

“The Aim of All Genuine Art is Always Engaged”

« *Le but de tout art véritable est toujours engagé* »

‘Echte kunst is altijd geëngageerd’

Joshua Oppenheimer



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In 2013, Texas-born film maker Joshua Oppenheimer launched his documentary film *The Act of Killing*, which explores the aftermath of the 1965 mass killings in Indonesia. The work received worldwide critical acclaim, won numerous awards and prizes at festivals (European Film Award, BAFTA Award, DocsBarcelona, Berlinale), and was nominated for an Academy Award in 2014. Oppenheimer's new film, *The Look of Silence*, was released in August 2014.

→ Interview by Anneleen Spiessens

Joshua Oppenheimer

“ THE AIM OF ALL GENUINE ART IS ALWAYS ENGAGED ”

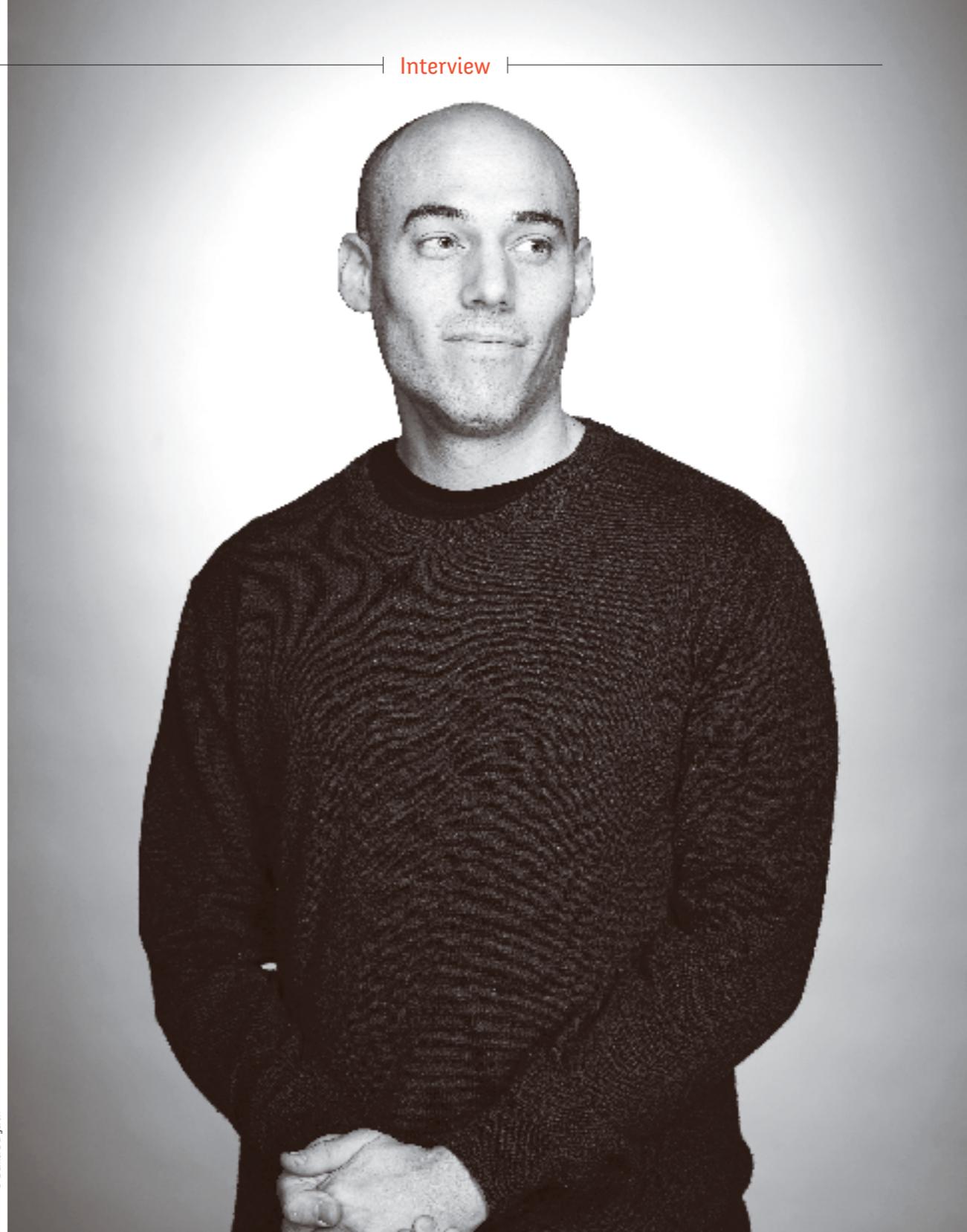
In 1965, the Indonesian government was overthrown by the military, and General Suharto installed his New Order regime. The Communist Party, which had firmly supported former President Sukarno, was immediately banned, leading up to purges during which an estimated half million alleged communists (intellectuals, farmers, unionists) were murdered by mobsters. Joshua Oppenheimer follows in the footsteps of some of these self-described *preman* or “free men”, small-time gangsters who were recruited by the army in 1965 and promoted to death squad leaders. *The Act of Killing* focuses on Anwar Congo, one of the most notorious executioners in the city of Medan, North-Sumatra, who was responsible for the death of hundreds of people. Today, Anwar is revered as a role model. He is the founding father of Pancasila, a right-wing paramilitary organisation that grew out of the death squads. Since all of the killers prove to be surprisingly talkative, they are challenged by Oppenheimer and his crew to dramatize their experience through the filter of Hollywood film genres.

