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Re-Enactment as Counter-Memory: On the Mobilization of Documentary Form in Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing* (2012)

Like the statements we make about physical reality with the aid of the camera, those which result from our preoccupation with historical reality may certainly attain to a level above mere opinion; but they do not convey, or reach out for ultimate truths, as do philosophy and art proper. They share their inherently provisional character with the material they record, explore, and penetrate.

Siegrfried Kracauer, *History: The Last Things before the Last*

Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing* (2012) is a documentary film inquiring into the aftermath of the massacres of the Communists during 1965 coup d'état in Indonesia. Even though undeniably well-meant, the film has been greeted with admiration and revulsion in equal measure, admiration emanating from the community of elite *cinéastes* (Werner Herzog, Errol Morris, Dušan Makavejev), revulsion – or at least serious reservations – from film critics and the public at large. The cause for this sharply polarized reaction to the film is no doubt the director's controversial strategy of allowing the perpetrators of the 1965 massacres of the Communists in Indonesia to stage on film their "history" of these horrific events: "We get musical sequences, and passages of grotesque cross-dressing; scenes in which torturer play their former selves, or, pasted with fake blood and flesh, their own victims; and the reconstruction of an assault on a village, in which local women and children are hired as extras and left in traumatized tears. This is difficult to watch...Yet the project gave me pause. Although Oppenheimer has called it a 'documentary of the imagination,' whatever this means, would a measure

of investigation have spoiled it? We hear that Congo [the protagonist of the film] personally exterminated thousand people. Does that figure stand up, and does it not matter more than his dawning remorse?"¹.

The main reproach seems to be the sheer weight of the demands placed upon the viewer by the film. The dissatisfaction provoked by the film is not trivial, though it does appear excessive. The film opens with a brief summary of the 1965 coup d'état in Indonesia. If this proves insufficient, there is a press release that is almost scholarly in its historical thoroughness. The notion that Oppenheimer didn't do enough investigation also evinces a surprising ignorance of the fact that, because the perpetrators remain in power, there is no reliable history of the massacres or a manageable way in which this history can be written today. The baroque nature of film's imagery cannot be the root cause of this rash dismissal, however, for there is no shortage of grotesque violence on film. Rather, it must be the fact that grotesque imagery was is not properly balanced by a reliable historical narrative. In other words, what makes the film difficult to watch is not the outrageous kitsch spawned by the killers-turn-filmmakers, but the absence of the neutralizing historical framework which would make these images "comprehensible." Only in this way can a documentary film become a proper kind of testimony. As is often the case, here the compulsion to reduce documentary form to a fact-gathering mission blinds us to the fact that facts may often be lacking; that they are fallible and contingent artifacts; and that the process of documentation, rather aiming to explain, may opt to expose us to the events it claims to investigate.

Bewilderment caused by the prominence *The Act of Killing* chose to give to the perpetrators is understandable. The aim of this paper is to expose the logic behind Oppenheimer's decision to place the figure of the perpetrator at the center of his film. We can begin by recalling that engaging criminals into representing the crimes they committed is not an arbitrary and lurid "embellishment," but a

strategy that has received a scrupulous justification in the writings of Theodore W. Adorno. A Nazi camp survivor himself, Robert Antelme presented the rationale for this approach with characteristic bluntness: “We are not only potential victims of the executioners: the executioners are our fellows [semblables].”² My second aim is to place Oppenheimer’s use of re-enactment in the context of the ongoing debate about creating public counter-memory in the aftermath of collective trauma. Though to contemporary audiences the use of re-enactment may seem exotic or pretentious, this process is central both to documentary film and psychoanalysis of trauma. In other words, resistance to re-enactment can no longer be justified either by the simplistic notion of documentary as spontaneous capture of reality or the equally naïve idea that, in the aftermath of trauma, there is a subject that can recall “what really happened” due to the magic powers of remembrance. Finally, because this film explicitly engages with the living memory of an atrocity (i.e., a crime against humanity, an organized assault on the very idea of human community executed with the connivance of the state), one can hardly dissociate my first two objectives from re-examining the concepts of “human rights.” In fact, the film’s critical impact stems from its ability to put these concepts to a test, rather than merely apply them to the “case” of Indonesia. Seen in this light, the film exposes the aporias of human rights and the incompleteness that the law is always bound to suffer in the face of atrocity.³ By introducing a new form of engaging with atrocity, the film does more than expand the reach of the cinematic form. It also outlines a cosmopolitics of the stranger in the age when the optimism of Kant’s cosmopolitanism no longer seems credible. Thereby, *The Act of Killing* creates a viable and impressive alternative to the distancing and immobilizing effects of the dominant modes of mourning atrocity on film.

