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# UNSETTLING REDEMPTION: THE ETHICS OF INTRASUBJECTIVITY IN *THE ACT OF KILLING*

SARA KENDALL

“Dostoyevsky was concerned with psychology; he made visible the criminal element hidden in each person. Brecht is concerned with politics; he makes visible the element of crime hidden in all business.”

—Walter Benjamin<sup>1</sup>

## I. Between *Psyche* and *Polis*

*The Act of Killing* (2012) resists clear categorization as a cultural artefact. Neither documentary nor dramatization, it inhabits a space between, offering a novel approach to cinematic representations of historical violence. Referencing the period surrounding the overthrow of Indonesian president Sukarno by a military coup in the mid-1960s that brought US-backed General Suharto to power, the film focuses on several mid-level agents of an anti-communist purge that resulted in the deaths of half a million to two million people.<sup>2</sup> By following a group of former paramilitary killers through dramatic re-enactments of their crimes, it lends material resources and an international platform to the

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Brecht’s *Threepenny Novel*,” in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings* (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), 201.

<sup>2</sup> The figure here is the filmmaker’s own, drawn from a co-authored introduction to an edited volume. See Joram ten Brink and Joshua Oppenheimer (eds.), *Killer Images: Documentary Film, Memory and the Performance of Violence* (New York: Wallflower Press/Columbia University Press, 2012). For the broader history of the period, see Ariel Heryanto, *State Terrorism and Political Identity in Indonesia: Fatally Belonging* (New York: Routledge, 2006); John Roosa, *Pretext for Mass Murder: The September 30<sup>th</sup> Movement and Suharto’s Coup d’État in Indonesia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006); and Max Lane, *Catastrophe in Indonesia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press/Seagull Books, 2010); see also Robert Cribb, “The Indonesian Massacres,” in Samuel Totten and William S. Parsons (eds.), *Century of Genocide*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 235–262.

perpetrators through inviting them to produce their own narrative of the violence using the stylistic conventions of their choice.

In contemporary Indonesia, where many of the same perpetrators have links to state power and are treated as heroic figures, the discourse of “ending impunity” invoked by human rights activists and proponents of international criminal law is markedly absent. As one of the film’s subjects maintains, “war crimes are defined by the winners. I’m a winner. So I can make my own definition.” Institutional mechanisms such as courts and truth commissions that inscribe and enforce the redress of past wrongs are far from the political horizon in contemporary Indonesia. Coming to terms with past atrocities requires alternate approaches in a polity that continues to disavow this violent history. In this sense the film is an intervention: a possible unsettling of political complacency and a site for reflection on existing power structures and historical effacements. The film’s official trailer prompts its audience with the overlaid text—“why have they never been punished?”—suggesting that lack of accountability is a significant and framing theme.

By inviting perpetrators to craft narratives of their crimes, however, *The Act of Killing* also provokes reflection on its novel experimental form. The film draws its audience into a space of ethical ambiguity, prompting questions as to the work’s meaning and purpose. Can it produce remorse and redemption among its perpetrator-subjects, and is this approach likely to bring about political transformation? How might this artefact contribute to the historical record of mass atrocity? *The Act of Killing* can thus be read in relation to “transitology,” a term that I use here to characterize the ideological underpinnings, sentiments, and themes of the field of transitional justice.<sup>3</sup> The field places ideological emphasis on the temporal and ethical movement from past injustice to a presumptively just present. As part of a broader discourse of “humanitarian reason,”<sup>4</sup> it employs affective sentiments that include trauma,

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<sup>3</sup> “Transitology” is often understood more narrowly as referring to the comparative political study of regime transitions, and particularly of post-Soviet regimes, within the discipline of political science. For a critical treatment of this narrower form, see John Haskell and Boris Mamlyuk, “Capitalism, Communism ... and Colonialism? Revisiting ‘Transitology’ as the Ideology of Informal Empire,” *Global Jurist* 9, no. 2 (2009): 1–35. Others have used the term in relation to transitional justice; see John Torpey (ed.), *Politics and the Past: On Repairing Historical Injustices* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003). Here I use the term to refer to the animating *sentiments* of the field of transitional justice—thus its referent is more an affect than a field of inquiry or a set of mechanisms.

<sup>4</sup> Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*, trans. Rachel Gomme (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012). Fassin argues that “humanitarianism elicits the fantasy of a global moral community that may still be viable and the expectation that solidarity may have redeeming powers. This secular imaginary of communion and redemption implies a

healing, remorse, and redemption. It addresses themes of accountability, impunity, truth-telling, and reconciliation. These sentiments and themes have appeared within the film itself, in interviews with its makers, and in journalistic and scholarly commentary. According to an anthropologist specializing in cultural and political responses to Indonesia's violent past, the film "penetrates the entrenched impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators of one of the worst massacres in modern history."<sup>5</sup> In this light, the film has been taken up not only as a creative work, but also as a means of provoking a psychological transition in its subjects and a broader political recognition of a disavowed past.

*The Act of Killing* can be read in relation to what I am calling "transitology" on two different registers: at the level of the *psyche* and at the level of the *polis*. Following Walter Benjamin, we might say that the film combines a Dostoyevskian interest in the inner criminal with a Brechtian concern for exposing the underside of political and social structures—in this case, the links between individual killers, paramilitary organizations, and ultimately the Indonesian state. Joshua Oppenheimer, the most public presence of the film's three directors, offers an account of his decision to support a group of perpetrators, including the film's main perpetrator-protagonist, Anwar Congo, in producing narratives of their own crimes:

And so begins a process of refinement and embellishment where these simple re-enactments with Anwar and his friends become these kind of grotesque, surreal, beautiful, phantasmagoric dramatizations. The engine of that embellishment is in fact Anwar's own conscience in the hope that by making it beautiful in the film he can somehow make it ok for himself.<sup>6</sup>

Oppenheimer is interested in tracing the work of Anwar's conscience—to the extent that he believes he can record and render it visible—in order to show how Anwar tries to "make it ok" for himself. Anwar's *psyche* provides a key narrative thread for the film, which at times seems to venture into a personal journey of seeking redemption, or, at the very least, of some form of release

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sudden awareness of the fundamentally unequal human condition and an ethical necessity to not remain passive about it in the name of solidarity—however ephemeral this awareness is, and whatever limited impact this necessity has" (xii).

<sup>5</sup> Ariel Heryanto, "The 1965–6 Killings: Facts and Fictions in Dangerous Liaisons," *International Institute for Asian Studies Newsletter*, 61 (Autumn 2012), 16–17, available at <http://www.iias.nl/the-newsletter/article/1965-1966-killings-facts-and-fictions-dangerous-liaisons>.

