect of the scene. By exaggerating the fakeness, the audience is able to distance from the pain of seeing this, just as Congo distances himself by dramatizing his acts. Oppenheimer said, "I understood instinctively that the dramatization of the killings was a kind of running away".⁵² The stylistic choices of the crime setting, lighting, costumes and the fakeness of the blood and wounds, are also a way to use

⁵² S. Vizcarrondo, 'The Art of Killing: How Much Truth Comes from the Lie that Tells the Truth?', *ida. International Documentary Association*, 2013, <http://www.documentary.org/feature/art-killing-how-much-truth-comes-lie-tells-truth>, (Accessed 27 April 2015).

fiction as a technique to tell the truth. Oppenheimer has mentioned his interest in combining fiction and documentary, also as a way to analyze the way in which people cope with strangeness.⁵³

Acting

To analyze the acting style in a documentary can be confusing and contradictory, while to talk about reenactment also raises questions about the differences between terms like reinventing, reviving, and the way these concepts create meaning. In this particular reenactment, the acting style is unique because we know the meaning behind it. We know that is Anwar Congo performing what he did to many people in the past. This gives the performance a different meaning. We are not witnessing just a gangster Hollywood entertaining film, but one real example and yet performed of the tortures in Indonesia in 1965.

The acting uses elements and symbols from Hollywood *film noir* and horror crime movies, for example, the body movements, the aggressive language and the cynical attitude. In some parts of the reenactment, Congo's acting seems forced and a bit too staged. Even though, towards the end, the close-ups show how his face expressions become more realistic and how he falls into a real emotional breakdown as he is unable to proceed. The fact that those staged events happened for real and that we know there is an audience, gives a very different sense to the concept of "acting", which is the main theme of the film: the ACT of killing and the filmed reenactment of such an atrocity.

Bret Woods argues,

“The method of having the main characters of a film decide how to depict themselves as the subjects is incredibly effective, and in the case of *The Act of Killing* this subjectivity is what causes the lines between assumed fiction and reality to blur. Without this film technique, the stories, though tragic and important, would likely have remained one-dimensional. The notion of “killing” as a performance—an “act” that one person does—is often lost behind the societal conception of a killing’s conceived context, purpose, or intent. This is especially so when there is

⁵³ D. Fortune, ‘Joshua Oppenheimer and Werner Herzog on The Act of Killing’, *A.V.Club*, 2013, <http://www.avclub.com/article/joshua-oppenheimer-and-werner-herzog-on-ithe-act-o-100900>, (Accessed 1 April 2015).

an alienated ignorance of that killing and when the numbers of the dead are so great that they are truly impossible to comprehend. But experiencing multiple contexts of the dramatized reenactment of these killings, performed by the men who actually committed these acts, made the scenes horrific and palpable.”⁵⁴

The reenactments throughout the film enclose different performing styles. From extreme method acting, to perhaps other styles like in this reenactment scene, the Brechtian distancing effect. This style of acting emphasizes the artificial aspect of the performance, not the authenticity of it. “Brechtian distancing refers to the destruction of the theatrical illusion for the purpose of eliciting an intellectual response in the audience”.⁵⁵ Bill Nichols speaks of different variations of re-enactments, and mentions the Brechtian Distancing as one of them. He says: “This type of reenactment increases the separation of the reenactment from the specific historical moment that it reenacts, giving greater likelihood that the fantasmatic effect will come into play”.⁵⁶

It is evident that by reenacting the memory of something he had done so many times, this reenacted event resulted into something new, maybe what Nichols calls the “fantasmatic effect”, which probably was lacking in the original representations and which I previously discussed in the cinematography section. The reenactments do not represent the historical events as they were, but a fictionalized representation that resulted, through memory, fantasy and other stylistic methods, in some sort of truthful confession for both Congo and the audience (See figure 6).



Figure 6: Anwar Congo unable to proceed with the scene.

⁵⁴ Woods, p. 561

⁵⁵ M. Pramaggiore and T. Wallis, *Film: A Critical Introduction*, 3rd ed., USA, Pearson, 2013, P.70.

⁵⁶ Nichols, ‘Documentary Reenactment and the Fantasmatic Subject’, p. 85.

Reenactment

During this reenactment, ethical implications are raised again. Is inviting perpetrators to restage their crimes just a benefit for cinema and television? Is this acceptable because Indonesia is so far away and so little known or talked about?⁵⁷ Or as argued by Nick Fraser, “Of course murderers, flattered in their impunity, will behave vilely. Of course they will reliably supply a degraded vision of humanity. But sorry, I don’t feel we want to be doing this. It feels wrong, and it certainly looks wrong to me. Something has gone missing here. Something not very good is being done.”⁵⁸ In any case, I believe the film is so unusually done, that even though reenactments have been used in film since many decades, *The Act of Killing*, manages to give them a different use and meaning.

Joshua Oppenheimer’s method is of great importance because it didn’t intended to focus only on the persons who committed the crimes, but to go into a deeper level of conscious that could make the viewer response, also the center of the film. The method incorporates many elements that are not usually mixed together. There are no judgments against Congo and the other leaders. Oppenheimer relates to them in the same level as any other human, which of course creates a very uncomfortable response that may probably be misunderstood by many people.

Through the different reenactments and the use of stylistic techniques, like the surreal scenes, the fragments of memories, imagination, the colorful settings, the enhancement of the fictionalized moments, the narrative, the cinematography style and the freedom for Congo and the other leaders to chose the theatrical styles of their performances, it is possible to see how Congo goes through a process of recognition, where he is able to feel in some way perhaps only a small fraction of the pain and fear that his victims felt, to such an extent that he is unable to continue the scene.

Oppenheimer said, “So suddenly the filming of Anwar, and the asking him to reenact what he did for me, brought back the mode of Anwar’s way of being at the time of the killing. It is not exactly the same. But the past literally comes into the present in an unexpected way, for the audience and

⁵⁷ N. Fraser, ‘We love Impunity: The case of the Act of Killing’, *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (Winter 2013), p. 21.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*

for me- and for Anwar in a very, very disturbing way.”⁵⁹ This is result of the ethical complexity of the film, and also as discussed by Bill Nichols of the fantasmatic representations of Congo’s past, as discussed in more detail in the previous cinematography section.