Documenting After Adorno: Why The Sociology of the Perpetrator?

All political instruction finally should be centered upon the idea that Auschwitz should never happen again....To do this, education must transform itself into sociology, that is, must teach about the societal play of forces that operates beneath the surface of political forms.

Adorno, "Education after Auschwitz"

Every attempt to introduce a new mode of documentation to the subject of atrocity creates bitter controversy and results in a litany of mutual accusations that are only too familiar by now.⁴ It is significant that this impossibility of proper speech, this lack of the proper subject for speaking, or lack of the proper, fitful speech, has been haunting the very figures who forced upon Western culture the name of "Auschwitz" during the period that the officialdom was eager to forget it.⁵ Arendt's attempt to remove from the European Jewry the stigmata of helpless victim has famously backfired in a catastrophic manner, for her *Eichmann in Jerusalem* seemed to implicate Jewish Community Councils in being accomplices to the bureaucratic machinery of deportations.⁶ The tone of her reportage seemed cold, detached and self-centered. Even her admiring and sympathetic biographer, Elisabeth Young-Bruhl, felt aggrieved by her subject's "ill-considered" choice of words and "needless irony and misquotations."⁷

A similar affliction can be observed in a section of Adorno's *Negative Dialectic*, where he demands that perpetrators of atrocity be shot on the spot and goes on to discount the possibility that a judicial proceeding can be anything but a ludicrous, humiliating, blasphemous show of impotence: "If the men charged with torturing, along with their overseers, had been shot on the spot, this would have been more moral than putting a few on trial. The fact that they managed to flee, to hide out for two decades, effects a qualitative change in the justice that was missed at the time. Once a judicial machinery must be mobilized against them, with codes of procedure, black robes, and understanding defense lawyers, justice – incapable in any case of imposing the sanction that would fit the crimes – is

falsified already...” (286-7). To point to these lapses of judgment and understandably intemperate hyperboles is not in order to dismiss Arendt’s or Adorno’s thinking wholesale; or to invite a sense a sense of total, fateful impossibility of doing justice to the act of killing. On the contrary, it is only by becoming cognizant of the madness that seems to overtake the very attempt to think the acts of killing that we can hope to arrive at a better ways of remembering them. Such madness must not be excluded or become an excuse for excluding those afflicted by it; instead, we should inscribe it within the framework of remembrance while exposing the paralyzing effects of claiming that all justice is falsified in advance because no fit punishment is imaginable. Fortunately, the very authors who fall prey to these exaggerations also supply us with the means for sorting them out. Adorno is a case in point, and, as I will argue below, his 1966 radio-speech-turn-essay “Education after Auschwitz” successfully and perhaps even cathartically complements *Negative Dialectics*, his masterwork where conceptual, nominalist use of his most famous coinage received a full philosophical justification.

Adorno’s acerbic analyses of everyday life and imperious aesthetic judgments earned him a reputation of an elitist detached from the possibilities of collective action, someone who exposed the negative, destructive side of the dialectic of the Enlightenment, but said frustratingly little about its positive side. From this point of view, “Education after Auschwitz” presents a very different and surprising side of the thinker, namely, Adorno the education reformer. Simply put, rather than appealing to the values of traditional education in the classics and the arts that one would expect (along the lines of Leo Strauss’s nostalgia for return, however “experimental,” to great books curriculum), Adorno claims that education after Auschwitz has only one goal – to do whatever is necessary to prevent a repetition of this type of event. After positing this ideal, Adorno goes on to explicate his understanding of the “never-again” approach. Historical approach to teaching of atrocity has an unfortunate effect of placing the acts of killing into a secure version of collective past, and thus creating a temporal, geographic or cultural distance that serves to inhibit the very idea of its recurrence. The hyperbolic stress that popular