<sup>6</sup> SOHK.TV Interview with Joshua Oppenheimer (*The Act of Killing*), interview by Jack Jones, © Minky Productions 2013, available online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pMBx4crMG7A>.

from the nightmares that have been haunting him. Yet Oppenheimer claims an additional objective: he wants to show that this violence in which Anwar is implicated is not removed, remote, and marginal, but rather endemic and universal. “All of our societies are built on mass violence,” he contends, which forms the “the underbelly of our reality.”<sup>7</sup> In the words of Simon Critchley, we might say that the wider orientation of *The Act of Killing* is one of “political disappointment”:

something lacking or failing arises from the realization that we inhabit a violently *unjust* world, a world defined by the horror of war, a world where, as Dostoevsky says, blood is being spilt in the merriest way, as if it were champagne.<sup>8</sup>

Part of the film’s project entails capturing the merry ways in which its subjects recount the spilling of blood. For Critchley, political disappointment “provokes the question of justice,”<sup>9</sup> and it seems that the question of justice haunts the margins of the film without being overtly addressed. How then can this “violently *unjust* world” be navigated, where perpetrators such as Congo continue to inhabit positions of influence? What kind of transition, if any, is possible without a transformation of the *polis*—the political community that has been affected by mass atrocity? Is the possible redemption of the perpetrator’s *psyche* the only available avenue of redress enabled by this form?

This article explores what kind of transformation or transition is possible within the terms of the film’s own (en)framing and the wider historico-political context that it inhabits. *The Act of Killing* takes up a different and more subjective task of documentation than the field of transitional justice’s traditional orientation toward a polity, and in this sense the film’s objectives diverge considerably from those of the field.<sup>10</sup> Yet transitional mechanisms also employ the affective categories of trauma and healing, and in this sense I suggest that both the film and certain discourses of transitional justice share a common sentiment. At the level of the individual subject—whether victim, perpetrator, or beneficiary of past oppression—“transitology” appears to slide into the realm of the therapeutic, and the imperative of overcoming trauma takes precedence over attention to structural injustice. As Didier Fassin and

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (London: Verso, 2008), 3.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>10</sup> On transitional justice as a field, see Ruti Teitel, *Transitional Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) and Pierre Hazan, *Judging War, Judging History: Behind Truth and Reconciliation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

Richard Rechtman have noted, the category of trauma has become a dominant form of representing historical violence:

Trauma has become a major signifier of our age. It is our normal means of relating present suffering to past violence. It is the scar that a tragic event leaves on an individual victim or on a witness—sometimes even on a perpetrator.<sup>11</sup>

Oppenheimer explains that he “lingered on Anwar because his pain was close to the surface”—“it was though he was shadowed by genuine memories that were haunting him.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed, as the next section argues, *The Act of Killing* seems to present the production of the film itself as a therapeutic process—an uneasy narrative of coming to terms with past acts. Yet unlike the frame of a truth and reconciliation commission, which allows a space for the figure of the perpetrator but with attendant conditions (solemnity at a minimum, and in some cases an intersubjective expression of remorse), the frame of the film appears unconditional: here perpetrators participate in producing a spectacle without the expectation that they ought to account for what they have done.

In this sense, trauma—Anwar’s pain and the memories that haunt him—forms a greater part of the film’s narrative arc than the issue of ongoing structural injustice and impunity. The film’s relation to the theme of accountability is less direct and more allegorical, read through the shattered *psyche* of its main perpetrator-protagonist. Oppenheimer claims he was “not interested in leading a killer to remorse. But . . . discovering his brokenness has been the most effective exposé, if you like, of the rottenness of the whole regime.”<sup>13</sup> This exposé suggests a kind of metonymical relationship, where Anwar’s broken *psyche* is seen to index the political order in contemporary Indonesia. The risk with this emphasis on the personal journey lies in foregrounding the *psyche* over the *polis*, and with privileging affective sentiments concerning the individual over political transformation. As a critical intervention, the film’s main purchase comes from what it allows us to see

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<sup>11</sup> Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), xi. Cathy Caruth argues that “The phenomenon of trauma seems to have become all-inclusive, but it has done so precisely because it brings us to the limits of our understanding: if psychoanalysis, psychiatry, sociology, and even literature are beginning to hear each other anew in the study of trauma, it is because they are listening through the radical disruption and gaps of traumatic experience.” *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 4.

<sup>12</sup> SOHK.TV Interview.

<sup>13</sup> Joshua Oppenheimer’s interview with Amy Goodman, “Democracy Now,” available at [http://www.democracynow.org/2013/7/19/the\\_act\\_of\\_killing\\_new\\_film](http://www.democracynow.org/2013/7/19/the_act_of_killing_new_film).

about the broader structural conditions of contemporary Indonesia than about Anwar's intrasubjective journey.

This reading of *The Act of Killing* thus draws upon critiques of transitional justice, humanitarian discourse, and human rights. These critiques often employ a shared concern with how these discourses depoliticize and moralize, focusing on individual sentiments rather than structures of power. As Bronwyn Leebaw claims, transitional justice processes "are too often framed as apolitical responses to the deeds and experiences of individual victims and perpetrators."<sup>14</sup> By contrast, thinking through transition at the broader level of the polity reveals the (political) dynamics between victims, perpetrators, and beneficiaries, as well as the structural conditions that continue to inform the way this violent history is disavowed in contemporary Indonesia.

## II. The Theatricality of Evil

In 1965, the Indonesian government was overthrown by the military. Anybody opposed to the military dictatorship could be accused of being a communist: union members, landless farmers, intellectuals, and the ethnic Chinese. In less than a year, and with the direct aid of western governments, over one million "communists" were murdered. The army used paramilitaries and gangsters to carry out the killings. These men have been in power—and have persecuted their opponents—ever since. When we met the killers, they proudly told us stories about what they did. To understand why, we asked them to create scenes about the killings in whatever way they wished. This film follows that process, and documents its consequences.

If *The Act of Killing* can be considered a documentary, its subject is not this violent period of Indonesian history in the mid-1960s. Little historical framing is provided beyond what appears in the text above, which accompanies the film's opening moments. Much of the work of situating and contextualizing its content is left to the viewer.<sup>15</sup> As a documentary, then, this film's subject is the theatrical representation of violence by select individuals who participated in it.

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<sup>14</sup> Bronwyn Leebaw, *Judging State-sponsored Violence, Imagining Political Change* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 92.

<sup>15</sup> A good companion piece or supplement in this regard is Benedict Anderson's chapter in an edited volume assembled by Oppenheimer and a co-editor, which documents the September 30<sup>th</sup> movement and places the violence in political context. See Benedict Anderson, "Impunity," in Brink and Oppenheimer (eds.), *Killer Images*, 268–286.

These perpetrator-protagonists present their past enemies as “communists” and “Chinese,” but apart from the claim above that killings were carried out “with the direct aid of western governments,” the larger Cold War history in which these acts transpired remains outside the frame.<sup>16</sup> The Indonesian state’s counter-revolutionary suppression of its pre-1965 revolutionary past also does not feature in the narrative.<sup>17</sup> The film thus does not engage in what Mahmood Mamdani would call “the question of political identity” resulting from “the history of state formation,”<sup>18</sup> which would entail a more complex presentation of the colonial and post-colonial history of Indonesia as well as its broader geopolitical context. Instead, the film’s cursory introduction above mainly foregrounds the fact that the perpetrators were never removed from power, and it claims that their violent acts have been mythologized as heroic and necessary.