In many cases, as discussed by Nichols, reenactments represent the filmmaker interpretation, but in this case, Oppenheimer opens up a space where Congo is able to make an interpretation of his own acts. By recognizing and feeling what the victims felt, he realizes the meaning of the performance and of the past events. This is enhanced with the combination of stylistic techniques mentioned above and that have been analyzed in this chapter. This is the reason why *The Act of Killing* is so hard to locate in a category of film or genre. It has created a new type of filming and perhaps a new way of telling facts. But what makes the film uniquely stylistically is also the way we are implicated as spectators.

Oppenheimer explains, “I think viewers of the film also have talked about this kind of shock turning into fascination turning into shock. I think it’s very painful because the viewer and I go through the same kind of emotional trajectory that somehow Anwar goes through and we therefore feel very implicated. We don’t necessarily go on that journey with Anwar the way we do in most films, which is out of empathy with the main character, but rather because a parallel process is happening in the viewer and me as a filmmaker. And that happened in Anwar.” Through the reenactment, we live with Congo his process of remorse. The audience empathy for him is what makes the film and reenactments so unique. It is interesting to realize that Oppenheimer went through the same kind of emotional trajectory, which makes also the audience to feel empathy with him. These characteristics of making the audience emotionally connected are part of the reflexive documentary mode as mentioned previously in the cinematography section.

Nichols raises another interesting aspect saying that by recognizing that what we are seeing is a reenactment, and to witness it, we also recognize that the meaning is not the same as what the events they represent meant, “They evidence the passage of time, the gaining, or failure to gain,

⁵⁹ D. Fortune, ‘Joshua Oppenheimer and Werner Herzog on The Act of Killing’, *A.V.Club*, 2013, <http://www.avclub.com/article/joshua-oppenheimer-and-werner-herzog-on-ithe-act-o-100900>, (Accessed 1 April 2015).

insight, and they do not carry the same consequences.”⁶⁰ In the reenactment, Anwar Congo’s head is not cut for real, nobody is dying or being hurt. Referring back to Nichols, “The reenactments take the form of stylized typifications.”⁶¹ In this context, Nichols also concludes: “History does not repeat itself, except in mediated transformations such as memory, representation, reenactment, fantasy – categories that coil around each other in complex patterns.”⁶² In the particular case of this scene, Congo is caught with a reaction that he surely not expected. Perhaps the fantasmatic element is Congo’s recognition and remorse process, something that perhaps didn’t existed in the original events. The interesting aspect about this reenactment is also that the boundaries between fantasy and reality are not often clearly marked, leaving the audience with the task of making their own interpretation.

This scene becomes a route for Congo to reconnect with a more human dimension, and functions as a mirror not only for Congo, but for the spectator too. Through playing a complete reversal role he finds himself broken. After being performing fantasies, as the aggressor, he finally plays the victim. As Homy King mentions, “His performance style in turn shifts from an aloof reenactment of his crimes to one in which his physical and emotional reactions are no longer under his control.”⁶³

It is interesting to question whether Congo decided to be the victim, to actually get closer to what his victims felt, or if he decided to act like the victim to cope with his own pain. In an interview with for America Aljazeera, Oppenheimer said “I think what motivates the perpetrators to re-enact is also an attempt, paradoxically, to deal with their pain”.⁶⁴ However, it has also been questioned, weather Congo suffers from some level of Post Traumatic Stress, since through the different re-enactments, he becomes the victim by recognizing his acts. Regarding to this, Oppenheimer said, “In that sense each re-enactment is a denial of the moral meaning of what they did. So I think they’re unconsciously drawn to the trauma.”⁶⁵

⁶⁰ B. Nichols, ‘Irony, Cruelty, Evil (and a Wink) in The Act of Killing’, p. 25.

⁶¹ Nichols, ‘Documentary Reenactment and the Fantasmatic Subject’, p. 84-86.

⁶² Nichols, ‘Documentary Reenactment and the Fantasmatic Subject’, p. 73.

⁶³ H. King, ‘Born Free? Repetition and Fantasy in The Act of Killing’, *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (Winter 2013), p. 33.

⁶⁴ K. Kitamura, ‘Joshua Oppenheimer on ‘The Act of Killing’, *Aljazeera America*, 2013, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2013/9/22/joshua-oppenheimeronfilmingtheactofkilling.html>, (Accessed May 15 2015).

⁶⁵ K. Kitamura, ‘Joshua Oppenheimer on ‘The Act of Killing’, *Aljazeera America*, 2013, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2013/9/22/joshua-oppenheimeronfilmingtheactofkilling.html>, (Accessed May 15 2015).

Conclusion

During this scene, Anwar Congo and his paramilitary leader friends recreate one of Congo's favorite old torturing techniques; cutting heads with wire. The difference is that this time Congo acts as the victim. The scene transmits a very claustrophobic experience, where as an audience we become witnesses of his emotional breakdown. Joshua Oppenheimer gave the opportunity to Congo and the other leaders to choose how they wanted to reenact their crimes. In this scene, the style is similar to a Hollywood gangster movie, which was originally one of Congo's sources of inspiration back in 1965. In earlier moments of the film, both Koto and Congo remember how they got inspired and copied some of their killing techniques from cowboy and gangster films, musicals and horror crime movies.⁶⁶ They even remember gladly how they used to go to the cinema, watch films and then go directly to kill people. Killing was a theatrical way of acting for them and repeating those roles they were inspired from and as mentioned earlier, probably a way to scape from the guilt and pain. Therefore their guilt hasn't been expressed and in the opposite has been justified. Congo's self-deception is therefore revealed through his breakdown in this scene.

Through this filmmaking process, and by Congo acting as the victim, he begins to acknowledge in different degrees throughout the scene, the horror of his acts. By playing a victim who is being strangled in his favorite wire procedure, he turns out visibly affected, unable to continue the scene. This is interesting, since in earlier stages of the film, he seems even proud of himself. Through this reenactment and many others, he begins some kind of moral transformation and recognition, and ends up having an emotional breakdown.