representation of Nazi crimes lays on their “German” obsession with order, hygiene and stylish uniforms performs this isolating function: the more typically German the Nazis are, the safer the audiences can feel, for something *that specific* to its time and place could never threaten us. By contrast, Adorno takes a sociological approach to the task of collective immunization. This change of perspective leads him to argue that atrocity is not a local, but a global phenomenon tied to the political evolution of Western and Westernized societies. Developing this line of analysis, he goes on to identify the post-World War II trends compatible with his analysis of Nazi Germany and the “authoritarian personality”: (1) intensification of resistance to civilization brought upon the “claustrophobic” social space: “The denser the weave, the more one want to escape it, whereas it is precisely the weave that prevents any escape. This intensifies the fury against civilization. The revolt against it is violent and irrational” (195); (2) the cult of pain as a test of “stamina” and thus price for integration into society, paired with demand to suppress anxiety and other “negative” emotions (198); (3) expansion of spectatorship at the expense of participation, especially in sports (197); (4) the emergence of technology as the receiver of human affection, noticeable in the worship of “high –performing” machines, attachment to gadgets and pursuit of “efficiency” (198-9). Let us be clear: Adorno does not prophecy the recurrence of death camps, but simply points out that it would be exceedingly naïve to think that such abominable crimes could never happen again just because they have “already” happened in Germany. He does, however, imply that since the conditions for unleashing blind rage against society not only remain in force, but continue to grow. Looking back on Adorno’s analysis fifty year later, it is hard to argue that he was wrong. At the same time, Adorno maintains that even pointing these trends out does something to immunize society against them.

Consistent with his stress on the sociological mechanisms of atrocity, rather than historical causes of particular acts of killing, Adorno stresses that, contrary to the entrenched myth, the eruption of National Socialism in 1933 was not a manifestation of the conformist, martial weave of German

culture, but a symptom of its breakdown, or, as he put it: “ one must accept that fascism and the terror it caused are connected with the fact that the old established authorities of the *Kaiserreich* decayed and were toppled, while the people psychologically were not yet ready for self-determining. They proved unequal to the freedom that fell into their lap. For this reason the authoritarian structures then adopted the destructive and, if I may put it so, insane dimension they did not have earlier....” (194). The “insane dimension” of National Socialism is a sociological phenomenon, not a psychological artifact or a theological omen. It has emerged out of the failure of Weimar democracy to master the conditions of freedom. Nor is it a manifestation of German propensity for mindless deference to the authority; instead, it is a symptom of the breakdown in the reproduction of the authority of the State. This breakdown left the State susceptible to a takeover by a Party that had to improvise itself into being while barely believing into its own reality. In contrast to Arendt, Adorno sees atrocities as having little to do with radical evil in human nature, even if they invite us to consider its existence.

What does Adorno’s sociology of the “insane dimension” entail? What strategies of analysis does his approach promote? Which ones does it set aside? In the lines that follow, Adorno offers a sobering and somewhat unsettling summary of his view:

I do not believe it would help much to appeal to eternal values, at which the very people who are prone to commit such atrocities would merely shrug their shoulders. I also do not believe that enlightenment about the positive qualities possessed by persecuted minorities would be of much use. The roots must be sought in the persecutors, not in the victims who are murdered under the paltriest of pretenses.... One must come to know the mechanisms that render people capable of such deeds, must reveal these mechanisms to them, and strive, by awakening a general awareness of those mechanisms, to prevent people from becoming so again. It is not the victims who are guilty, not even in the sophistic and caricatured sense in which still today many like to construe it. Only those who unreflectingly vented their hate and aggression upon them are guilty. One must labor against this lack of reflection, must dissuade people from striking outward without reflecting upon themselves. The only education that has any sense at all is an education toward critical self-reflection. (193)

The danger Adorno intuits in the traditional responses to atrocities are not trivial. Invoking abstract ideals in the face of crimes against humanity only seems to highlight their impotence to prevent these events from occurring. If respect for life, law or autonomy of the other were innate, none of these events would have occurred; but since they did, these notions seem to be relative to political contexts in which they are invoked. Thus, unmediated reference to abstraction invites equally facile relativism which is the standard defense of war criminals: my freedom to act as I choose has as much right to exist as your universal freedom, so you, i.e., the Court, cannot judge me. This dismissal of cosmopolitan justice is usually accompanied by the broad cynicism signaled by the “shrug of the shoulders”: references to noble ideals only serve to justify past actions, not to orient future ones; your references to “human rights” do not ground your prosecution, but justify arbitrary exercise of judicial power. We shall encounter a version of this defense in the words of Adi Zulkadry, the most sophisticated criminal we meet in *The Act of Killing*. Second, and, perhaps, more controversially, Adorno suggests that the focus of education in the wake of Auschwitz should not be exclusively on the victims. This is an extremely sensitive issue and bears closer scrutiny. Adorno does not argue against representation of the victims, but against representations that fall into abstract pattern of heroism, i.e. modes of telling that ground themselves in the eternal capacity to resist Evil or similar clichés that owe nothing to the experience at hand. Such responses would function as shortcuts to mastering the past at the cost of re-learning from it the lessons we learned many times already (and apparently to no effect). Such learning, though undoubtedly reassuring to the audience, would thereby release us from the obligation to learn. If heroism is possible always and everywhere, then this past becomes interchangeable with any other dismal or wretched historical event that tried human spirit; then history is nothing but a litany of the same sufferings and responses; then ultimately, there is nothing to learn, only to lament, recognize, admire and mourn. This position has its defenders, but Adorno is not one of them. From his standpoint, Auschwitz ruptures the continuousness of historical time in such a way that the past can no longer be

