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Joshua Oppenheimer's *Look of Silence*: A Cinematic Look at the Banality of Evil

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Abstract

Questions have been raised by many filmmakers over the years as to whether the 1965 coup in Indonesia was the handiwork of the Indonesian Communist Party. American/British documentary filmmaker, Joshua Oppenheimer, who has previously made The Act of Killing on the same subject, poses the question again with a new documentary. But this time, he takes a cinematic approach by fully utilising the language of film to create a solemn and meditative work. He focuses on the faces and the silence of the individuals involved, in an effort to probe their minds. The individuals are some of the surviving killers as well as the brother and family of one of those who were killed. Oppenheimer also places emphasis on landscape as character. In the area of the killings, the landscape stands as a silent witness to the horrors perpetrated there. The demonisation of the communists continues till today in Indonesia, as it does in Malaysia as well as Singapore. The millennium saw revisionist histories surfacing that explored the blatant demonisation and vilification of communists. Films with a creative approach began to be made by young people who explored what had transpired, in an effort to foreground the truth.

Keywords Cinematic apparatus; Cinematic approach; Re-enactment; Formalist approach; Power of suggestion

Introduction

In 1968, the CIA Directorate of Intelligence noted in a report about the 1965 coup in Indonesia, that:

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> "In terms of the numbers killed, the anti-communist massacres in Indonesia rank as one of the worst mass murders of the 20th Century ... the Indonesian coup is certainly one of the most significant events of the 20th Century, far more significant than many other events that have received much more publicity."

In 1965, six army generals were kidnapped in the coup, and were purportedly killed brutally by the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). This led to a counter-coup by army General Suharto who subsequently deposed Sukarno as President of the Republic of Indonesia. More than five decades later, declassified information has revealed another side to the story - supporting the contention of the CIA report above: of how almost a million members of the PKI, their sympathisers as well others who were accused of being communists, were brutally massacred, imprisoned or ostracised by death squads. The complicity of foreign nations, specifically the United States, Great Britain and Australia, became evident. Their justification was to prevent the infamous Domino Theory from coming true, i.e., that the countries of Southeast Asia must not fall to the communist 'scourge' at any cost.

The documentary, *The Look of Silence* (2014) by Joshua Oppenheimer, is but one of many films that have looked at this infamous episode in Indonesian history. Among the other films are:

- *The Year of Living Dangerously* (Peter Weir, 1982)
- *Penumpasan Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* (Eradication of the Treason of G30S/PKI, Ariffin C Noer, 1982)
- *Puisi Yang Tak Terkuburkan* (A Poet: Unconcealed Poetry, Garin Nugroho, 2000)
- *Shadow Play* (Chris Hilton, 2002)
- *40 Years of Silence: An Indonesian Tragedy* (Robert Lemelson, 2009)
- *The Act of Killing* (Joshua Oppenheimer/Christine Cynn, 2012)

The first three films were narrative features while the others were documentaries. The Year of Living Dangerously was a Hollywood production; G30S/PKI was the 'official' version made during the Presidency of General Suharto, and in 1984, it was made compulsory viewing in government departments. Every September 30th, the film was also screened on television and in the cinemas. In a podcast interview on the BBC World Service, Eric Sasono, an Indonesian film critic, whose university dissertation had been on The Act of Killing, described how it was mandatory for schoolchildren to see it, with he himself having seen it twice (coincidentally, his father and uncle had been involved in the communist purge). Puisi Yang Tak Terkuburkan is a digitally-made dramatised, aesthetically-produced version of the events as seen from the perspective of those who were detained, and waiting to be killed. In the lead was an actual detainee, a poet, who had survived to tell the story.

The entire film had only about seven or eight shots done in long, unbroken takes. These three films were meant for the cinema, and as a result, used a dramatic structure, and therefore, were creative versions of what had transpired in 1965.

In terms of treatment, a documentary purport to show the 'reality' of something that had happened, but the very cinematic apparatus applied for the purpose determines that it will be creative in its mode of presentation. An appropriate camera position must be decided upon, the shot size and camera angle must be determined, and the lighting must be suitable. And in post-production, editing creates the right tempo and rhythm to make the film palatable for an audience, with sound and music playing no mean roles in the entire process. John Grierson, who coined the term 'documentary', and is considered the father of British and Canadian documentary films, noted that documentary was 'the creative treatment of actuality.' He believed that documentary film was not merely a report 'but could be a visual art that can convey a sense of beauty about the ordinary world.' It is this that Johsua Oppeheimer has aspired to in his film.