By switching his role from perpetrator to victim, he plays with the feelings of blame and pity. Oppenheimer commented in an interview, "It was his idea; it was something he was doing from the very beginning. At the outset of the film, he has a length of wire around his neck showing me how he killed. He says, "Now I must show you how the victim died." The memory of watching victim after victim being strangled to death may be more traumatic than anything else for him.

⁶⁶ O. Landesman, 'The Act of Killing', *REVERSE SHOT*, 2013, http://reverseshot.org/reviews/entry/1140/act_killing, (Accessed 7 April 2015).

And yet he's drawn to it. Perhaps by re-enacting it he tames it, makes it safe — builds up a kind of protective scar tissue around the wound. Maybe the film gave him a space to feel guilty" ⁶⁷ Therefore, this analysis tries to reveal how this space was stylistically structured and performed.

It is disturbing and shocking to witness what Congo did to many people, but seen in his own body and to witness his punishment through his remorse is also perturbing. Perhaps, by reenacting his own criminal acts, but in the position of the victim, he is able through this performative new method, to make some level of consciousness. The reenactment style utilized by Oppenheimer, not only functions as a mirror of Congo and the other characters, or to place them in a context of evil or good. The way the reenactments are made with the narrative and stylistic techniques, takes society as a big part of it. The reenactment is not only focused on seeing how Congo cut people's head, but to also understand how they wanted to be seen and remembered, which becomes a mirror of how society wants to be seen and remembered too. The reenactment allows us to question how society functions and how other impunities in the world have been understood.

2.1.3. Closing Sequence

Cinematography

The closing sequence is one of the strongest moments of the film. Towards the end of the movie, there is a highly fictionalized scene. In an extreme long shot, Anwar Congo appears surrounded by women in shiny clothes and in the back a stunning waterfall. While the camera makes a pan movement to the right, we get to see Congo and Herman Koto in the center of the frame. Then a medium shot with two men, Congo's victims, holding a wire in their hands. One of them takes a medal from his pocket and with another pan movement to the right, the camera focuses in Congo, who is seen in the middle of the frame receiving a medal from one of his victims. The man portraying the victim, thanks Congo while giving him a medal and saying "For executing me and

⁶⁷ K. Kitamura, 'Joshua Oppenheimer on 'The Act of Killing'', *Aljazeera America*, 2013, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2013/9/22/joshua-oppenheimeronfilmingtheactofkilling.html>, (Accessed May 15 2015).

sending me to heaven”. Congo and the man hold hands and raise their arms to the sky while Congo with his eyes closed seems to feel liberated while being portrayed as a savior. After this scene, through a medium close-up, we see Congo sitting on a chair while he watches two of the scenes for the film in a television monitor. These scenes are for *The Act of Killing*, so we see the film within a film. Before seeing Congo sitting on his chair, we see the first scene that he is watching, which is the one mentioned above with the waterfall and which opens the closing sequence. Congo seems proud and satisfied by seeing his performance while saying, “This is great Joshua, this is very good” “I never imagined I could do something so great”. He talks to Joshua Oppenheimer who’s voice can be heard but his body can’t be seen.

Congo asks to see the scene where he is playing the role of a victim and strangled with a wire. It is obvious that Oppenheimer’s is playing an integral part with his participation, which is a characteristic of Nichols’ participatory documentary mode. Through a POV shot, as viewers we are now on the same side as Congo; we are seeing through his eyes.⁶⁸ The scene when he is strangled is shown, and then again the medium close-up of Congo smoking and watching the scene while he calls his grandsons to come and watch the scene with him. After a few seconds we see him in the frame with both of his grandsons in his lap, the three of them in a medium close-up in the center of the frame. The film stock and high exposure intensify this sequence through the range of saturated red colors and a strong warm filter, which allow us to see the sweat from Congo’s face and perceive the tension of the moment (See figure 7).



Figure 7: Anwar Congo reflecting on his acts.

⁶⁸ * Point of view shot: A shot taken with the camera placed approximately where the character’s eye would be, showing what the character would see; usually cut in before or after a shot of the character looking (Bordwell, p. 504.)

In this moment, we hear the off-screen voice of Oppenheimer reminding Congo that it is a violent scene, but Congo does not seem to care. The camera turns again to a POV shot and we see in full frame the scene where Congo is strangled, in the same direction as him and his grandsons are looking at. Seconds later, the camera points again to Congo and the children in a medium-close up, while he tells them, “Grandpa looks so sad doesn’t he, Yan? It is so sad, isn’t it? That’s your grandpa. That’s Grandpa being beaten up by the fat guy”. Again we see the full frame of the scene they are watching, where Congo is treated violently. Then he gives a kiss to his grandsons who move away from the frame.

The constant movements of the camera through POV shots create a sense of anxiety and also an intense feeling of closeness to the situation. The point of view shots allow us to see what Congo is looking at but from a slightly more objective view. As the grandsons leave the room, we see Congo in the middle of the frame in a medium close-up, face to face with a cruel version of himself, while he seems conflicted with what he is seeing.

In the following section Congo makes a reflection of his own acts and says to himself and to Oppenheimer, who we know is on the off-screen space, “Did the people I tortured feel the way I do here?” Then he says, while we see again in full frame the scene where he is tortured, “I can feel what the people I tortured felt”. He reflects, “Because here my dignity has been destroyed... and then fear comes, right there and then all the terror suddenly possessed my body”.

Suddenly, Joshua Oppenheimer answers him “Actually the people your tortured felt far worse – because you know it’s only a film. They knew they were being killed” Congo answers, “But I can feel it Josh, really I feel it, or have I sinned?” Then he looks up to Oppenheimer and says, “I did this to so many people, Is it all coming back to me?” He wipes the sweat on his face and continues staring at the TV monitor. Through the medium close-up we are able to experience from a closer angle, Congo perturbed by what he has realized.