the past. In other words, atrocity cannot be granted the same temporality as other historical events. Adorno submits that the pastness of Auschwitz be made indissociable from its futurity, from the sense that it also orients our thinking without becoming sealed from the present. Finally (and on this score Adorno echoes Primo Levi), the *topos* of the heroic cannot capture the sociological dimension of atrocities. With great deliberation and planning, these events are staged in such a way as to demoralize populations, to deprive their world of the minimum of intelligibility that is required for any action, let alone a heroic one. Only after the horror that such events could be staged sinks in, can we begin to appreciate the real significance of the acts of resistance, to understand why resistance to atrocities is so rare, to grasp why their exceptional, singular character cannot be grasped in the traditional vocabulary of valor, courage, bravery or self-sacrifice, to comprehend why it is only the Others, not the victims, can truly resist. (On this score, the exceptional behavior of the Bulgarians, the only European nation that was able to stop the Final solution four times, deserves to be made a centerpiece of education after Auschwitz; the fact that this event remains marginal to the collective memory of the Holocaust indicates how far we are today from what Adorno had in mind in 1966; sadly, there are still those who, thoughtlessly joining hands with the logic that guided the executioners, feel authorized to make a connection between the heroism of the few and the impotence of the countless many who “inexplicably” marched to their death “of their own will”; Adorno’s allusion to the “caricature” of the victim remind us, distressingly, how old this particular reaction is).

Instead of appealing to values or focusing on the heroism of the victims, Adorno demands that we put the spotlight on the persecutors. After all, atrocities tend to be organizational events backed up by commitment of institutional resources and logistic considerations. They frequently involve, in one way or another, the apparatus of the state. Although usually committed to secrecy, the preservation of secrecy itself often engenders additional archives and bizarre contradictions: while photography was strictly prohibited in the Nazi camp system, forty thousand photographs from Auschwitz survived the

determined attempt of the Nazi functionaries to destroy all traces of the Final Solution.⁸ Sociologically speaking, organizers are in a much better position to tell us about the logistics of mass murder than the victims.

In practice, however, one quickly finds that events such as Auschwitz or the Indonesian massacres of 1965 do not have a proper subject who can “speak” them. While victims lack the broad perspective for the mechanics of mass murder, organizers have no incentive to cooperate with their accusers and plenty of motivation to deny, conceal or minimize their involvement. To overcome this obstacle, Adorno suggests that investigators appeal to the vanity of the perpetrators in order to coax them into self-disclosure. Distasteful as this task may seem, it is the price we have to pay for the fact that something that should have never happened did happen. Perpetrators must be induced to cooperate, to disclose their innermost thoughts, dreams and desires, to supply the public with the historical data and psychological material which would allow us to grasp the wretched intertwining of mundane conformism and extraordinary cruelty. Thanks to this ruse, the perpetrators must be coaxed into submitting themselves to the power who existence they deny, namely, public reflection and judgment beyond the courtroom. For those acts where no punishment seems enough and no forgiveness is possible, another scene of justice must be produced.

Because couched in sociological rather than psychological terms, this focus on the perpetrator has nothing to do with the theological notion of radical evil and the popular obsession with moral monster that, regrettably, dominates much of the public memory of Nazism and, perversely enough, serves to glamorize it. Putting war criminals to documentary use does not isolate them from social practice, but imposes this practice upon them; it does not cooperate with the cult of great criminal initiated by Diderot and Sade, re-invented by the French Romantics, and transplanted into cinema through the genre of gangster film. On the contrary, allowing the criminal to speak is meant to initiate

the self-destruction of the cult of greatness to which the criminal himself may subscribe. Further, rather than demanding vengeance as he did in the intemperate passage in the *Negative Dialectic* cited above, in “Education after Auschwitz” Adorno sets out a reconstructive, rather than *lex talionis* approach. Coaxing the perpetrators into revealing their motives in broad daylight, for reasons of vanity if necessary (199), grants them a measure of redemption they do not deserve. This turn asks us to create a justice of generosity that has nothing to do with forgiveness or punishment, but consists in regenerative acts that grant those agents who had excluded themselves from humanity, and thus committed a moral suicide, a temporary membership among those they have abandoned and abused. Moral catharsis of the perpetrator, flagged as distracting and inappropriate in Anthony Lane’s review of *The Act of Killing*, is an incidental side-effect, for the real object of the film’s inquiry into atrocities is elsewhere. Even if Anwar Congo never began to choke uncontrollably in front of the camera, Oppenheimer’s film would have been just as successful in creating a space where a public counter-memory of the 1965 massacres could begin to begin.