The Look of Silence is a finely-structured documentary film that, in its gestalt (form), looks like a narrative feature. Oppenheimer has taken a stylistic approach, i.e., with the modes of presentation being obvious (as opposed to realist cinema, which tries to hide its modes of representation). The film depicts Adi, an Indonesian ophthalmologist, who views silently, a video of Oppenheimer's earlier documentary, The Act of Killing. Together with Adi, we see some of the footage of interviews with those in the death squads who were involved in the mass killings. Adi's brother, Ramli, was one of those who were killed inhumanely in his village. He was stabbed, his penis cut off, and his body thrown into the nearby Snake River. We follow Adi as he journeys to interview some of the killers who are still alive. Included is his own uncle who had been assigned to guard some of those who had been taken prisoner, and waiting to be dragged away to be killed. In between, we see Adi with his aged mother who continues to live in silent grief at the death of her son. Adi's father is senile and remembers nothing, sparing him memories of the agony through God-induced amnesia. And as in a narrative film, he provides comedy relief in the film through his senility!

The Cinematic Approach in The Look of Silence

Oppenheimer's decision to give his film a narrative treatment is perhaps to show how today, the lines between fact and fiction have become blurred. And he is not far wrong. What happened in Indonesia in 1965 reads like something straight out of a fiction novel. In his use of stylistics, Oppenheimer tries to distance us from the horrors that were perpetrated. What actually happened is not shown but is instead described by the perpetrators in a calm manner, and in detail. Oppenheimer's camera does not move; it calmly records everything. Adi is

similarly calm as he watches the video of The Act of Killing. There is no visible emotion on his face. The same calmness also exudes from him as he sits talking to his mother, and then with his wife. Adi's interviews with those who were directly or indirectly involved with his brother's death are similarly conducted in a calm manner. There are many instances of silence in which both the interviewed and Adi just sit and look at each other. These scenes almost seem like they are directed. Oppenheimer was lucky enough to have had these moments on camera as they contribute to the narrative style of his film. This almost Brechtian approach involves the audience, allowing them to be more objective in concluding as to what is going on in the minds of Adi, and the people he is interviewing.

At the end of the film, Adi and the television set (always having been shown separately earlier), are finally shown in proximity in a beautifully-lit two-shot, looking almost like a realist painting. It provides a closure to the film, signifying that Adi has truly come to terms with all that has happened to his brother. For the audience, however, Oppenheimer does not give the same satisfactory closure. The final scene is a repeat of the shot of the trundling trucks in the darkness of the night that was shown at the beginning of the film. Silently, the trucks carry the doomed prisoners to their death. In this shot, Oppenheimer alludes to us that the story has not ended here. There may be other such mindless massacres in Indonesia in the future because some of the killers of 1965 still stride in the corridors of power. The fear and loathing of communists still pervades among those interviewed, and it appears to be sanctioned by the State. It is for that reason that many of the Indonesians involved in the production of The Look of Silence and The Act of Killing have opted to credit themselves as 'Anonymous' in the end credits of both films to protect their identity.

Oppenheimer has consciously opted for a structured form by using the language of film in his documentary portrayal of what transpired in 1965. It is similar to what another German documentary filmmaker, Marcus Vetter, has done in his two films on Palestine, *Heart of Jenin* and *Cinema of Jenin*, but with a difference. Vetter opted for a realist approach to tell his story, Oppenheimer, instead, goes for a visibly-structured and controlled look in the style of classical narrative film with expressionistic tendencies. He consciously applies patterning and organization by using narrative devices such as ellipsis and selectivity as well as binary opposites to fit that patterning and organization. In short, Oppenheimer makes use of the art of cinema to take his documentary to a higher, more erudite level, with a very bold, exploratory approach of his subjects' minds.