The Act of Killing is therefore an enquiry into the nature of memory and imagination. Rather than offering an account of what happened in the past, the film exposes a present-day regime that has never been forced to acknowledge its crimes and is established on glorifying mass murder. In this sense, it is also a film about the power of fiction. As it turns out, fiction in Indonesia – be it in the form of cinema, propaganda or re-enactment – precedes, surrounds, supplants but ultimately also uncovers the violence in the real world.

Joshua Oppenheimer, *The Act of Killing* broaches the subject of the mass killings in Indonesia in the 1960s, an event that, at the time, was largely obscured by the Vietnam War. You even refer to it as a “forgotten story”. When did you learn about it, and why did you decide to film the perpetrators?

Joshua Oppenheimer: I went to Indonesia for the first time in 2001 to produce *The Globalization Tapes*, a participatory film project. My co-director Christine Cynn and I helped a group of palm oil plantation ●●●

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— Anwar dancing the cha-cha-cha on the rooftop. Still from *The Act of Killing*.



© Carlos Arango de Montis

— Anwar playing the victim in a film noir scene.

... workers to document their struggle to organize a union in the immediate aftermath of the Suharto dictatorship, under which unions had been illegal. Suharto was forced to resign in late May 1998, and when I arrived in the Summer of 2001, I found conditions that were abominable. However, the Belgian owner of the plantation, *Société financière*, hired Pancasila Youth to intimidate and threaten the workers. It was then that I found out why they were so afraid: many of their parents and grandparents had been members of a strong union but had been accused of being communist sympathizers in 1965, and were killed. Clearly the workers feared that this could happen again.

After we finished that documentary project, I decided to go back to the plantation and make another film about the paralyzing fear people experience in a post-genocidal society where there has been no justice, no efforts to address what happened, and where the perpetrators still hold key positions in the government. But when I got there in 2003, the army threatened the workers not to participate in the film. On the advice of the survivors, I approached the perpetrators instead. I found out to my horror that every single one of them was boastful, often about the worst details of the killings, which they would recount with smiles on their faces even in front of their grandchildren. Both the survivors and the Indonesian National Human Rights Commission, after watching the material, assured me that I was on to something very important. Not only did I show what really happened in 1965, but everyone now had to acknowledge this grotesque situation of impunity. Everyone had to see the rotten heart of the Indonesian society. I realized that I could do something

that the survivors could not do themselves: interview the perpetrators.

Why did you choose Anwar Congo as a central character for the film?