The encounter of Oppenheimer with Congo becomes a critical element of the film, while different elements of the documentary modes are perceived. On the one hand, the poetic mode is obvious, as it is expressed through the fictional performances, as well as the expressive desire to give a new form and perspective to the events, by showing himself forgiven by his own victims. However, the filmmaker still has a high degree of control of the situation, through his

participation and this is clear when Oppenheimer talks directly to Congo. It also has elements of the reflexive mode and the performative mode, since it creates a subjective experience and provokes an emotional response from the viewers. Congo's moment of reflection is strongly personal and it makes us feel empathy for him, through the poetic style of the scene, which is enhanced with the stylistic techniques described.

In the following take, we see a close-up of Congo's eyes reflected through the mirror of a car. This is the scene that takes us to the final part of the movie. We see a long shot of Congo going up the stairs to some place. Then a medium close-up of Congo standing in the terrace, of the same place we saw much earlier in the film, where he tortured and killed many people. This time, Congo goes back to that same place, filmed many years later.⁶⁹

He stays quiet and thoughtful for some seconds, then the camera makes a pan movement to the left side following him while he shows the place and says, "This is where we tortured and killed the people we captured". Then a medium long shot of Congo standing in the center of the terrace as he says, "I know it was wrong – but I had to do it". Seconds later, Congo body reacts and he begin to vomit, as a possible result of reflecting on his own actions. Then we see a long shot with him sitting on a cement block on the terrace while he holds a thin wire and says "This is one of the easiest ways to take a human life" and then while holding an empty sack, he says "And this was used to take away the human beings we killed" Then he continues vomiting and choking. Congo's reaction is very different from the first time that he appears in that place showing his torture techniques, which is seen in the first scenes of the film. It is interesting to see how he has changed over the years and how different he reacts while talking about his crimes. He has gone through a deep process that has helped him recognize the implications of his actions.

In the next shot he is seen walking down the stairs slowly and then a shot of him leaving the place. He seems far and in depth. The camera stays in that position focusing to the inside of the empty store with the view to the open door where Congo left. This last seconds enhances a feeling of emptiness. The next shot is a black screen that says "A film by Joshua Oppenheimer" and right after, appears the same scenery we saw at the beginning of the film with the fish

⁶⁹ A. Goodman, "The Act of Killing": New Film Shows U.S.-Backed Indonesian Death Squad Leaders Re-enacting Massacres', *Democracy NOW*, 2013, http://www.democracynow.org/2013/7/19/the_act_of_killing_new_film, (Accessed 8 May 2015).

sculpture. This time with six women dancing in the same passage to the mouth of the fish and Congo and Koto, who is dressed as a woman dancing in pairs the same passage, as the final credits of the film come out. This last scene is extremely stylistic and poetic, once again including elements of fantasy and imagination in a surreal way.

The duration of the final sequence from the beginning of the medal scene till the appearance of the final credits is of about 15 minutes.

Editing

The editing style in the final sequence is intriguing. We are introduced to the fantastical medal scene with the theme “Born Free” and the extreme long shot of Anwar Congo in the middle of a landscape, the same one from the opening scene, with Herman Koto by his side, a scenic waterfall in the back and the women dancing freely surrounding them.⁷⁰ Through a jump cut, we see the medium close-up of Congo watching the scenes and talking to Oppenheimer. We engage in the mood of the moment through the synchronization of the pictures on screen and the conversation between Congo and Oppenheimer.

In several shots, as viewers, we see from the eyes and perspective of Congo, while in others in the same off-screen space as Oppenheimer. The speed in which these changes occur is fast and it makes the viewer feel part of the conversation. The jump cuts back and forth between Congo and the TV monitor emphasize Congo’s reaction and the moment of realization where he says he understands what his victims felt. However, the moment he is reflecting if he has sinned is slightly longer than other takes, which creates some sense of intimacy with the moment and a space for reflection for both Congo and the audience. This part of the scene, where we see the reenactment through Congo’s monitor, has also reflexive indicatives of the reflexive mode of documentary. The reflexive mode focuses on the act of filming to make the viewer more aware of the filmmaking process.⁷¹

⁷⁰ H. King, ‘Born Free? Repetition and Fantasy in The Act of Killing’, *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (Winter 2013), p. 33.

⁷¹ B. Natusch and B. Hawkins, ‘Mapping Nichols’ Modes in Documentary Film: Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry and Helvetica’, *The IAFOR Journal of Media, Communication and Film*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Summer 2014, <http://iafor.org/archives/journals/media/media-journal-vol1-issue2-contents/Nichols-theory.pdf>, (Accessed May 19 2015).

The graphic relation between shots is abrupt, however, it enhances the connection between what Congo is seeing and the moment he gets emotional about it. After he reflects on his acts, there is a jump cut and then we see him sitting on the chair, staring at the floor in silence.

During the last long take, the unedited shots make the viewer focused for a longer period, which becomes very uncomfortable to watch. These last moments have been subject to many discussions about ethical aspects and about Oppenheimer's intention. As Lúcia Nagib said, "The decision to preserve the long take in its integrity is hence a political one, and simultaneously Oppenheimer's ultimate betrayal of his subject, negating cinema in order to let reality speak for itself"⁷² I believe that Oppenheimer decided to keep the long take, since Congo's reaction is the culminating moment of his body and mind reacting to the whole process of the film. After many reenactments and internal processes, he recognizes something and has to face it. The length of the take is important to really perceive the intensity of the moment. The question about betrayal is however an important subject to discuss in a general perspective of the film. The editing style was not meant to only show that Congo had a human side, but to show how he came to the point of no longer being able to ignore what he had done. This opens up a bigger discussion about the way society has dealt with different massacres and if it is possible to come to that moment of realization and perhaps change something.

Sound

The role of sound in the closing sequence is very influential in the way that we perceive Congo's reaction. The introduction to the first scene of the sequence begins with the non-diegetic music of the title "Born Free" from a film from the 1960s about a lion kept in captivity and then released into the wild.⁷³ Later on, during the scene where Congo is watching himself acting as a victim, the diegetic sound comes from the conversation between him and Joshua Oppenheimer who is not seen on frame. As mentioned earlier, Oppenheimer's voice enhances the participatory qualities of the reenactment, since he not only observes the characters; he participates with Congo

⁷² L. Nagib, 'Regurgitated Bodies: re-enactment as the production of reality in The Act of Killing', *Keynote speech at the "World Documentary Film and TV Conference"*, Falmouth University, 4-6 September 2014.