The narrative structure provides contrasts to differentiate the 'protagonists' (the victims and their families) from the 'antagonists' (the killers and their families) through their character, manner and speech. The cinematographic style dramatically supports this by the use of binary opposites as found within the visuals: Adi and his mother are at times framed against lush greenery (a symbol of vibrant life); so, too, when he has a talk

with his wife outside their house; there are repeated scenes of Adi's father being bathed or shaved by both Adi and his mother; Adi and his mother share some amusing moments with Adi's senile father. However, there is no such homely or familial scene at the houses of the former killers. In the interviews with the killers, Adi is always calm (even though his own brother had been killed violently). The killers, however, begin to get upset as the interviews wear on. The manner and character of these people is a contrast, and is distinctly different from that of Adi and his family, thus showing visually the gulf that exists between victims (the good guys), and perpetrators (the bad guys).

Two images stand out from Oppenheimer's documentary. The first (a re-enactment) early in the film is a night shot seen from an extreme distance. It shows the silhouettes of suspected members of the PKI being forcibly loaded onto trucks. The trucks then trundle slowly, faceless and impersonal, towards the camera. The shot is extremely long – 80 seconds in all. The other image is a static shot of a steel bridge over the Snake River into which many bodies of dead 'communists' had been thrown. It is a gothic image, consonant with the formalist approach taken by Oppenheimer: the bridge stands, bluish in the approaching dawn, a silent sentinel, and a witness of the atrocities committed in the name of the State and the people. The scenes are framed aesthetically, and colour-graded appropriately. They are chillingly beautiful, echoing the words of Grierson that 'all things are beautiful, as long as you have them in the right order.'

In both the above scenes, the silence is foreboding, pregnant with the unspeakable horror that has taken place. There are other places that give the same scenic but gruesome feeling: the entrance to a paddy field is devoid of human beings; there is the characterless entrance to a small town with featureless buildings, and leafless stumps of palms standing starkly against a blank sky. It is as if the pain and suffering of those killed and the stench of death still pervades the landscape. Time will erase the memories of all that has happened, but how does one remove it from the land on which so much human blood was spilt?

The Banality of Evil

In 1992, Hannah Arendt published the book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil.* It was based on a series of newspaper reports she had written on the trial of the Nazi, Adolf Eichmann, who was one of those responsible for the death of millions of Jews during World War Two. What astonished her was how banal were Eichmann's motives in ordering the killings even though he was a key player in the meticulous planning of the killings. From that, she concluded that he was not really anti-Semitic; he did it all only for the purpose of moving up the Nazi bureaucratic grades.

This same banality can be seen in the reaction of the interviewees in The Act of Killing video that Adi is watching, and similarly when Adi does his own interviews. Two of the men on the video, with absolutely no

sense of regret or remorse, demonstrate animatedly how they tortured and killed communists, and then kicked them into the river. At the end, they fall silent, as if they regretted what had happened. Then, one of them then says philosophically that, after all, that is what life is all about. In the next instant, their expressions undergo change, and both, with wide smiles, pose for photographs. Another death squad member (after singing a karaoke song in his living room), smilingly demonstrates how he choked the throat of a communist, ripped open his stomach and cracked his skull against a rock. Another man demonstrates how he stabbed a woman, and kicked her into the river. Another says he had cut off the head of a woman, and brought it into a shop. Still another says he killed the sister of someone who could not do it himself. Adi's uncle, when interviewed, smiles sickeningly throughout the interview with Adi. He shows no remorse or regret at not having done anything even when his own nephew (Adi's brother) was taken away to be killed.

Suggestion is a psychological process whereby a person's thought and feelings are guided by another, resulting in him doing something that he will not normally do. The death squads were told that the communists had no religion, and even slept with each other's wives (but some of the killers themselves were not averse to taking over the wives of those killed!). To the simple minds of the village folk, the (purported) behaviour of the communists was evil. They readily took these cunning suggestions, in the words of Shakespeare in *The Tempest*: "…as a cat laps milk." General Suharto, in collusion with foreign powers, manipulated the people and turned them into a mindless group. And as a group, they became automatons, driven by only a single objective – which was to kill. The army just stood by, having the villagers - and the world - believe that it was a 'people's struggle'.