Joshua Oppenheimer: It wasn't a conscious decision. I expected to make a film about a group of perpetrators. Between 2003 and 2005, my anonymous Indonesian crew and I spent two years filming every perpetrator we could find, working our way from plantation to plantation, from the countryside to the city, from death squad to death squad, up the chain of command. Anwar was the forty-first perpetrator we filmed. When I first met him, he took me to his old office, to the rooftop where he murdered hundreds of people. He thought it would be useful to bring wire along to demonstrate his killing techniques, and a friend to play the victim. In a way, I think, this friend had to protect him from the ghosts that he felt were waiting there.

So this scene, where he shows how he killed and then dances the cha-cha-cha, was shot on the very first day I met him. In fact, that was a typical first shot with a perpetrator, except for one thing: Anwar, unlike the other forty perpetrators, acknowledged his pain. Within minutes, he started talking about having nightmares, being afraid of the ghosts, about drinking and taking drugs to forget what he did. Then he starts to dance. Of course, in dancing in a spot where he killed all these people, he was creating one of the most absurd, grotesque, potent metaphors for impunity that I encountered during this whole two-year period. Yet, the reason why he was dancing, was because he was trying to banish the pain that he had just described.

It was right there on the surface. I started to wonder whether perhaps the boasting that I spent two years documenting with all these men, wasn't what it appeared to be. What if it's not a sign of pride, but the opposite. These men know all too well that what they did was wrong, and they're desperately trying to convince themselves otherwise? That's a chilling thought. If boasting and remorse are two sides of the same coin, then this whole performance of impunity is nothing but a lie and a way to protect oneself, as a killer, from feeling guilty. I believe this was the key to the film's impact in Indonesia. Ordinary Indonesians understood that the heroic story celebrating the exterminations as a "patriotic struggle", was a fiction, even in the eyes of the killers.

Anwar's gradual recognition of the reality and scale of his own crimes constitutes the narrative backbone of the film. At night, in the middle of the sea, he claims being afraid of karma, of the law of nature – as a *preman*, by definition, he does not need to fear state law. Later, after playing his own victim during an interrogation scene, he seems overwhelmed and confesses to you in an almost religious way: "Josh, have I sinned?" Finally, we see him again on the rooftop where he killed most of his victims and hear retching sounds of his own dry heaving. Are we witnessing a traumatic rupture here? Is Anwar feeling remorse?

Joshua Oppenheimer: I'm sure Anwar feels remorse, trauma, guilt, regret. Or maybe I should state it more precisely. I would draw a line, especially for perpetrators, between trauma, guilt, regret – and remorse. Remorse is a conscious position, a conscious recognition that you did was wrong. And that requires courage and a certain kind of self-awareness. Trauma doesn't require that. It is a destructive emotion that can tear you up inside, regardless whether you allow yourself to feel it or not.

Anwar, when he starts to feel this trauma, tries to somehow deal with it in a way that protects him from its genuine significance – by offering me a kind of generic and dishonest confession. "Now I feel what my victims felt", he says insincerely, hoping he can redeem himself and be relieved from this horrifying guilt. On the rooftop, at the end of the film, he is suddenly overcome by his physical reaction of disgust or nausea. Maybe he unconsciously feels the irrevocability of what he's done. He's trying to vomit up the ghosts that haunt him, only to find that nothing comes up. Because

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To make a film with survivors is to navigate a minefield of clichés, almost all of which are sentimental and self-serving. They serve the audience's need for a comfortable position with which to identify.

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what haunts him, is his past, and in that sense *he* is the ghost that haunts him. Maybe that's a secular definition of karma: we are our past, we are the result of what we do. If you live part of your life harming people and destroying others, and if you then live the rest of your life in denial or "acute shallowness", to quote Hannah Arendt, then you have somehow destroyed yourself in the process. There's no redemption for that kind of destruction.

You call *The Act of Killing* a "documentary of the imagination". By introducing scenography, you encourage the killers to tap directly into their memory. This process reminds us of the *cinéma vérité* of Jean Rouch, which was also destined to reveal, through the work of film, images and thoughts that would otherwise remain inarticulate.

Joshua Oppenheimer: Jean Rouch's work was far less ecstatic than mine, but I'm absolutely standing on his shoulders. My camera, like his, does not pretend to be a transparent window on reality. Instead it provokes performances in order to understand how people imagine themselves. In order to understand why these men are boasting, in order to understand their openness – not in order to get them to open up! – I would let them dramatize what they had done in whatever way they wished, but I would also film their discussions around the dramatizations. And in so doing, you create an observational documentary of their imagination. For this very reason, *The Act of Killing* is not a platform ...