⁷³ H. King, 'Born Free? Repetition and Fantasy in The Act of Killing', *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (Winter 2013), p. 34.

in a conversation. The background diegetic sounds in the house are disturbing but they add a feeling of reality to the scene, of an un-staged moment. While we see the image of him being beaten while reenacting, at the same time we hear his voice telling to his grandsons; “This is only a film. Look at that”. The sounds coming from the TV monitor in the reenactment are loud which give a sense of continuity to the sequence, and intensify what Congo is saying. In the final scene, while Congo goes up the stairs to the rooftop, his footsteps and the emptiness of the place add a lot of tension to this moment. When he goes up the terrace, the intensity and strength of the sounds of his body when he starts vomiting are incredibly uncomfortable to hear. The tempo of this final moment creates an inexplicable anxiety, since there is no other sound but the sound of Congo's body reacting to what he has said and done.

Mise-en-scène

Setting

Most of the scenes were shot in real places in Indonesia. The first scene of the closing sequence is the same setting we saw in the opening scene. The extreme green color of the grass and the beauty of the landscape are absolutely surreal. The medal that Congo receives is extremely lustrous which makes it stand out from the rest of the objects in the setting (See figure 8). Once again, the poetic and highly stylistic qualities of the reenactment stand out during this scene.



Figure 8: Anwar Congo's redemption.

In the next part, we see Congo sitting on a chair in the interior of a house. In his right back side, some porcelain beautiful vases in different prints and on his left backside, the back of the chair where he is seated, which has engraved flowers in different colors. The colors are mostly strong reds and yellows, which intensify the setting. The characteristics of these objects are part of Oppenheimer's method, to make the audience involved and identified with the elements shown in the scene. He explained in an interview, "And Anwar's chair when he gets up to go grab his grandchildren—this carved, painted, over-the-top gaudy chair with crystal in the background—that should be beautiful. It's beautiful to them and maybe we find it's tasteless, but here we are in this all glass condo [where the interview is taking place]—why is this more tasteful? So it was a very important principle: a way of translating, if you like, what's culturally different into our world by trying to always make it seductive, and therefore implicate the viewer that way. To think, oh it is beautiful, oh it is heart-stirring, even as it's repulsive."⁷⁴

This technique is interesting because throughout the film, there are several elements of the Indonesian culture, which are probably unknown to the audience, and that are presented seductively, with bright colors and which become attractive elements of the film. By not identifying something, it becomes exotic and striking. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why Oppenheimer chose to do so many reenactments with surreal characteristics, as a way to engage the audience.

The TV that he is looking at is an old SANYO monitor from the 1980s, on a little table over an Indonesian carpet. In the background of the TV there is a big shelf with some glasses. In the last scene, the only element is Congo and the abandoned rooftop. It is an empty cement terrace with fences around and some growing grass.

Space and Composition

During the landscape scene with the waterfall and the delivery of the medal to Anwar Congo, the composition resembles a staged musical. Congo and Koto are deliberately located in the center of the landscape, surrounded by beautiful women that somehow decorate and glorify them while dancing to the music. The imposing waterfall in the background adds intensity and exaggerates

⁷⁴ N. Rapold, 'Interview: Joshua Oppenheimer', *Film Comment*, July 2013, <http://www.filmcomment.com/entry/interview-joshua-oppenheimer-the-act-of-killing>, (Accessed 13 March 2015).

the moment (See figure 9). The overall experience is enhanced and digitally controlled by Oppenheimer, which exploits the possibilities of Nichols' participatory and poetic modes.



Figure 9: A musical sequence.

In the next scene, we see Congo watching different scenes where he had acted. In this part, the composition is interesting as it is focused mainly on the face and expressions of Congo, but still revealing certain elements in the background that contribute to the Indonesian culture and Congo's eccentric clothing style. The composition is balanced and we see Congo in the center, with different objects on each side and in the background a bright red curtain. Congo is located quite close to the screen, in a close-up, which limits the space between him and the viewer and which simultaneously brings us closer to his moment of consciousness.

Towards the end of the film, in the last scene Congo's eyes are seen through the mirror of a car. His eyes filled with remorse and feelings seen through the mirror, close to the screen and to the audience too. The composition in the end is mainly formed by Congo situated in different areas of the terrace. There is a sense of claustrophobia in the way the camera moves and the spots where Congo stands. These feelings are part of the characteristics of the participatory mode, which in this case together with the stylistic techniques makes us as spectators at some level participants of the scene. The viewer is involved in the horrifying last moments, by witnessing Congo's remorse.

Lighting

During the first scene analyzed of the closing sequence, the brightness of the fantasy landscape is very extreme. It is daytime and the reflections of the women skirts and the medal given to Congo intensify the scene. There is so much light and color that it makes the landscape even more surreal. In the following part, there is also a high exposure while Congo watches the scenes on the TV. The frontal lighting eliminates the shadows and the lighting allows the sweat and texture of Congo's face to be perceived. In contrast, at the end of the closing sequence when Congo goes back to the rooftop, it is nighttime, it is dark and there are a lot of shadows, which accentuate the darkness of what Congo is talking about. The main source of light comes from external sources on the off-screen space.

Costume and Make up

In this final sequence, during the first scene, the clothes of the women are very shiny. They wear strapless red tops and silver long skirts that reflect with the sunlight and stand out dramatically from the rest of the scenery. They have long feathers in their heads and exaggerated makeup. Anwar Congo wears a long black cape and Herman Koto a blue female dress, the same one described in the opening sequence. Once again, Oppenheimer's method to implicate the audience is clearly seen in these elements, which add a comical style to the scene making everything look strange but seductive at the same time. However, this has been subject to discussions since these elements might only be seductive to viewers, who are not familiar with Indonesian culture, raising questions about the ethical implications of this method.