Amir Siahan, the commander of the Snake River death squad says in Oppenheimer's interview, that he signed a list for about 600 communists to be killed over three days and nights. Some were even buried alive. Clearly to him, the communists were not human; their lives did not have value even though many had been his neighbours, and also had families whom the other killers knew. He even has the temerity to say that he should be given a paid holiday to America because it was the Americans who taught the Indonesians to hate the communists. To Adi's question at his house, he admits he is now well off, living in comfortable quarters, all from some of his 'friends' who provided it for his 'services to the State'.

M.Y. Basirun, a former Secretary-General of Komando Aksi (Action Commandos) involved in the killings, and who is now the Speaker of the Regional Legislature, reiterates to Adi that it was 'a people's struggle', and that 'the people hated communists.' In this, he clearly reveals his pro-government stance. And like a true politician, he emphatically says that the people whose relatives had been victims would not have elected him to his post if they had hated him! But he soon begins to get upset at Adi's probing questions, and starts to deliver a veiled threat: that if questions about the killings keep getting raised, 'those things' might happen again. Interestingly in Malaysia, the same kind of veiled threats keep surfacing in the country's politics, with reference

to the bloody May 13 riots that erupted in Kuala Lumpur in 1969. After the General Elections of that year, the rambunctious opposition party (mostly made up of Chinese) that had made enormous gains at the polls, conducted a rally in the streets of Kuala Lumpur. Their boos and jeers angered the Malays, and led to a bloody massacre involving both Malays and Chinese. This bogey of 'May 13' keeps getting resurrected (with the connivance of politicians), whenever non-Malays in Malaysia raise questions about socio-political issues deemed sensitive to the dominant Malay population. In a recent demonstration (on September 16, 2015), that was in support of the main ruling political party (all Malay), placards loudly condemned an opposition party (largely Chinese), with being communists.

What was most horrifying in the case of the 1965 incident in Indonesia was the drinking of the blood of victims by the killers. This was due to the local belief that the killers would go mad if they did not. This is the perhaps the most significant aspect of the massacre, something truly macabre that is usually associated with demonic rituals. Two of those interviewed by Adi speak of doing so without any feelings of revulsion. I do not think any mass killings in any part of the world in history can compare to what happened in Indonesia in 1965: how a government, in a sense, 'hypnotized' segments of the populace to become inhuman, to kill their neighbours, friends and relatives, and leading to the drinking of their blood! It is perhaps this that is indicated as 'significant' by the CIA report mentioned at the beginning of this essay, that it was "one of the worst mass murders of the 20th Century…" and that " the Indonesian coup is… far more significant than many other events that have received much more publicity."

Oppenheimer contrasts all the above with a scene of Adi walking with an old man who survived the killings. They make their way through the undergrowth leading to the Snake River. All along the way, the old man mutters prayers to the souls of the dead. He calmly tells Adi that there is no point in digging up the past, that the perpetrators of the killings will be given their just punishment by God in the afterlife. He, too, appears to be as banal as the inhumane killers despite his own suffering. However, his banality is of a different kind. It is a result of his just being a religious human being who has come to terms with all that had happened. He has made his peace with God who he believes is the real Giver and Taker of life. Through organisation and patterning of the various characters, Oppenheimer shows us that there is indeed a wide gulf between the killers and their victims. Life – in all its banalities – also has its dimensions.

The Communist as Bogeyman

In the post-World War Two period, the communists became the bogeyman for keeping the populace of some countries in check. And the significant aspect of this is that it was done so easily, especially in countries where the media is totally under the State's control. All one had to do was accuse someone of being a communist and he would be hauled up and incarcerated, resulting in trauma and ostracisation for him and his family. The

infamous McCarthy era in America is a prime example of how ordinary lives could be disrupted or destroyed due to the communist bogey being resurrected. The threat from communism was raised by every American administration using covert and overt suggestion, including working together with Hollywood to demonise those who were communists or even suspected of being communists, by making villains out of them. This was evident during the Cold War, and can be seen in films like *Guilty of Treason* (1949), *The Big Lift* (1950), and *Walk East on Beacon* (1952). In fact, in Hollywood, many creative personnel themselves became affected by McCarthyism during this era. Some were blacklisted, others lost their jobs, with at least one of them committing suicide. In an infamous incident, noted film director, Elia Kazan, appeared before the House Committee of Un-American Activities, and named eight of his friends who had been members of the American Communist Party together with him in the 1930s.