The text above forms the largest part of its meta-narrative, where its makers inform their audience about the film’s context and their intentions in producing it. Its closing credits produce another archive: the overwhelming anonymity of its Indonesian crew, including one of the co-directors, marking the repressive political circumstances in which the film was made. The production of the film entailed great risks for them, and their participation was a courageous act of *parrhesia*—of speaking truth to the contemporary Indonesian state.<sup>19</sup> But much of the broader context of *The Act of Killing* has come out primarily through interviews with its makers rather than within the film itself.<sup>20</sup> The film is not an isolated text that stands alone as an interpretive object, but instead can be read alongside the commentary that its makers provide. This interpretive decision is a consequence of the film opening a number of ethical questions about its production that remain unanswered within *The Act of Killing*. The makers of the film have elaborated upon these questions extensively in press accounts and interviews. In these interviews, however, the emphasis appears to be as much about the experience of making the film within a film from the standpoint of its perpetrator-protagonists as it is about the

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<sup>16</sup> For more detailed historical accounts of this period, see the texts mentioned in *supra* note 2.

<sup>17</sup> See Max Lane, *Unfinished Nation: Indonesia Before and After Suharto* (London: Verso, 2008).

<sup>18</sup> Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 21 and 22.

<sup>19</sup> Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001).

<sup>20</sup> A historian of Indonesia has criticized the film for decontextualizing these acts of killing, presenting them as “the work of civilian criminal psychopaths” rather than exploring the role of the Indonesian army. See Robert Cribb, “Review: An Act of Manipulation?,” *Inside Indonesia* 112 (April–June 2013), available at <http://www.insideindonesia.org/feature-editions/review-an-act-of-manipulation>.



broader Indonesian political context. For example, Joshua Oppenheimer describes the film as follows:

*The Act of Killing* is a film in which former death squad leaders who have been in power ever since they helped the army of Indonesia kill a million people in 1965 are invited to dramatize what they have done as a way of understanding what happens to all of us when we build our normality on the basis of terror and lies. And these men set about re-enacting their acts of genocide, acts of mass murder, in dramatizations inspired by the film genres that they love—gangster, musical, cowboy, Western—and along the way they, the main characters in the film, go through an emotional journey where they start to understand—the film-making process becomes the prism through which they finally recognize the true meaning of what they have done.<sup>21</sup>

This extract from an interview is exemplary both for its discussion of form—the role of film and specific genres—as well as for expressing the sentiment that I have described as “transitology.” Here the perpetrator-protagonists are seen as undertaking “an emotional journey” where they move from a state of disavowal, repression or displacement to recognition of their past deeds. For this reason, the film can be read not only as a work of art but also as a narrative of redemption crafted by its filmmakers that links it thematically to the field of transitional justice.

With nearly a decade spent acquiring footage, the normative arc of *The Act of Killing* comes in how it is edited and crafted as the narrative described by Oppenheimer above. In his many public interviews, Oppenheimer explains that he had been living in a community of survivors of the mid-1960s violence, and that there was limited space for recounting their stories in light of the political conditions in contemporary Indonesia. Instead they advised him to speak to those responsible for their suffering, and Oppenheimer found that the perpetrators within the community were more than willing to recount what they had done.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> SOHK.TV Interview.

<sup>22</sup> At the film’s first large public screening in September 2012, Oppenheimer explains that he had previously been commissioned to make a film of survivor communities who were working on a plantation in Northern Sumatra. He found that their inability to mobilize to contest their working conditions was tied to the ongoing fear of perpetrators living in their midst, and he was advised to speak with the perpetrators. Introduction to *The Act of Killing* with Joshua Oppenheimer at the Toronto International Film Festival, September 9, 2012, available at



The resulting film is thus based upon the narratives of the perpetrators. These men “had a natural theatricality . . . which led [Oppenheimer] to offer to underwrite and film their re-enactments of their deeds.”<sup>23</sup> The film’s audience is introduced to “Anwar Congo: Executioner in 1965,” who demonstrates how he dispensed with suspected communists on a rooftop in Medan, Northern Sumatra. He explains that he adapted wire-based strangulation in order to minimize the bloodiness of his acts of killing. The broad smile on Anwar’s face as he stands poised with the wire around the neck of another man, also smiling, is unsettling enough: this is compounded when moments later he begins to dance and claims that “I’ve tried to forget all this with good music . . . Dancing . . .” Anwar’s modes of escape provide a red thread throughout the film, as do his claims that he is haunted by victims of these acts who come to him in nightmares. The other perpetrator-protagonists appear less emotionally developed within the frame of the film: Herman Koto, Anwar’s main sidekick, seems to be liberated from such haunting and instead delights in the subversive position afforded by the film’s production. Koto’s most memorable scenes involve him dressing in drag: as the violated woman in a Western-style wagon train scene; as a vengeful goddess who delights in eating Anwar’s organs; and as an ambiguous figure clad in body-fitting pink lycra, accentuating Koto’s corpulent form. Indeed, Koto’s interventions as a character in *The Act of Killing* serve more as theatrical depictions of a much-admired Hollywood than as registering the “emotional journey” that Oppenheimer describes.

The men involved in staging this film within a film have associations with the Pancasila Youth, a paramilitary organization with connections to the Indonesian state. Emerging from out of the period of Suharto’s ascendancy to power, the organization was rooted in the activities of paramilitary “gangsters” who supported the overthrow of Sukarno’s government and the attendant purge of suspected communists. The perpetrator-protagonists in *The Act of Killing* frequently refer to themselves as “gangsters,” asserting a link between “gangster” and “free man” as if the terms were locked together through a shared etymology. The “gangster” presented here is unlike the 1960s Jamaican

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<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NU-8Xv-LVUk>. See also Oppenheimer’s interview with “Democracy Now.”

<sup>23</sup> “The killers did not get a salary but were paid what Mr. Oppenheimer called a ‘modest per diem’ (approved by the University of Westminster and the British Arts and Humanities Research Council, which financed the re-enactments).” Larry Rother, “A Movie’s Killers are All Too Real: ‘The Act of Killing’ and Indonesian Death Squads,” *New York Times*, July 12, 2013, available at [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/14/movies/the-act-of-killing-and-indonesian-death-squads.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/14/movies/the-act-of-killing-and-indonesian-death-squads.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).

