

# The Act of Killing and The Look of Silence: A Documentary Review

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These two documentaries are about the mass murder of Chinese Indonesians in the period 1965–1966. *The Act of Killing*, directed by Joshua Oppenheimer and co-directed by Christine Cynn and another anonymous co-director, was released in 2012 and follows a man named Anwar Congo, who was an executioner during the mass murders. The second documentary, *The Look of Silence*, was released in 2014 by the same director on the same topic, but from a different perspective. This documentary follows Adi Rukun, an optometrist and a survivor of the Indonesian mass killings of 1965–1966. The documentary is a work of art by the director who takes the viewer on a journey along with Adi as he confronts the perpetrators of the horrendous acts. *The Look of Silence* is also laden with symbolism, which not only adds depth to the director's message but also keeps the viewer thinking long after watching the documentary. The documentary exposes what could happen when a majority views a certain minority as a threat. It focuses on the economy of impunity when perpetrators of mass murder are in power and rule the state. It is strongly recommended that viewers watch *The Look of Silence* before *The Act of Killing*. This way, viewers get a more general idea about the period in concern before delving into the specifics of how victims were murdered. This paper is a review of the two documentaries. Since they focus on the same topic, I review them concurrently by focusing on the dominant themes in both.

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What is it about small numbers that make them objects of fear and rage? This is a question that Arjun Appadurai explores in his book *The Fear of Small Numbers*. Before proceeding to answer this question, I would like to briefly explain what Appadurai refers to as 'predatory identities.' According to him, predatory identities are those identities whose social construction and mobilization require the extinction of other social groups.[1] Appadurai states that predatory identities are always majoritarian. They view minorities as a threat to their own survival and as a blemish to the purity of the nation. Predatory identities also see themselves as potentially replaceable by the minority. This condition unleashes the need to "purify" the nation by getting rid of those who threaten the way of life of the majority.

Appadurai's conception of predatory identities can help us understand why the mass murders of 1965-1966 took place. Although there were other groups targeted, ethnic Chinese Indonesians were the feared minority. By labeling them 'communists' with no religion, they were seen as a threat to the majority's way of life. This means that Chinese Indonesians represented a shortcoming to the national purity sought by the majority. Throughout the documentaries, those who committed the killings justified their actions by labeling the ethnic Chinese Indonesians as communists who had to be exterminated. Labels, whether fitting or not, have a long history of sparking conflict from minor violence to ethnic cleansing. History has many examples of what happens when a majority labels a minority and starts seeing them as a threat. Labeling, therefore, seems to be an effective strategy used to mobilize a majority against a minority.

In the next sections, I discuss the dominant theme and symbolism in the documentaries. For *The Look of Silence*,<sup>[2]</sup> I chose to focus on the word "silence" in the title. Silence is intangible and therefore cannot be seen. Also, the word "silence" is associated with many other things such as secrecy, conspiracy, and guilt. It also makes the reader wonder what the secrecy is all about and the reasons behind the silence. For *The Act of Killing*,<sup>[3]</sup> I focus on Anwar Congo who was an executioner during the mass murders. To him, the killing appears to have been an act. One that he is happy to reenact in front of the cameras. Perhaps another name that would have been suitable for *The Act of Killing* would be *The Look of Pride*. For Anwar Congo, killing communists was something that earned him a heroic status that is still celebrated today.

### **The Silence**

This first part of the paper focuses on the "silence" as it captures the theme of both documentaries. There is so much silence about what happened in Indonesia in the 1960s, and those who do talk about it, like Anwar in *The Act of Killing*, do so with a false sense of pride. Perhaps the pride is just a facade that perpetrators wear to prevent themselves from dealing with the truth. However, the silence does not end here. There is also silence about the role of the U.S. and other nations in the massacre. When it is mentioned, it is often with a sense of joy about how they "crushed communism" as they did in other places around the world where communism reared its ugly head.

Perhaps the silence is because no one wants to deal with the traumatic past. Those who do are labeled as "communists", which carries a lot of stigmas and is enough to make one jump on the bandwagon of silence. The label "communist" serves to silence those who demand a reckoning with the past and those who might call for revenge or justice. It appears that no one wants to talk about justice because that would entail admitting guilt. Silence, therefore, becomes the best way to prevent going back to the past, which continues to haunt many in the present.

The past has a way of entrenching itself into the very fabric of our existence. For example, what was done in the colonial period almost always resurfaces in the post-colonial era. There are numerous examples of how this could play out. In Rwanda, for instance, the massacre of the Tutsi tribe by the Hutus is directly linked to the politicization of race and ethnicity during the colonial era. The Tutsi minority were seen as racially superior over the Hutu majority by the German and Belgium colonial powers. The Tutsis were given leadership positions and enjoyed a better life than the Hutus. Although Rwanda obtained its independence in 1962, the colonial strategy of divide and conquer and racial stratification still had an impact in the post-colonial dispensation. In 1994, 32 years after independence, the Hutu tribe massacred the Tutsis over a hundred-day period of ethnic cleansing.