This also happened in Malaya (later Malaysia). In 1945, the British who had abandoned the country when the Japanese army invaded in 1941, returned unashamedly after the war, thinking that the populace would welcome them wholeheartedly. They did not expect the resistance from the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), and nationalist Malay leftist parties. The MCP was the first Malayan party to demand independence for Malaya. This was the reason for the leftist parties to work with them even though their ideologies were disparate. Though the British had given arms to members of the MCP during the War, and fought the Japanese alongside them, the MCP was now their enemy. With the collusion of the right-wing parties (and to safeguard British economic interests), the British banned the MCP and the left-wing parties. This led to the armed struggle dubbed the Emergency that lasted from 1948 to 1960. Physical warfare (police and army), and psychological warfare (newspapers, radio and film), was mobilised to the hilt, and branded the MCP and the left-wing parties as terrorists. In the documentary films of the Malayan Film Unit that had been set up by the British in 1946, the Malayan people were depicted as a 'united' nation working together to uplift their social and economic status. General Sir Gerald Templar who led the fight against the communists from 1952 to 1954 was officially accorded the image of a hero in every film that he appeared. (Reenacted) scenes of the communists' supposed atrocities, actual scenes of the bombing of communist hideouts in the jungle, and communist surrenders were continually shown to the public in cinemas and mobile units. These films were, in every sense of the word, examples of 'the creative treatment of actuality'. And they worked. The ordinary man was completely brainwashed, and subsequently looked upon the communists as Public Enemy Number 1.

This (creative) power of suggestion utilised by the British in Malaya was similar to what would be later used in Indonesia in 1965. The effects of this method were enumerated to me in an interview with the Secretary-General of one the left-wing parties, Wan Khazim Wan Din, whose father had been jailed by the British. Wan Khazim told me that the Malay right-wing party that collaborated with the British went around the villages, and told the simple country folk that the Malay left-wing parties had abandoned their Muslim religion, and had

become communists. Relatives stopped coming to Wan Khazim's house. Even his own grandfather believed the stories, and herded Wan Khazim out of his house. Unable to stand the situation in his village, Wan Khazim left for Singapore and found work at the film studios of the Shaw Brothers. Wan Khazim was but one of the many whose lives and those of their families were disrupted.

The communist bogey gets resurrected every now and then to make Malaysians remember 'the evil communist terrorists'. Like Indonesia's feature film, Penumpasan Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI, officially-sanctioned films such as *Bukit Kepong* (Kepong Hill, 1995) based on an actual incident about a communist attack on a police station in a remote village, are regularly screened on television. Both these films were technically-polished with excellent photography and art direction. The filmic construct gave the films credibility, thereby presenting a semblance of the 'truth' being told. In Bukit Kepong, the policemen defending the station all die in the shootout, and they are proclaimed as 'Malay heroes', even though they were policemen on the payroll of the British. Films about the communists are banned even though no communists are even shown, as in Amir Muhammad's *The Last Communist* (2006). The same fate befell Fahmi Reza's *10 Years before Independence* (2007) which was a revisionist history that included interviews with the left-wing independence fighters. This film, too, became a victim of State intervention when a screening of the film at a State-sponsored university was cancelled at the eleventh hour. Muhammad's next film, *Radio Days* (2007) was also banned even though it showed the communists, now aged and infirm, living peacefully in the south of Thailand. Both *The Last Communist* and *Radio Days* appear to be plotless and seem to have a lack in their structure. On the contrary. Amir Muhammad has consciously used many red herrings. The blissful life and normal activity of people set within peaceful landscapes that he portrays cleverly debunks the image of the 'evil' communists.

In limbo until now is the feature film, *The New Village* (2013). It was alleged to be promoting the communists because it portrayed the MCP and the Malayan People Anti-Japanese Army as independence fighters. The film has not been banned but there also does not seem to be any official proclamation forthcoming. The film's trailer shows it to be a well-made film with excellent production values. Obviously, the powers-that-be see any positive depiction of the communists as being incongruent with the 'national fiction' that they have created. It is certainly true that the victors (re)write history. But Fate, however, had the last laugh as far as Malaysia was concerned. The leader of the MCP, Chin Peng, died on September the 16th, a date that coincides with the formation of Malaysia. So, in a sense, when the event is celebrated, it is also a remembrance of the passing of Chin Peng.