“rude boy,” however, whose transgressive self-fashioning has been read as a practice of freedom.<sup>24</sup> Instead, the Indonesian “gangster” presented in the film reads as a morally unencumbered subject, radically libertarian, whose “freedom” appears more as a negative freedom rather than as a practice of identity. These self-proclaimed “free men” are still imbricated with state power: they participated in counterrevolutionary violence that displaced the previous post-colonial order. The film’s overlaid text tells us “Pancasila Youth is one of Indonesia’s biggest paramilitary organizations. Pancasila Youth played a leading role in the 1965–66 killings.” In a political speech captured by the filmmakers, the organization’s leader, Yapto Soerjosoemarno, states:

All members of the Pancasila Youth are heroes. From exterminating the communists to fighting neo-communists and left-wing extremists and those wishing to break apart the nation. This isn’t only the duty of the army and police. We, Pancasila Youth, must take a stand. For these are threats to the nation and we must take action.

Despite claims to libertarian subjectivity, the gangster is carrying out the work of the state by proxy. The gangster appears as a persona who kills without remorse, but precisely because he is carrying out this work for others. Oppenheimer notes that sometimes Anwar and his friends would use a state television crew “since they are basically the government in Northern Sumatra.”<sup>25</sup> Although the protagonists cultivate a mythology of their own libertarian form of freedom, they are still bound up in the state apparatus of contemporary Indonesia, raising questions regarding the extent to which the filmmakers may also be interpellated into this framework of power despite their attempts to unravel it. As with other subversive documentary works, such as Mads Brügger’s films *The Red Chapel* (2009) and *The Ambassador* (2011), there are uncomfortable moments for both filmmaker and audience as access is negotiated through acts or omissions that inhabit a grey zone between documentation and complicity.<sup>26</sup> Yet by dwelling in this ambiguous zone, the

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<sup>24</sup> David Scott, “Fanonian Futures,” in *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

<sup>25</sup> Q&A with Joshua Oppenheimer at the Toronto International Film Festival, September 9, 2012, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NU-8Xv-LVUk>.

<sup>26</sup> Oppenheimer claims that he began the project “with a sense of mission for the survivors, but at the same time, I also wanted to know how my characters, as human beings, imagined themselves. Therefore, I had no choice but to treat them like human beings if I expected them to allow me to see the human beings they really are from the very beginning of the filming. That was the gauntlet I threw down before myself. And then at a certain point, Anwar and I started to

film also archives the limits of what forms of documentation are possible in light of the heroic status still accorded to these perpetrators in contemporary Indonesia as well as their links to state power.

The representation of violence—and particularly of state and state-sanctioned violence—is constrained by social and political factors. In her work on the images of torture taken at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, Judith Butler asks us to consider “what forms of social and state power are ‘embedded’ in the frame.”<sup>27</sup> Butler’s work concerns images from war reporting, and the subject is mediated through the photographer’s lens and through the US state’s efforts to establish control over the framing, “if always with only partial success.”<sup>28</sup> *The Act of Killing* harbours a double frame: there is the framing carried out by the perpetrators in their embellished re-enactments, who are themselves enframed by Oppenheimer when he shows Anwar casually dancing the *cha-cha* after his staged demonstration of killing by wire on the rooftop. Here we see quite clearly the “framing of the frame,”<sup>29</sup> in Butler’s words: a framing that is often constrained directly and indirectly by state power. Oppenheimer has made concessions to power that were arguably productive: among other things, through his decision to focus on perpetrators, which he claims resulted in part due to harassment and threats from state security services when he attempted to document victims.<sup>30</sup> Another concession may have been the decision to give the perpetrators authorial control over the narratives they would tell. Although it led to fascinating insights into how these individuals see themselves and wish to be seen, the decision to let the film’s subjects recount their acts through the stylistic conventions of their choice raises questions about the ethics of this form of representation. Even so, the film also reveals what power has attempted to occlude, which is where its own subversive potential emerges.

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become close.... There was a period of time around 2006–2007 where I started to have deeply guilty feelings about Anwar. I felt, somehow, that I was betraying him. We became close, and he was opening up to me....” Joshua Oppenheimer’s interview with Pamela Cohn, BOMBlog, December 18, 2012, available at <http://bombsite.com/issues/1000/articles/6992>.

<sup>27</sup> Judith Butler, “Torture and the Ethics of Photography,” in *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2010), 72.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>30</sup> Oppenheimer notes that in 2001, when he and his co-director interviewed descendants of murdered union workers who were too frightened to unionize themselves out of fear that they would be persecuted, Oppenheimer and Cynn were “quickly and repeatedly harassed by the military. ‘They would take our equipment, they would take our tapes, they would detain us,’ Oppenheimer said. ‘It was very difficult to get anything taped, and it was very frightening, especially for the survivors.’” See “Making a ‘Killing,’” *The Austin Chronicle*, August 9, 2013, available at <http://www.austinchronicle.com/screens/2013-08-09/making-a-killing/>.

Watching the film, then, there is the distinct sense of a divide between the period of its making—which may have entailed moments of complicity, or at least of the filmmaker bearing neutral witness—and the period of its dissemination, when its critical force can be brought to bear upon the powers that previously constrained its production.

The film harbours a tension precisely because of its makers' careful efforts not to moralize or guide the perpetrators' self-reflections while assembling the material that forms the finished product. Thus Anwar seems left to his own observations of himself, musing, "I'd see the person being interrogated ... I wouldn't be sadistic. I'd give the guy a cigarette, I'd still be dancing, laughing. It was like we were killing happily," or noting "I know my bad dreams come from what I did, killing people who didn't want to die. I forced them to die." There is no intersubjective space of judgment within the film, no sense of accountability to others, but rather the impression of an egoic journey with occasional moments of self-reflection. The journey transpires through the vehicle of artistic production, dwelling upon aesthetic details such as Anwar's comments, when viewing himself on film, that he would never have worn white back then on account of the blood—"I look like I'm dressed for a picnic"—or "My acting has to be violent. And maybe I should dye my hair black." Such seemingly trite and unrepentant observations, combined with the stylized spectacle of the re-enactments, leads to the aestheticization of violence as camp. As Susan Sontag wrote, the essence of camp is "its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration"—a "sensibility" that "converts the serious into the frivolous."<sup>31</sup> A scene of young women dancing before a waterfall while Anwar receives imagined blessings from his victims forms a particularly unsettling example—a staged spectacle of redemption drawn entirely from the perpetrators' own creativity and desire.

One of the film's main provocations is thus the ethical discomfort it may produce for its viewers in witnessing this conversion of serious material—acts that could constitute crimes against humanity in the framework of international law—into campy visual spectacles when viewed as a work of art. As a documentary, the film's subject is the creation of the film within it, with the latter inhabiting an ambivalent space between fiction and nonfiction; Oppenheimer himself refers to it as "nonfiction filmmaking."<sup>32</sup> The inner film

<sup>31</sup> Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Picador, 2001), 276.

<sup>32</sup> "The core of nonfiction filmmaking is that somehow you are creating a reality with your characters the moment you film them. You are never a passive observer documenting 'what's there.' That's why it's fundamentally creative." Oppenheimer's interview with Pamela Cohn, BOMBlog.

depicts events that occurred, but mediated through creative retellings that re-contextualize these acts through the use of different settings, props, and costuming, and drawing upon the tropes of Hollywood film genres. Theorizing the ethics of viewing in this case thus requires drawing upon work that considers the representation of both actual and fictionalized violence.