••• for the perpetrators. Instead, the film exposes how a regime of killers wants to be understood and understands itself. Jean Rouch was dealing with the brutal reality of French colonialism and racism in Africa. I was dealing with the brutal reality of a post-genocidal Indonesia where the perpetrators are still in power. Using this method of self-staging and performance, I bring out the stories that constitute that reality.

Anwar let me do something with him that I didn't dare do with anybody else, which was to show him the footage of himself before shooting the next scene. We would never plan more than one scene at a time. The whole idea was that what he'd seen would take him to a whole new place. All the while he is proposing more and more elaborate, outrageous, surreal, absurd scenes, ultimately inspired by his favourite film genres. The re-enactments and dramatizations become artefacts of the man's conscience, in a way. Anwar's visions and fears shed a light on his own experience of history, but at the same time they unmask the regime. Is it really possible that the Minister of Youth would be flown out by the government in Jakarta to participate in the re-enactment of a pogrom? Is it really possible that Indonesian state television considers this a good story for an entertainment show?

I think the film, in pushing the generic boundaries, teaches us something about testimony, and the strategic but paradoxical role that fiction can play in processes of truth and social justice. Which relation do you establish between truth and fiction in *The Act of Killing*?

Joshua Oppenheimer: When I ask the killers to stage themselves, they act out the fantasies they hold of themselves, in order to make sense of their experience. The natural state of the nonfictional camera is a prism that makes visible the fictions that constitute our factual reality. Fiction is the machine that creates our reality, our selves. And nonfiction is the prism for showing that. But most documentary film makers, unfortunately, are inhabiting the role of the journalist. They try to hide the fact that the people they film are staging themselves, pretending that they're offering an open window into a pre-existing reality that would look the same without the camera to register it. That is to say, they collaborate with the people they film to simulate a reality in which the camera is not present. And that is a lie. Maybe is not a lie, but it is a fiction – it is another fiction. One that obscures the insight that the camera might offer into the stories we tell.

Just like you did with the survivors, you personally approached the killers, spent years filming them and building a relationship of trust. Your knowledge of the Indonesian language allowed for an even closer contact. How important is this process for your work?

Joshua Oppenheimer: I think it is essential. You can't make an honest film about anybody as a human being without being close to them. You could perfectly judge their actions from the outside, but if you want to understand killing – and use that understanding to prevent these things from happening in the future –, you have to hear from people who do it. Killing is not something survivors can tell you about. They've never done it. They've only lived with its terrifying effects. I had to recognize early on that the killers were human, and that's the awful truth at the heart of the film. I could not make the leap from saying "these men have done something monstrous" to "these men are monsters". I would nearly be reassuring myself that I am not like them, which maybe makes me feel good but doesn't aid in my understanding. Of course I hope, that if I grew up in Anwar's family in 1950s in Indonesia, in his peer group as a *preman*, I would be a different person and make different choices. I know that I'm very lucky never to have to find out.

This intermediary position you occupy – you're not entirely present nor absent from the filmmaking process, arguing the survivors' case while working with the perpetrators – is a very unstable and morally uncomfortable one, I imagine. Can you recall a moment when you felt extremely uneasy as a "third party"?

Joshua Oppenheimer: My biggest moral commitment and my primary ethical position was that of a collaborator with the human rights community and my anonymous crew, as well as emissary of the survivors, to do a work that they could not do themselves. Now at a certain point, Herman and Safit [Herman Koto and Safit Pardede, two of Anwar's friends and members of Pancasila Youth] wanted to show me how Pancasila make their money. We would all together go to the Chinese market to collect their weekly payment, by extorting the market sellers. My Indonesian crew encouraged me to film this significant event, but I was faced with a big dilemma. I recognized that I ran the risk of becoming an accomplice to Herman and Safit, and possibly adding to the fear that the Chinese merchants already felt. It was important to me, as a film maker spending five years with survivors and an Indonesian crew, not



© Anonymus

– From left to right: Safit Pardede, Anwar Congo, Adi Zulkadry and Joshua Oppenheimer behind the scenes.

to replicate the violence I was seeking to address. So I told the men to move along fifty meters and wait for me while I would get the release forms signed. What I was really doing, was explaining to the market sellers why we were there, and paying them back. Each of them was paying an average of fifty euros. Considering we filmed thirty of those extortions, it was a very expensive day... At the end, Herman and Safit made 1,500 euros – but from us, not from the market sellers.