In the Singapore of the 1970s and 80s, the communist bogey was also brought to the fore under the premiership of Lee Kuan Yew. Lee's emphasis was on economic success at the expense of politics. And so Lee brooked no opposition. He arrested his political opponents under the Internal Security Act (ISA) that allowed

detention without trial. Martyn See made *Zahari's 17 Years* (2006), a film on Said Zahari, editor-in-chief of a Malay newspaper, who was detained under the ISA for seventeen years after being accused of being a communist. A recent documentary, *Tracing the Conspiracy: Part 1* (2015), made by Jason Soo, a young Singaporean, chronicled how 22 people had been arrested, some of them social workers, under the ISA, and accused of being involved in a Marxist conspiracy to turn Singapore into a communist state. The film was screened at the Freedom Film Festival held in Petaling Jaya, Malaysia, in September, 2015. After the screening, five of the surviving detainees who were in attendance, described the torture and coercion they underwent during their incarceration which subsequently led to their 'confessing' on live television that they were, in fact, communists, and had been planning to 'overthrow' the government.

Conclusion

In Joshua Oppenheimer's The Look of Silence, there is a present-day scene of a teacher in a classroom who tells his students about the 'evil' communists who killed the generals during the 1965 coup. In a clever use of shots and juxtaposition during editing, Oppenheimer uses the art of cinema to show the audience that the students do not really believe what the teacher is telling them. Some students appear bored or are seen to be listless. They disinterestedly, mouth and complete the teacher's words that he purposely leaves hanging so as to have the students give closure to it. Using the power of suggestion, the image of the communists as the enemy is ingrained into students at an early age. In Malaya, the struggle of the Malayan Communist Party and the sacrifices of the Malay leftist parties are not mentioned in history books. What is continuously emphasised are the killings that occurred due to the forced Emergency that was declared by the British. What is never highlighted is the even more brutal and higher number of killings and atrocities committed by the Japanese forces during the occupation of Malaya between 1941 and 1945.

In The Look of Silence, Adi knows that he cannot reveal the name of his village even when asked by those he interviewed. Many of them are still in power. Fear and loathing of the communists is still rife among the populace of Indonesia. Even Adi's mother and wife are concerned about his safety. As in a narrative film, Oppenheimer builds tension in some of the interviews with the killers. Adi is accused by one interviewee of being 'political' with his questions and that he could be one of 'them'. The sons of a woman who is being interviewed start to become aggressive when their aged mother becomes upset with Adi's line of questioning. Adi is cautious in his approach. And he is not alone. Many Indonesians working on the production of Oppenheimer's The Act of Killing and The Look of Silence wanted to be credited only as 'Anonymous' for fear of reprisals by those who still believed that the PKI was behind the killing of the six generals in 1965.

It all sounds like fiction to those who have not experienced or were part of "one of the mass murders in the 20th century". It was a "significant event" where humans drank the blood of their victims, and could

nonchalantly say that it tasted 'sweet-salty'! In this, Oppenheimer is telling us that truth is certainly stranger than fiction. And that is why he approached The Look of Silence in a highly cinematic manner. By opting for static camera shots, appropriate art direction, solemn lighting and long takes during the interviews, Oppenheimer, in a sense, lulled the interviewees into revealing many things that had not been revealed in The Act of Killing, and which they might not have revealed in a normal interview. Adi, too, played his part well, and like a professional actor, he calmly observes the killers during moments of pause during the interviews. As in a fiction film, the protagonist and the antagonist confront each other in silence. They seem to be evenly matched, as if planning the next move in a chess game. Though Adi, the protagonist, is in the antagonist's lair, he is visually depicted as being more 'heroic' and thus, dominating in the scene.

This treatment by Joshua Oppenheimer for his documentary film is what gives it its form, making the content all the more dramatic and compelling. The Look of Silence is truly 'a creative treatment of actuality', that forcefully tells us that truth can be stranger than fiction.

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