The ethical questions prompted by *The Act of Killing* have been addressed in other attempts to think through how acts of violence are represented through different media, including photography and journalism. Several scholars have noted how certain representations operate as a kind of “pornography of violence,” which Judith Butler describes as “the pleasure taken in seeing human degradation and in the eroticization of that degradation”—a “sexualization of the act of seeing” distinct from the depiction of sexual acts.<sup>33</sup> Mahmood Mamdani has claimed that “[n]ewspaper writing on Darfur has sketched a pornography of violence.... This voyeuristic approach accompanies a moralistic discourse whose effect is both to obscure the politics of the violence and position the reader as a virtuous, not just a concerned observer.”<sup>34</sup> In both instances, the critique concerns the relation between the spectator and the representation, a gaze that is construed as pornographic due to the affect of the viewer contrasted with the gravity of what is represented. Relatedly, Arthur Kleinman has argued that “commercialized voyeurism” may lead to the loss of empathy as suffering is increasingly rendered visible in commercial and consumable forms.<sup>35</sup> Among the effects pointed out by these commentators are the derivation of pleasure from suffering, the depoliticization of violence, moralistic spectatorship, and the loss of empathy.

While Butler, Mamdani, and Kleinman are speaking here of the potential effects of “pornographic” or “voyeuristic” documentation of violent acts and suffering, others have thought through the ethical dilemmas attending fictional representations of violence in literature and film, where they note tensions between the seductive pleasure of an aesthetic form and its troubling content. Concerning the political effects of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Michael Taussig writes,

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<sup>33</sup> Butler, *Frames of War*, 89 and 91.

<sup>34</sup> Mahmood Mamdani, “The Politics of Naming: Genocide, Civil War, Insurgency,” in *The London Review of Books* 29, no. 5 (2007), 5–8. See also Mamdani, *Saviors and Survivors: Darfur, Politics, and the War on Terror* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2009).

<sup>35</sup> Arthur Kleinman, “‘Everything That Really Matters’: Social Suffering, Subjectivity, and the Remaking of Human Experience in a Disordering World,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 90, no. 3 (1997), 319.

I am not so sure that its strikingly literary quality and hallucinatory filmness do not finally blind and stun the reader into a trance, drowning in a sea-storm of imagery. The danger here lies with aestheticizing horror, and while Conrad stops short of doing that, we must realize that just to the side lurks the seductive poetics of fascism and the imaginative source of terror and torture embedded deep within us all.<sup>36</sup>

In her work on violent films, criminologist Alison Young asks how we might judge the affect of cinematic violence. This approach foregrounds the figure of the film's viewer, who is put in a "thoroughly equivocal position" of deriving pleasure from both judging violence as well as from the aesthetics of the scene in which violence is carried out.<sup>37</sup> Writing about a torture scene in Quentin Tarantino's film *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), Young notes "the spectator is placed in a thoroughly compromised ethical position, experiencing both pleasure in the look of the scene and of the character, and distaste for the violence that will ensue."<sup>38</sup> A film critic commenting on *The Act of Killing* hints at this ethical dilemma when she remarks "it's important to emphasize, I think, how fun—in a horrible way—this really is to watch."<sup>39</sup>

The difference is in what is being depicted: in the first instance a fictional account of torture, and in the second, theatrical representations of past acts, which is what leaves the violent scenes in *The Act of Killing*—though not the historical acts they depict—somewhere between Abu Ghraib and *Reservoir Dogs*. Anwar seizes upon this ambiguity between documentation and aesthetic representation when he observes,

Why do people watch films about Nazis? To see power and sadism. We can do that. We can make something even more sadistic than ... more sadistic than what you see in movies about Nazis. Sure I can! Because there's never been a movie where heads get chopped off except in fiction, but that's different because I did it in real life!

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<sup>36</sup> Michael Taussig, "Culture of Terror—Space of Death: Roger Casement's Putumayo Report and the Explanation of Torture," in *Interpretive Social Science: A Second Look*, ed. Rabinow and Sullivan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 247.

<sup>37</sup> Alison Young, "The Screen of the Crime: Judging the Affect of Cinematic Violence," *Social and Legal Studies* 18 (2009), 12.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Catherine Shoard on *The Guardian Film Show*, June 28, 2013, available at <http://www.theguardian.com/film/video/2013/jun/28/this-end-act-killing-video-review>.

In addition to the ethical dilemmas it presents to its viewers, part of the interpretive challenge of viewing *The Act of Killing* lies in understanding the referent of these scenes. Do they represent historical acts or rather the memories of individual deeds, distorted and embellished over time, an amalgamation of reality and fiction? Projections of sadism refigured as heroism? Outside the structuring frame of a truth commission, with its testimony taken under oath, there is no external constraint upon these representations apart from the material constraints of the filmic form. The makers of the film within the film, these perpetrator-protagonists, are free to set the terms of the frame and its truth conditions. Oppenheimer maintains in an interview that “everything we see is nonfiction” and “everything is true,” but this “truth” is mediated “through artifacts, through emotional and poetic force, through [Anwar’s] personal process.”<sup>40</sup> Elsewhere in a scholarly piece on a related project, Oppenheimer and a co-author claim that “we avoid considering historical narration as mediation of a past that can be made coherently and fully present; instead we consider historical narrative as a performance whose staging produces effects.”<sup>41</sup>

What kind of archive might this be, then, in registering events from Indonesia’s violent history? For Oppenheimer and his co-directors, it would seem that the film documents a certain transformation within its subjects. To return to Oppenheimer’s comment, “the filmmaking process becomes the prism through which they finally recognize the meaning of what they have done.” I want to suggest here that such a reading is overly restrictive, foregrounding the psychic dimensions of a largely intrasubjective process to the detriment of a series of other important relationships. There is the relationship between *The Act of Killing* and its makers, which raises issues of complicity, interpellation, and framing. There is the relation between the film and its audience, raising issues about the ethics of viewing: the risks of aestheticizing violence as camp, the (pornographic) pleasure and *jouissance* of spectatorship, and ethical disorientation.<sup>42</sup> Finally, there is the relationship between the film’s subjects

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<sup>40</sup> Oppenheimer’s interview with Pamela Cohn, BOMBlog.

<sup>41</sup> Joshua Oppenheimer and Michael Uwemedimo, “Show of Force: A Cinema-Séance of Power and Violence in Sumatra’s Plantation Belt,” in Joram ten Brink and Joshua Oppenheimer, *Killer Images*, 290.