In the following shot and throughout the film, it is obvious that Congo cares about his style, since he is most of the times wearing shiny colors and exotic patterns, perhaps another way of distancing himself from the darkness of his past. In this scene, he is wearing a silk looking shirt with yellow stars, red, navy blue and light blue colors and patterns. It is as saturated as the colors in the background and the whole composition. Towards the end of the film, when Congo goes back to the rooftop, he wears an ochre suit with a colorful shirt under, which contrasts enormously with the fact that he is talking about the people he killed there (See figure 10).



Figure 10: Anwar Congo in closing sequence.

Acting

The acting in the final sequence covers many different styles. During the first scene, through extreme method acting, Anwar Congo and Herman Koto seem fully immersed into a world of fantasy where Congo is forgiven and he is even granted medals. In the next scene, Congo appears watching the scene where he is forgiven by one of his victims. When finished viewing the scene, he seems proud of his performance and happy. Later, after watching the scene where he is decapitated he reflects on what his victims had felt. Despite being one of the strongest moments of the film, this moment has raised some questions regarding how truthful his reaction was or not, as well as how much was he influenced by the presence of the camera. At the end of the film, in the last scene, we see Congo explaining how he killed his victims. While walking on the terrace where he killed thousands of people, his body reacts and he starts choking while explaining what he did. His physical reaction is so severe and uncomfortable that many people has questioned if this reaction was real or not. Was he at some level acting? This scene shows elements of the performative mode, as it is surreal but with emotional intensity which enhances the narrative. The very last scene with Congo and Koto dancing in pair through the fish mouth passage is highly surreal and significant. After having had witnessed the whole film and last remorse, we end up watching again that highly stylistic setting which is at the same time humorous. This is characteristic of parody and irony reenactments, where the separation between the prior events and the reenactment may create a more complex way of understanding what the tragedy actually means. It is at the same time, as previously mentioned poetic, reflecting one more time the dreams and imaginations of these men (See figure 11).



Figure 11: Final image of *The Act of Killing*.

Reenactment

The Act of Killing is considered a documentary, however, a documentary is usually not expected to contain any sorts of acting and even less re-enacting. *The Act of Killing* is a film that crosses borders between different genres, including different types of representations and levels of performance. During the first scene of the closing sequence, we are invited to, a fantastic and surreal scenery, where Congo is forgiven by his victims, even glorified and given a medal for sending them to heaven. This scene is like a parody to Hollywood musicals and as Oppenheimer has mentioned, “The Act of Killing is a musical, because it creates a kind of allegorical space of collective celebration”⁷⁵ It is the film’s stylistic techniques, the reenactments and the soundtrack of Oppenheimer’s method that can together create this space and provoke such an interesting result. Oppenheimer reflects on the way that in musicals, the excitement of a character is transmitted to the other characters and that's how they all start singing and dancing, based on a feeling and emotion transmitted from one another, as if the emotion and feelings of the main character was widespread and collectivized. In this particular scene, is as if Congo transmitted to all other characters his desire to be forgiven and his emotions were suddenly collectivized and represented by all the other characters, so they all expressed Congo’s desire to redemption. The way this method transmits and collectivizes feelings is also why as viewers we feel involved and even some level of empathy with Congo. This reenactment works in the way of a typification,

⁷⁵ I. Lusztig, ‘The Fever Dream of Documentary: A Conversation with Joshua Oppenheimer’, *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (Winter 2013), p. 55.

since they perform based on an idealized image of how musicals should look, but also the idealized image of how Congo would like to see himself.

The theme of "fantasy" has also an extremely important role in the film and in the final sequence. The scene symbolizes the way in which Congo would have liked to be perceived, or maybe as an escape to not deal with the harshness of the facts. The fantasy represents a world where he could be forgiven and idolized for what he did, which also intensifies the strange and surreal aspect of the film. The Indonesian government has made people like Congo national heroes and they are celebrated and have lived their lives with no guilt. However, through different reenactments, Congo faces for the first time a different image of himself. Through the reenactments of his crimes, in the position of victim, hero or criminal, Congo is affected by the realization of what he has done. Is Congo's fantasy to be forgiven by his victims, to forgive himself or is it to be glorified by this forgiveness?

In the following scene of the closing sequence, Congo watches some of the scenes where he reenacts in the role of a victim. He sees himself strangled with a wire, one of his favorite techniques. At first he feels proud of his acting and the authenticity he simulates, however when he finishes watching them, he questions himself if he had sinned and how his victims felt. He makes a testimonial reflection of what he did to many people. It is unavoidable for him to encounter himself and the crimes he committed against others.

Janet Walker discusses how in *The Act of Killing*, neither Congo's image as an executioner or as a victim conform the conventional search for truth in documentary practice. However she makes emphasis on how these constructions create meaning according to the paradoxical logic of traumatic testimony. She argues, "There is a pronounced, excessive vitality to the traumatic (re)enactments that Anwar embodies." According to these thoughts, Congo is testifying and confessing with words and actions, not only what we know of the historical facts, but the extreme violence he and others perpetrated, his own experience and actions. Neither the fantasy of being held, or being victimized are common ways to find or make truthful acts in documentary film. Congo is testifying with words, memories and with his body. It is a truth that goes beyond the

simply historical facts, to a different kind of truth.⁷⁶ I agree with Walker, since one of the reasons this film is so special and unique is because it changes the way of telling the truth, which is not based in facts but in a combination of techniques. Through the stylistic performances, as well as all elements of the staging, lighting and stylistic techniques, together with the fact that this reenactments were seen by an audience and by Congo himself, he had the perfect setting to come to another kind of truth which maybe otherwise would have been impossible to reach. Werner Herzog has a similar thought, as he said in an interview about *The Act of Killing* that; “Documentary has to move from pure fact based movies because facts per se do not constitute the truth.”⁷⁷

In the last scene, Congo returns to the scene of the crime, the place where he earlier in the film, demonstrated how he strangled prisoners with his wire technique. According to Bill Nichols this moment can be “... interpreted as the culmination of the doubts and nightmares he has referred to throughout the film”, but he continues, “It can also be interpreted as his idea of how a movie should end, with the hero showing his vulnerable side and winning some measure of sympathy from an incredulous audience.”⁷⁸ However I do not believe that Congo was looking for a heroic ending to this film. From my perspective, this final scene represents, as Nichols says, somehow the culmination of doubts and nightmares that Congo had have, however it also represents the time when he is able to recognize what he did, without denying it. The last scene is extremely strong since in early scenes of the film, Congo, being in the same place, reacts very differently, fully refusing any kind of recognition, dancing and teasing to forget the events, with a constant attempt to distance himself from the pain. However, this last scene, which was filmed years later, serves to compare and see the process of Congo’s recognition. The scene allows the viewer, and at the same Congo to confront himself. This underlines the fact that the filming process was also a therapeutic one.