Coming back to the general theme of silence, some perpetrators do not mind answering questions about their horrendous acts. Anwar, for example, seems content with appearing on TV shows and being treated as a national hero. It seems that silence serves two purposes: to enable and disable. On the one hand, it enables the perpetrators to continue as if nothing ever happened. On the other hand, it “disables” the victims from bringing back the past, which is uncomfortable for the perpetrators, even those who boast about what they did.



"Slaughter of innocence" by [Choeung Ek](#) is licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND](#).

### Helping Them See

Another fascinating aspect of the documentaries is the choice of subjects. In *The Look of Silence*, viewers follow Adi, an optometrist, as he confronts the killers of his brother. Since many of the perpetrators have aged and have poor vision, the first thing Adi would do is to prescribe a pair of lenses to help them see. As the conversation between Adi and the perpetrators progresses, Adi would give them stronger lenses to improve their vision. This is very symbolic of what Adi hopes to achieve by interviewing the perpetrators. Adi hopes that they will “see” their actions and admit that what they did was in fact, wrong. However, the perpetrators hold on to what they believe even though there is a clear disjunction with what they know. As Oppenheimer said, “they’re able to operate on belief, even if they know it’s false”.<sup>[4]</sup> Anwar demonstrates this point very well in *The Act of Killing*. He dances on the rooftop, where he killed hundreds of people. To Oppenheimer, this is a profound allegory for what happens when perpetrators win and are never called to account for their actions. Anwar’s dance shows more than this though. It shows a person who has resigned himself to

a life built on lies. When asked about how he copes with living based on lies, he answers that alcohol, drugs, and the cha cha cha dance help him forget.

During the interviews, Adi would often push his interviewees by asking the tough questions that they prefer not to answer. To this, one perpetrator answers that he does not like to talk about politics or answer deep questions. A review of these two documentaries would be incomplete without talking briefly about some of the techniques of the director. Many times throughout the documentaries, Oppenheimer takes the viewer to the dark side of human nature only to reel them back by showing more tranquil scenes such as children talking about mundane things. One scene shows Adi asking questions to a perpetrator who is clearly pushed to the brink by the “political questions”. The tension builds up even more as the camera focuses on the perpetrator’s face onto what looks like a slight hint of regret. Immediately, the scene shifts to two children talking about a tooth that has fallen out.

After the interviews, Adi would tell his interviewees that he is going to make a pair of lenses for them. Again, this is symbolic of Adi’s persistence and hope that the perpetrators will come to “see” their actions in a different light. The perpetrators never admit that their actions were wrong. However, with this one simple tool—a pair of lenses—perhaps the perpetrators can look at things differently. Therefore, the lenses symbolize Adi’s hope for achieving his goal of forcing the perpetrators to own up.

There is yet another interesting facet to the documentaries, especially in *The Look of Silence*. Children become the subject of propaganda to entrench the idea that communists are “evil” and must be exterminated. One scene shows a teacher explaining to his students how the communists killed army generals, which, according to the teacher’s version of the story, is the reason why the massacre took place. Again, Adi is seen talking to one of the students afterward helping him “see” that what this teacher told him may not necessarily be true. Adi provides the other side of the story, which is very different from the one promulgated by the mainstream media with the help of their heroes such as Anwar. Although this time Adi does not provide lenses, he offers his time to undo the works of propaganda which seeks to capture the minds of children, and thereby justify the past.

### Conclusion

Bad things happen when one part of the population accuses or labels another. There are many examples of this in history. Also, many of the conflicts waged in today’s socio-political arena revolve around this very same notion of “us” and “them”. Appudurai’s work reminds us that the more aware the “us” are of themselves, the more aware they are going to be of “them.” *The Act of Killing* and *The Look of Silence* show how this played out in Indonesia in 1965-1966. More than that though, the documentaries show what a culture of impunity looks like when the perpetrators can rule without ever having to account for their actions. This culture is defined by a world built on lies that are still told today. The silence serves as a tool for the perpetrators to continue ruling as if nothing ever happened, and it also serves to suppress those who may be seeking justice. For the perpetrators, justice is best left alone as it would involve admitting guilt.

Oppenheimer’s documentaries are more than just a reminder of what happened in the past. They make visible that which has been deliberately kept invisible. The pain, memories, and doubts are sketched out on the faces of the perpetrators and the victims. For this reason, Oppenheimer believes that film has a greater advantage over literature. That advantage, however, can only be

achieved when people can watch the documentaries. In an age of censorship, it can be challenging getting such films out in the open. Unfortunately, the silence will prevail, but these documentary films have made a dent on the shield of silence. The more people get to watch them, the more significant the dent on the shield of silence will become.

### References

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- [2] Joshua Oppenheimer, *The Look of Silence*, Historical Documentary (Drafthouse Films, 2014).
- [3] Joshua Oppenheimer, *The Act of Killing*, Historical Documentary (Drafthouse Films, 2012).
- [4] John Roosa, 'Interview with Joshua Oppenheimer', *Rethinking History* 18, no. 3 (3 July 2014): 418, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2014.898422>