<sup>42</sup> Sontag expressed concerns that the Abu Ghraib photographs were unable to produce “ethical pathos” in their viewers; meanwhile Kleinman comments that “[t]he impossibility of engagement with the real life constraints and contingencies of that which is local” create the conditions of possibility of an “amoral virtual reality: suffering at a distance, and a safe distance at that” (“Everything That Really Matters,” 319). Baudrillard presents an even more grim picture by arguing that the possibility of an adequate ethical response has been foreclosed because oppositional forms have now become complicit with hegemonic powers: “Images, even



and the broader socio-political context to which they belong. This relationship highlights the *psyche/polis* dichotomy that the film arguably resolves in favour of the *psyche*.

### III. “Transitology” and Humanitarian Reason

The boundaries between Anwar as a person and the political regime have been dissolved. He’s holding it all. I could not have had any kind of political ending; it had to solely reflect Anwar’s psychological state.<sup>43</sup>

There has been no public accounting for the violence that occurred in Indonesia during the mid-1960s. Because of the ongoing relationship between perpetrators and the Indonesian state, Oppenheimer and his co-directors turned to inventive forms to produce narratives of that period. As an archive of historical violence, the film captures subjective impressions of past acts, mediated through decades of remembering, repressing, and embellishing, and supplemented by campy costumes and sets in its contemporary re-telling. Reading this film as a work of art—whether documentary, creative nonfiction, or even as fantasy—leads to the ethical questions posed above concerning its production and uptake by its audience. But the film’s intervention is not only as a work of art. Its makers see it as prompting a transition within its subjects, and more broadly, as acting *into* Indonesian society to reveal what has been repressed. As noted previously, one commentator claimed that the film “penetrates the entrenched impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators.”<sup>44</sup> These understandings of the film—as a site of reckoning and accountability—bring it into a relationship with what I have been referring to as “transitology,” or the ideological sentiments of transitional justice.<sup>45</sup>

*The Act of Killing* raises what political theorist Robert Meister calls the “questions of impunity and disclosure” that accompany the transitional justice

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radical-critical ones, are still a part of the crime they denounce, albeit an involuntary one. What is the impact of a film like *Darwin’s Nightmare*, which denounces racial discrimination in Tanzania? It will tour the Western world and reinforce the endogamy, the cultural and political autarky of this separate world through images and the consumption of images.” Jean Baudrillard, *The Agony of Power* (Los Angeles, Semiotext(e)), 60.

<sup>43</sup> Oppenheimer’s interview with Pamela Cohn, BOMBlog.

<sup>44</sup> Heryanto, “The 1965–6 Killings.”

<sup>45</sup> I understand ideology here as both what disguises and distorts what we see as well as how we make sense of social relations. Didier Fassin attempts to bridge these two positions, which he identifies with Karl Marx and Clifford Geertz, by suggesting a critical orientation “at the frontiers” (neither fully outside nor inside). Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason*, 249.

literature on trials and truth commissions.<sup>46</sup> Individual criminal accountability and truth-telling are among the ideological underpinnings of the field of transitional justice. These sentiments appear both within the film itself and in interviews with its makers. One bridge between this internal narrative and external commentary lies in a rare appearance of Oppenheimer within the frame of the film. The filmmaker prompts the paramilitary perpetrator Adi Zulkadry, who has thus far appeared unapologetic, to reflect upon his own acts in the language of criminal accountability. From behind the camera, Oppenheimer asks, “I don’t mean to make you uncomfortable, but I have to ask.... By telling yourself it was “war,” you’re not haunted like Anwar. But the Geneva Conventions would define what you did as a ‘war crime.’” Zulkadry explains why he does not agree “with the international courts,” interpreting law or right as a product of those in power—“when Bush was in power, Guantanamo was right”—and concluding that, as “a winner,” he was able to define war crimes for himself. Oppenheimer presses further: “What if you were brought to the international criminal court in The Hague?” Zulkadry responds defiantly: “I’d go! I don’t feel guilty.... Please, get me called to The Hague!” In practice the Hague court could not exercise jurisdiction over Zulkadry’s acts, but Oppenheimer’s remarks appear to be aimed at prompting the unreconciled perpetrator to think in terms of his individual criminal accountability.

In addition to prompting his subject to considering his violent acts as *crimes*, Oppenheimer also presses him to think about the importance of establishing a historical record. In response to Zulkadry’s claim that “even if everything you’re finding out is absolutely true, it’s not good,” Oppenheimer counters, “but for the millions of families whose relative were killed, if the truth comes out, it’s good.” Oppenheimer’s claim about the moral value of truth for those directly affected by violence reveals an underlying premise of truth commissions: that establishing a historical record of what transpired is a collectively therapeutic exercise. But what if the narrative of the perpetrators is insufficiently remorseful or even defiant? Antjie Krog recounts the desire of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s audience to hear from apartheid-era perpetrators after months of victims’ accounts: “More and more, we want the second narrative. And it had better be good. It had better be powerful. It had better display integrity. And it had better bring acute personal detail, grief, and bewilderment.”<sup>47</sup> Yet as Krog goes on to recount, many of the

<sup>46</sup> Robert Meister, *After Evil: A Politics of Human Rights* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 25.

<sup>47</sup> Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull: Guilt, Sorry and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2000), 74.

apartheid-era perpetrators who appeared before the commission did not speak in the repentant tone that the audience desired. Similarly, the anonymous Indonesian co-director of *The Act of Killing* commented:

How could these people tell these horrible stories so lightly and so proudly? You just want to challenge them right away. But you have to keep telling yourself to be patient, to let them tell the story the way they like. Because then we can learn something about the whole system of destruction.<sup>48</sup>

In the event that the speakers do not perform the desired integrity, grief, and bewilderment and instead speak with levity and pride, their speech acts become a matter of establishing content for the historical record rather than attempts to repent or reconcile. In this sense the film has aspects of the work of a truth commission, of documenting “something about the whole system of destruction.” It may be that, in Oppenheimer’s words, “something true is revealed through this process,”<sup>49</sup> yet this “truth” is mediated through many layers of representation and artifice. Meanwhile, the therapeutic dimension is foreclosed to the audience of the speech act and is reserved for the perpetrators alone.

The filmmakers’ emphasis on accountability and truth-telling appears to be supplanted by a deeper investment in the psychological journey of the film’s subjects. This privileges an intrasubjective focus on the *psyche* of the perpetrator-protagonists over an intersubjective frame, whether accountability to others or establishing the truth for others. Two key scenes arguably offer different conclusions to *The Act of Killing*, both of which are revealing for this emphasis on the insular sentiments of the perpetrator. The first scene, which also appears briefly in the opening, is a staged scene of redemption. Young women dance to “Born Free” in front of a waterfall, encircling Anwar, clad in black, and Herman, in a vivid blue dress. Two men approach Anwar and remove garrotting wire from around their necks. One pulls a medal out of his pocket, drapes it over Anwar’s neck, shakes his hand, and states: “for executing me and sending me to heaven. . . . I thank you a thousand times, for everything.” The men then join hands with Anwar and Herman and raise their arms skyward. This scene contrasts sharply with the final sequence of the film, wherein Anwar returns to the darkened rooftop of the building where he had previously demonstrated how he executed people by garrotting. In contrast to his previous theatrics, this time Anwar is restless and troubled.