The truthful confession of Congo’s body in the last scene is very powerful, as it his body testifying physically and performing the drama of his own actions. Some academics and

⁷⁶ J. Walker, ‘Referred Pain: The Act of Killing and the Production of a Crime Scene’, *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (Winter 2013), p. 16-17.

⁷⁷ ‘Werner Herzog and Errol Morris talk about The Act of Killing’, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LLQxVy7R9qo>, (Accessed 1 March 2015).

⁷⁸ B. Nichols, ‘Irony, Cruelty, Evil (and a Wink) in The Act of Killing’, *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (Winter 2013), p. 27.

professionals in the media have questioned in different ways this reaction. One of them is Errol Morris, executive producer of the film, who mentioned in a conversation with Joshua Oppenheimer, "The vomiting—whether the vomiting is one more performance for himself and for us, or if it is the result of something real. Can we ever know?", while Oppenheimer argues that in a way he is performing for the camera, and he is conscious and aware that there is a camera in front of him, but "At the same time, he's performing in such a way that he allows the past to hit him with an unexpected force in that moment."⁷⁹

On the contrary, Nick Fraser, who has different objections towards the morals of the film said, "Of course I may be alone in finding the vomiting noises finally made at the end of the film by Anwar Congo, dude and grandfatherly murderer, wholly inadequate as catharsis or indeed anything else; but I somehow doubt that this is so".⁸⁰ While he also criticizes the way the film presents the atrocities as inadequate as he calls the film to be a "snuff movie"⁸¹

After all, I agree with Oppenheimer's point of view, that there is a level of performance in the way Congo is telling what he did, however the force of his memories and of the past is still revealed in the way his body reacts and in conjunction with all the events that happened in the film. This final scene was the result of a process of many years of filming and probably reflecting. Another interesting aspect to analyze is that many of the reenactments in the film were filmed in the real spots where the tortures took place, while others in different areas close to the real places. The way that the film combines places, persons and memories constitute in a very interesting way the spaces where the reenactments occur. I wonder if Congo's reaction would have been the same in a different location. Is the authenticity of the place and space an influential effect in how Congo reflected upon himself and the past events?

In the other hand, Nichols talks about how voice-over commentary often generates some level of moral to the reality represented.⁸² In the final sequence we see Congo watching a scene where he is strangled. Oppenheimer's off-screen voice is heard when he tells Congo that his victims felt far

⁷⁹ E. Morris, 'The Murders of Gonzago', *SLATE*, July 2013, http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/history/2013/07/the_act_of_killing_essay_how_indonesia_s_mass_killings_could_have_slowed.3.html, (Accessed 12 May 2015).

⁸⁰ N. Fraser, 'We love Impunity: The case of the Act of Killing', *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (Winter 2013), p. 22.

⁸¹ Ibid

⁸² B. Nichols, 'Irony, Cruelty, Evil (and a Wink) in The Act of Killing', *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (Winter 2013), p. 28.

worse because they knew they would die, while he knows this was just a film. Oppenheimer's off-screen voice introduces some level of morality, however is the spectator who has to define and explain to himself the reality portrayed. It is the public who is left with a deeper voice, which forces ourselves to question the meaning of what we are seeing.

The stylistic techniques of the film create the space for the audience to be seduced and involved. As spectators, we get into the horrific events, through a method that is unexpected to the viewer, and that Oppenheimer created to involve us as an audience. He explains, "I also had that impulse that it should be beautiful, majestic, seductive; because, if we want to talk about how a lie can seduce us we have to make the lie as beautiful to the audience as it might be to the brainwashed."⁸³ The imposing force and effect of the film, also lies in the different usage given to the reenactments, which as mentioned during the chapter, are performed by the perpetrators.

Conclusion

The final sequence has powerful content, as it is in a way the climax of the film. Anwar Congo reaches a level of consciousness of his acts when he faces a very aggressive dark version of himself, by not only confessing in words and trying to explain to himself his crimes, but also defeated by his own body physical reactions. Both Congo's fantasies and his performances as a victim make this film to be far from conventional.

The film closing sequence shows a moment of truth, as Congo recognizes his actions, and realizes that the "communists" were also human beings. The musical scene is a way for Congo to cleanse himself and therefore represents his redemption and forgiveness in heaven. The scene with the heavenly setting and the "Born Free" song is in a way a scene of wishfullfilment and reveals the complex relation between Congo's psyche, guilt, dreams and memories. Perhaps as mentioned previously, as a way to protect and distance himself from the pain.

In other words, this fantasy scene reveals how far the mind can go to avoid confrontation, to find protection. However it also shows how much this can affect to both the people who committed

⁸³ J. Elphick, 'Joshua Oppenheimer discusses The Act of Killing', 4:3, 2014, <http://fourthreefilm.com/2014/05/interview-joshua-oppenheimer/>, (Accessed 28 April 2015).

the crimes, the history of a country and of course the victims. What is this final sequence revealing about humans and us? What is society facing through Anwar Congo's story?

The final sequence puts together many thoughts and questions that are present throughout the film. Are we as an audience also recognizing Anwar Congo as a human being, more than just a perpetrator? Or, are we somehow forgiving him for what he confesses? Is the film teaching us also something about forgiveness?