In August, your latest work *The Look of Silence* was released. Can you tell us more about the film and its genesis?

Joshua Oppenheimer: The film examines the Indonesian mass killings from the perspective of the victims. We follow Adi, whose older brother was killed in 1965. Adi was born twenty years after the genocide, as a replacement for his dead brother. He grew up with

this burden in a family that was terrorized into silence, and today sees his own children being brainwashed at school. Through the archive material of the forty perpetrators I had filmed between 2003 and 2005, Adi found out how his brother was killed. He decides to confront the men responsible for his death, and does so with tremendous patience and dignity. He is a wonderful character, giving a lot of space for the viewer to put themselves in his head because he doesn't speak self-righteously about what happened. The confrontations were shot after I finished the editing of *The Act of Killing*, but before we released it. I knew that after the release, I wouldn't be able to safely return to Indonesia.

Adi is an optician, so he approaches the killers by going and testing their eyes. While he is doing his job, his patients tell him stories – awful, unspeakable things. When he reveals his identity, an extraordinary dialogue begins. These dialogues are remarkable for the pauses, the silence, the fear in both the eyes of Adi and the perpetrators.

●●● There is a moral complexity to the image that we get from the killers in *The Act of Killing*. We see them as cold-blooded murderers reliving their glorious days, but also as husbands, fathers, grandfathers – and as imaginative people. In a way, you suggest that nothing of what these men did is outside imagination, *ob-scene*, or foreign to human nature. How did you grapple with the complexity of the survivor's portrait in *The Look of Silence*?

Joshua Oppenheimer: To make a film with survivors was to navigate this minefield of clichés, almost all of which are sentimental and self-serving. They are serving the audience, and not the people who are being filmed. That is to say, they serve the audience's need for a stable and comfortable position with which to identify. But these clichés do an injustice to the complexity of the survivor's experience. Avoiding them meant that the film became very poetic, very quiet, layered and sensitive. I don't think *The Look of Silence* is a complex character study, in the way that you could say Anwar is a real character. Adi is complex, but the main character in the film is silence and fear.

We talked about the perpetrator's trauma earlier. In which way is *The Look of Silence* an exploration of the trauma of the survivor?

Joshua Oppenheimer: The trauma of the survivors is something very different, of course. Surviving torture, political imprisonment, death – leaves you forever afraid. In *The Look of Silence*, we see a family that has not been able to mourn, to properly talk about the death of their son and to integrate that tragic event into their lives. Not only was it never acknowledged, the state was actually blaming the survivors for what happened to them and threatening them into silence. But one of the saddest things is the forgetting. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard says: "Forgetting extermination is part of extermination." This is also true for Indonesia. The victims are exterminated in the memory. In fact, I think forgetting is an integral part of any victor's history. Our patriotism, our national myths of freedom and democracy – and for me as an American, the American dream –, these are all based on forgetting. Patriotism indeed is the virtue of the vicious.

I have to say that *The Look of Silence* is not a film that offers an easy ending. In many ways, it is as painful as *The Act of Killing*. In the final big scene of the film, something important happens. We go back to one of the perpetrators involved in the murder of Adi's brother,



– Adi the optician, main character in *The Look of Silence* (2014).

who told his story in front of my camera a couple of years earlier. When we arrive, to my astonishment, the whole family starts to deny knowing anything about it. Adi has nothing to say and leaves, but I'm angry and show the family clips of the husband. They get furious and threaten to call the police – it ends in a total mess. The film opens with all these pieces that are mysteriously connected: we see a shot of a perpetrator singing but ignore the relation between Adi and the old footage. These pieces gradually come together over the first ten, fifteen minutes. At the end of the film, rather than ending harmoniously, all the pieces fall apart again into the mess of what happens, of what a genocide leaves. Nothing can bring back the dead, nothing can fix this. For the survivors, things will never be "okay". They have never even been allowed to mourn their dead. This makes the Indonesian case different from the Holocaust, where at least we were allowed to mourn. I say "we", because my family also lost a lot of people in the Holocaust. I left the final scene in the film because it shows the disharmony, the mess, the fact that reconciliation has to be a political and social process. It cannot happen until the survivors have the power to guide and frame that process. Yet again, *The Look of Silence* is a film about impunity and the victory of the perpetrators, but from the perspective and experience of the survivors.