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<sup>48</sup> Rohter, “A Movie’s Killers are All Too Real.”

<sup>49</sup> Oppenheimer’s interview with Pamela Cohn, BOMBlog.

“This is where we tortured and killed the people we captured,” he explains, adding “I know it was wrong—but I had to do it.” His breathing becomes more laboured and his body begins to shudder, and he retches violently. The scene drags on, with the camera lingering on the figure of Anwar retching, suspended at this threshold of abjection.

The two scenes suggest different moral conclusions for the perpetrators themselves. In the first we witness a staged spectacle of reconciliation and redemption, where the perpetrators have appropriated the voices of dead victims for their own egoic purposes. Yet what is depicted is a kind of inoperative reconciliation. The perpetrator constructs his own fantasy projection of forgiving victims; there is no intersubjective encounter, but rather a relation of self to self mediated by the psychic projection of an imagined other. By contrast, in the second scene we see how Anwar is unable to purge himself of his hauntings—the resolution or climax does not arrive, and he remains in a liminal state of apparent suffering. There is no catharsis to be had on the rooftop site where he committed his acts of killing.

In both instances, then, these scenes heavily emphasize the psychic desires or suffering of the perpetrators. The film’s focus on their affect and sentiments is a symptom of what anthropologist Didier Fassin describes as “humanitarian reason”: a moral economy where “[i]nequality is replaced by exclusion, domination is transformed into misfortune, injustice is articulated as suffering, violence is expressed in terms of trauma.”<sup>50</sup> In this economy, the second (moralistic) term is privileged over the first (political) term, and the language of suffering and trauma displaces the language of injustice and violence. Fassin argues that there is a corresponding epistemological shift among those who document violence and injustice, who are now “more sensitive to the subjectivity of agents and to the experience of pain and affliction.”<sup>51</sup> Fassin illustrates how recourse to the concept of trauma makes it possible to expand the range of individuals who may be considered victims—thus perpetrators can be drawn into the fold of suffering and traumatized subjects.<sup>52</sup>

Political theorists have noted the central role afforded to trauma and suffering in contemporary discourses of human rights and transitional justice. Wendy Brown claims that human rights “take their shape as a moral discourse centered on pain and suffering rather than a political discourse of

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<sup>50</sup> Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason*, p. 7.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

comprehensive justice.”<sup>53</sup> Robert Meister extends this critique of the apolitical moralism of contemporary human rights discourse by considering how it presents the relationships between different political subjectivities, whether perpetrators, victims, or conformists (bystanders to or beneficiaries of past regimes).<sup>54</sup> For Meister, the aspiration of human rights discourse “is that victims of past evil will not struggle against its ongoing beneficiaries after the evildoers are gone.”<sup>55</sup> The project of human rights transforms a politics of struggle and popular resistance into an ethics of reconciliation, “with its ostensibly less political focus on compassion for bodies in pain.”<sup>56</sup> What this means politically in transitional societies such as South Africa, Meister argues, is that invoking past or ongoing grievances—such as the gains that beneficiaries of past violence continue to enjoy in the present—disrupts the collective agreement that “evil” has passed.

In the vision of Indonesia represented through the film, the widely acknowledged “evil” appears to be the spectral threat of an imagined “communism” rather than the historical violence of the anti-communist purge in which Anwar and his supporters participated. There is no collective agreement that the events of 1965–66 require some form of reconciliation; indeed, as *The Act of Killing* points out, these acts continue to be publicly celebrated.<sup>57</sup> Unlike South Africa, then, Indonesia is not a transitional society, yet Meister’s critique offers a vocabulary for understanding the complex political subjectivity of the film’s main characters in addition to illustrating the shortcomings of “humanitarian compassion.” The subjectivity of the film’s protagonists is multiple: they are perpetrators as well as ongoing beneficiaries of past violence, enjoying the gains brought through their connections to the Pancasila Youth and, by extension, to the Indonesian state. Oppenheimer’s interviews suggest an additional identity: they are also represented as traumatized subjects through their participation in these acts of killing.

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<sup>53</sup> Wendy Brown, “‘The Most We Can Hope For...’: Human Rights and the Politics of Fatalism,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 103 (2004), 453.

<sup>54</sup> Meister’s critique unfolds on two registers: ideologically (“as a continuation of the counterrevolutionary project”) and theologically (“as a culmination of Paul’s Judeo-Christianity”) (Meister, *After Evil*, 314). Both ideological and theological positions advocate for the temporal deferral of justice by declaring “evil” to be in the past.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> In a “Special Dialogue” on Indonesian National Television presented in the film, the show’s smiling host announces that “Anwar and his friends developed a new, more efficient system for exterminating communists, a system more humane, less sadistic, and without excessive violence ... but you also just wiped them out!” to an applauding audience clad in Pancasila Youth uniforms.

Robert Meister is concerned with the political significance of intersubjective identification in contemporary human rights discourse and transitional justice. A key relationship is the beneficiary's identification with the (idealized and reconciled) victim as a mutual survivor of past violence, which serves to reassure the beneficiary that the (potentially *unreconciled* and aggrieved) victim will not demand compensation. In this way, Meister writes, "humanitarian compassion defends against the beneficiary's anxieties" through the beneficiary's identification with the reconciled victim.<sup>58</sup> Through a psychoanalytic reading, Meister shows how the self may be split in ways that project and incorporate other identities. The hostility a beneficiary would feel toward an external victim (who, if unreconciled, may appear as a threat) is instead directed toward an *internalized* victim. The suffering that the beneficiary may have wished upon another (or did not prevent from happening) becomes the beneficiary's own loss. The resulting melancholia of the beneficiary is a product of feeling an "ongoing and irreparable" loss that has been internalized: the beneficiary feels bad, "but in a good way, because he suffers *as though* he were someone else."<sup>59</sup> Freud's psychoanalytic account of melancholia is centered on the melancholic patient. By contrast, Meister is concerned with the political effects of beneficiaries producing an inner victim:

Identifying with and *as* the victim of the loss represses and perpetuates that patient's ambivalence about being, rather, a perpetrator or beneficiary. But the object of those negative feelings is nothing outside the beneficiary's unconscious mind. So we are not asked to consider *whose* primary loss the melancholic internalizes as his own loss or how this might affect ongoing relations with the real (external) loser.<sup>60</sup>

For Meister, these forms of psychic identification foreground the feelings of the "winners"—perpetrators and beneficiaries—rather than actual (socio-political) relations between those who benefited from past injustice and those who suffered. In humanitarian discourse, Meister argues, this helps to explain how compassion is a privileged affect: with compassion, melancholic feelings are transformed into pity for the "victimary object" that the beneficiary also identifies with and internalizes. But because this (internal) victim is a projection rather than an actual, aggrieved individual, such compassion is remarkably tenuous and can easily regress to paranoia when the external victim is encountered. The political effect of this form of humanitarian compassion is