The fantasy used in the final sequence, through the representation of redemption in heaven, together with other fantasy scenes throughout the film, perhaps could be seen as a new route for reality and truth. If fantasy would be used for this matter, could it be a way for society to open up doors from the past and maybe not only get conscious about past crimes but to open new possibilities to work against other impunities? Or as Warren Crichlow questions, “What happens, in other words, when memories of difficult pasts are encountered through a cinematic representation?”⁸⁴

Finally, what is also terrifying is the access we have through the confessions of the perpetrators, who often speak with no remorse; to see how they live their daily lives as ordinary people. There are moments in the film, where it seems that the barriers between good and evil do not exist. For example when we see Congo with his grandsons and his family, while he had just reenacted how he cut people's head. It is in these moments where as viewers we are confronted, identifying ourselves at list in a fraction with Congo. Oppenheimer revealed in an interview that part of his intention was that the audience could see part of themselves in a man like Anwar.⁸⁵

Lastly, as Errol Morris said, “I know that there is a past for people, but do they ever deal with it. or do they just try to reinvent it or just make it up out of whole”. Does this open up the possibility that Anwar Congo will perhaps deal with his past through this film, or will he reinvent the meaning of the story and his image through the attention the film gained and the world response to it?

⁸⁴ W. Crichlow, ‘It’s all about finding the right excuse in Joshua Oppenheimer’s *The Act of Killing*’, *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (Winter 2013), p. 39.

⁸⁵ Ibid

PART 3

3.1. Conclusive Summary

A few of years ago, I became largely interested in the use of reflexive techniques and reenactments in film. The first time I saw *The Act of Killing* I felt deeply uncomfortable and confused, while amazed by the silence that prevailed in one of the cinema rooms at the Berlinale 2013. After reading many of the reviews and articles published about the film, I realized that this film was dealing with a deeper issue that I hadn't fully understood. Therefore writing my Master's Thesis about this film was an interesting step for making a deeper study about this interesting subject. I noticed that it was extremely hard to classify the film or to place it in one of the existing categories. It wasn't really the type of film I thought of as a documentary, however I didn't understand it as a fictional piece either. Throughout the research I decided to use the vast amount of reviews and articles written about the film, as well as the information previously published about documentary modes, reenactment types and their use in documentary film throughout history, to further make a deep analysis of Joshua's Oppenheimer filming method in *The Act of Killing*.

In this thesis, I undertake a detailed analysis of the stylistic techniques such as the cinematography, editing, sound and *mise-en-scène* and simultaneously relating them to the different documentary modes and reenactment types that Bill Nichols proposed. The result of the analysis shows that the film uses more than one of these modes and blends many types of reenactments, while creates a method that is innovative and powerful.

It is impossible to place *The Act of Killing* in just one genre, since it crosses boundaries of documentary, fiction and creates a new category in itself. I noticed during my research that the absent signifiers, as we don't know when is dream, imagination, performance, truth or reenactment, were significant elements in implicating the audience. The film does not intend to explain in detail the genocidal atrocities of Indonesia, but encourage both the audience and the perpetrators to reflect about the consequences of silencing and not recognizing genocidal history, in Indonesia and the world in general.

Oppenheimer has mentioned many times that this is a documentary of the imagination. After analyzing in detail the opening and closing sequences and in Congo's reenactment scene as a victim, it is obvious to recognize that the results in the reenactments as well as their filmmaking processes reflected the inner world and thoughts of Congo and his leader friends, more than just representing historical facts. The closeness to the making of these reenactments and the intimacy with the perpetrators minds and daily lives, confronts us as viewers with men that are not totally different from us.

By studying the reenactments I was able to get a deeper understanding of the way they changed the men who committed the crimes by, with no much intervention, letting them challenge themselves to think critically evoking very strong emotions and a gradual recognition of their acts. The film not only serves to understand Indonesia's past, but it leaves the viewer in a state of contemplation, which makes us wonder about the present too. As spectators we have witnessed the whole process and therefore there is an inevitable question about society too.

The Act of Killing is extremely unique, especially from the fact that the focus is on the perpetrators rather than on the victims. Even though Oppenheimer released a film about the victims later, the fact that he didn't mix them is interesting. By solely focusing on the perpetrators minds, he was able to create a space for them to admit what they did through a very profound and therapeutic narrative.

One of the findings of this research are the ethical implications of Oppenheimer's method. Did Oppenheimer cross boundaries by exposing Congo's privacy? Did Congo and the other men knew what the implications of a film would have on their lives? Did Oppenheimer betray Congo by exposing everything Congo trusted him? The fact that Congo and his friends are so open and proud to talk about their crimes inevitable makes the viewer wonder if this is real or not. Why do they boast and feel proud about their crimes? What is the motive behind it? How does boating about such things affect society? Throughout the film it is clear that the boastful attitude of these men comes from their regime, which not only is a regime of impunity, fear and lies, but it also celebrates genocide. Nevertheless, throughout the film it is possible to see the closeness that Oppenheimer managed to have with these men, perhaps because he met them and learnt to know them over a period of several years, just as the fact that he addresses them as human beings.

One of the main findings was the fact that the highly surreal scenes created a different kind of truth. Even though the film seems far from documenting facts, it documents truth through the minds, the dreams and the imagination of these men. This opens up the possibility of thinking of truth and documentary in a different way, as well as a new technique in film to reflect upon things. It explores the process of social meaning and performance thorough its therapeutic narrative and creates awareness through its method. Therefore, this film opens a new area for further study as it can evolve the way of seeing documentary.

I understand *The Act of Killing* as a very significant ground breaking documentary, which managed to create meaning through a very creative method. Oppenheimer's method is of great relevance as it uses the reenactments and his particular way of stylizing them, created a space, a direct access to the confessions of these men and a passage to see their daily private lives and feelings. There are no boundaries between good and evil or fantasy and reality, which leaves us confused and reflecting on ourselves. I believe reenactments have the power to be used in a wide variety of forms that can benefit both the film and the audience through deep reflexive processes of the mind.

Lastly is interesting to analyze how Oppenheimer's highly stylistic method is understood and communicated in our actual context, in a world of media users and visual culture and how it makes us question the fact that the persistent celebration of atrocities in the world is part of the atrocities in itself. Therefore, what we can learn from Congo's remorse is a personal process, which could change how we position ourselves and how we recognize other very significant similar events in the world.

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3.3.Filmography

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