Political culture today in Indonesia thrives on the moral vacuum left by decades of celebrating historical trauma. Corruption, violence and fanatical anti-communist rhetoric are still rampant, and the government relies heavily on Pancasila Youth to take care of its business. There is a continuity, rather than a rupture, between the killings of 1965 and present-day society. What are your hopes for Indonesia's future?

Joshua Oppenheimer: I am pessimistic, but also optimistic. I'm both, and you have to be. You wouldn't make a film like this if you felt there was no hope. I am pessimistic, because even though Indonesia is a democracy today, it is completely dominated by criminal blackguards who obtain their wealth through extortion and theft, due to their proximity to Suharto or their participation in the killings. However, there is no celebrating anymore about what happened in 1965 as something heroic, and people become less and less afraid to challenge the regime. The lie is crumbling, slowly. *The Act of Killing* will be the child in *The Emperor's new clothes*, forcing people to finally acknowledge things that they have been too afraid to speak about. I wouldn't have done that if I didn't feel there was a chance, however perishingly small, that it could come to pass. I don't think a single film can transform a country, but this one has done more than I hoped.

It seems that the perpetrators in Indonesia, up until now, have had the exclusive right to speak. In a society where there has been no transitional justice, they are the only ones that can produce a legitimate narrative about the past.

Joshua Oppenheimer: Yes, and the films were intended to help open the discursive space. Essentially, I tried to short a circuit, like an intervention. To help catalyze a transformation and change the way Indonesians talk about their past. *The Act of Killing* has been screened a thousand times across Indonesia, and last year in September, we made it available for free download there. It has been downloaded 3.5 million times. Mainstream media are increasingly emboldened to talk about the past and now consider the events of 1965 a crime against humanity.

Why is it important to you to make these "engaged" human rights films?

Joshua Oppenheimer: In some ways it has to do with my family history. In Indonesia, I had this awful feeling that I had wandered into Germany forty years after

the Holocaust, only to find the Nazis still in power. Growing up in a family where you learn that the aim of all politics, of all morality – maybe the aim of all art – is to prevent these things from happening again, you have a pretty strong sense that you have to address this impunity when you encounter it. What is more, my work with the palm oil plantation workers taught me that this is not an isolated event: our margarine, our skin oil, many things we buy depend on that terror.

The aim of all genuine art is always engaged. Its aim is not to provide new information, that's the role of journalism. Journalism can be artful, and of course there can be overlap. But the fundamental or ideal role of journalism is to provide new information in the public interest, and to put that information in a context where the public can make decisions. The aim of art is somehow the opposite. It is to invite or force us to confront our most painful truths, and these are almost always things we already know, but are afraid to talk about. Now that *The Act of Killing* has blasted open the space to discuss the past, I believe *The Look of Silence* will be an important resource for a genuine reconciliation process.

A final question: would you say your films on Indonesia are about the past, the present or the future?

Joshua Oppenheimer: They're about the present. *The Act of Killing* is a film about a present haunted by an unresolved historical past, brutalized by a victor's history. So in that sense, it's also a film about history without being an historical film. But more than anything, it's a film about the present. To paraphrase Walter Benjamin: the present is always endowed with a messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim. We are all products of our own experience, we are all affected by fears and hopes that come from the past. We have but the past, the wreckage, the pieces that in *The Look of Silence* never come together, and the emptiness in which Anwar walks at the end of *The Act of Killing*. This lays a claim on us in the present, we are in debt to the past. And it is not a debt, according to Benjamin, that can be settled cheaply. It motivates everything I do. ■