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<sup>58</sup> Meister, *After Evil*, 230.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

to transform the beneficiary into a bystander, a witness to suffering, but a suffering that is still oriented toward preserving the psychic comfort of the beneficiary: “The *compassionate* bystander is no longer a beneficiary who *has* a victim; rather, he is the witness that his imaginary victim wants.”<sup>61</sup> What Fassin identifies as the logic of “humanitarian reason” features heavily in Meister’s diagnosis of “humanitarian compassion,” where injustice is recast as suffering and bearing witness is taken to be a political act. Meister writes,

humanitarian compassion defends against the beneficiary’s anxieties by constructing him as a viewer who can choose to insert himself into the picture viewed. Twenty-first-century humanitarianism *calls* the beneficiary a bystander in order to recall him as a witness who will *no longer* look away from those who still suffer. The new, affective bond to be created between them is made possible by an act of memory that makes compassion in the present *discontinuous* with the past.<sup>62</sup>

Meister’s overarching concern is with the ways in which contemporary humanitarian discourse (including the language of human rights and transitional justice) forecloses the possibility of justice in the present by reconstituting these different political identities—perpetrators, victims, and collaborators—as survivors of past injustice united through a shared *ethos* of reconciliation. The moral economy of affect, identification, and empathy displaces a political analysis of enduring power imbalances and ongoing injustice.

I draw upon Meister’s critique of humanitarian discourse because it helps to diagnose some of the presumptions of *The Act of Killing*’s approach to historical injustice. The film documents remorseless perpetrators and boastful paramilitaries, but it also archives the trauma of Anwar’s psyche. Toward the end of the film, the perpetrators stage a *noir*-style scene where Anwar plays a communist victim of a garrotting and Herman plays his interrogator. With a blindfold over his eyes and Herman tugging at a wire around his neck, Anwar becomes visibly disturbed and his hand begins to shake. Herman stops and asks if Anwar can continue, and Anwar responds, “No. I can’t do that again.” Later, after Oppenheimer shows Anwar the waterfall scene, or what the filmmaker has referred to in an interview as “Anwar’s vision of redemption,”<sup>63</sup> he asks to view the scene where he is strangled. He calls his young grandsons into the room to view it with him, instructing them to “watch the scene where grandpa

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 226.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 230.

<sup>63</sup> Oppenheimer’s interview with Pamela Cohn, BOMBlog.

is tortured and killed.” After his grandsons leave, Anwar addresses the filmmaker (offscreen):

**Anwar Congo:** Did the people I tortured feel the way I do here? I can feel what the people I tortured felt. Because here my dignity has been destroyed . . . and then fear comes, right there and then. All the terror suddenly possessed my body. It surrounded me, and possessed me.

**Joshua Oppenheimer:** Actually, the people you tortured felt far worse—because you know it’s only a film. They knew they were being killed.

**Anwar Congo:** But I can feel it, Josh. Really, I feel it. Or have I sinned? I did this to so many people, Josh. Is it all coming back to me? I really hope it won’t. I don’t want it to, Josh.

Anwar claims to feel what his victims felt, asserting a kind of affective bond that suggests an effort to internalize the victim in the psychoanalytic framework described above. As not only a beneficiary of past violence but also as a direct participant in acts of killing, Anwar may have even *more* reason to internalize and thus “tame” the objects of his violence in an effort to overcome their persistent hauntings. When Oppenheimer contests this identification by invoking the *actual* victim, Anwar insists on this affective bond—“really, I feel it”—and expresses the paranoia of the perpetrator who fears revenge. This scene contrasts starkly with Anwar’s “vision of redemption” before the waterfall, where reconciled victims thank him for redeeming them (sending them to heaven), in turn redeeming him from his “sin.” It is in this latter scene where Anwar seeks to incorporate the projected internal victim, reconstituting himself as a compassionate witness and attempting to instantiate a symbolic break from the past. In this sense the film within a film employs the transitological tropes of reconciliation and bearing witness. Indeed, Oppenheimer describes these scenes of Anwar’s psychic struggles and hopes for redemption as something to which the filmmakers and the film’s audience should also bear witness:

At some point, as Anwar started to go more and more into his conscience and into his nightmares, I felt, somehow, that I was a fellow traveler with him through all this, into all those dark places. But I had to keep my eyes open in order to allow him to go through all this and just be with him on that journey, as a support, certainly, but more importantly, as a witness. That’s



how I felt more and more towards the end of making it and how one should feel towards the end of the movie.<sup>64</sup>

Read in relation to Meister's critique of "humanitarian compassion," we can see how injustice is recast here as suffering, and bearing witness is taken to be a moral imperative—we are hailed as well. The moral economy of affect, identification, and empathy displaces a political analysis of enduring power structures and ongoing injustice. Meister seeks to show how this logic forecloses the possibility of justice in the present by reconstituting these different political identities—perpetrators, victims, and collaborators—as survivors of past injustice through a shared *ethos* of reconciliation.

This critique of transitological sentiments within *The Act of Killing* reveals the overdetermined presence of the *psyche* and the relative absence of the *polis* within the film. Meister argues that the "moral error of justice-as-reconciliation" is "to suggest that those who inflicted injury or benefited from it must focus on recovery and *self*-forgiveness."<sup>65</sup> Put another way, this "moral error" entails privileging the intrasubjective. Yet there may be a more liberatory potential for the film that extends beyond this inward orientation. In *The Emancipated Spectator*, Jacques Rancière claims that the disorientation we feel as spectators of intolerable images multiplies "folds and gaps, connections and disconnections" that "reframe relations between bodies" and "change the cartography of the perceptible, the thinkable and the feasible."<sup>66</sup> Rancière suggests a different politics of the sensible based on the uncertainty of effects:

The images of art do not supply weapons for battles. They help sketch new configurations of what can be seen, what can be said and what can be thought and, consequently, a new landscape of the possible. But they do so on condition that their meaning or effect is not anticipated.<sup>67</sup>

*The Act of Killing*'s internal morality tale is a product of the narrative arc that its directors inscribed within it. But while this article has argued that the film's progressive potential is not to be found in its subjects' intrasubjective journeys, its uptake is indeterminate: indeed, it appears to sketch "a new landscape of the possible." The film has been invoked as evidence of army-sponsored paramilitary participation in the killings by Indonesian human rights groups who are lobbying the government for a truth and reconciliation commission. As

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Meister, *After Evil*, 62.

<sup>66</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (New York: Verso, 2011), 72.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 103.

an intervention, then, the film's main purchase comes from what it allows us to see about the broader structural conditions of contemporary Indonesia, and its critical potential lies in what it reveals about what state power attempts to occlude. The film archives the relative absence of forms of accountability for historical violence in contemporary Indonesia, suggesting that a return to the *polis* and its intersubjective space of judgment may be possible despite the film's overdetermination of the *psyche*.