Scandalous Adorno’s approach may seem (and we saw that Adorno’s own feelings about perpetrators were not without ambiguities), decades later it will find an important echo in the activities of Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa. When paired with the TRC’s idea of reparative justice, Adorno’s sociological reorientation of “education after Auschwitz” supplies us with the rationale needed for grasping the logic of Oppenheimer’s decision to turn the perpetrators of 1965 massacres in Indonesia into filmmakers, and show us the result.⁹

Anwar Congo, or a Portrait of the Perpetrator as a Perpetually Young Man

“Relax and Rolex”
a phrase common among
Pancasila members, cited in *The
Act of Killing*

The protagonist of the film is Anwar Congo, an elderly resident of Medan, who sports showy clothing, cheerful smile and youthful energy. He rarely appears alone in the frame, for his friends from Pancasila, a paramilitary organization always seem to be around. Like many current Indonesian officials, the leaders of Pancasila were involved in the massacres of the Communists and the Chinese that accompanied General Suharto’s coup d’état in the fall of 1965. Through no precise figures are not available, it is estimated that around five hundred thousand may have perished in the massacres.¹⁰ While Suharto “heroic struggle” against his “opponents” (the 30th of September Movement first, the Communists later) is part of national memory, the mass murders communists are not. Pancasila was formed as a youth organization aligned with Suharto’s New Order, but in the film it seems to function as a paramilitary group specializing in extortion, smuggling and intimidation. Its spirit seems continuous with the mythology of “preman” (a deformation of Dutch “freeman,” translated as “gangster” into English) which explains the eminent place the organization grants to Congo. We learn that he got involved into massacres in the days when he, an avowed “preman” himself, was scalping tickets for American movies. President Suharno’s threat to close down the distribution of American films in Indonesia was all the motivation he needed.

The film begins and ends on the roof of an office building facing the movie theater where the “preman bioskop” were running their scams. After watching the movies, Anwar and his friends would come to this roof to execute the Communists condemned to death by a voluble newspaper boss and regime loyalist, Ibrahim Sinik. With a help of a volunteer, Congo demonstrates his methods of killing with considerable bravado, highlighting his use of the wire in order to make murders less messy. He

dances around the roof a bit, and wistfully recalls how the movies, Elvis Presley musicals in particular, helped him “to kill in a happy way.” He seems utterly satisfied with his performance, and exhibits nothing but pride in his action. When we see Congo walk up to the same roof in the film’s final sequence, his persona appears to be radically different. He is filmed alone, for the director asked him to show how the murders took place again. He wanders around the roof as if lost, then begins to choke or retch uncontrollably. It is impossible to tell what is happening to him, but we can see that he is in some sort of distress. Unable to get his body under control, he descends the narrow staircase, but then pauses in the middle of a flight of stairs. He seems disoriented, lost in some sort of labyrinth. What has happened between these two scenes? What sort of space has been opened both in Anwar’s formerly self-assured existence and the viewers understanding?

Seizing upon Anwar Congos’s passion for film, the director of *The Act of Killing* invited them to recreate their glory days as freemen (“gangsters”) using the language of the American movies they loved. Anwar is enthralled with the prospect of making a popular film on an important subject, and, in one sequence, even dreams of a worldwide distribution. The local television studios and make-up artists were put at the disposal of Anwar and his co-director and life-long sidekick Herman. Congo’s friends from the Pancosila supplied logistical support for the mass scenes, including the reconstruction of the burning of the village. Joshua Oppenheimer and his crew accompany Congo off and on the set, documenting their “artistic” decisions and succeeding in capturing the spontaneous reactions of criminals to the events they are re-staging. Later on, the footage is shown to Anwar, and we are confronted with his assessment of his artistic success or failure. Unsurprisingly, re-staging past events quickly metamorphosed into re-living them, eliciting cycles of denial and rationalization. As the filming progressed, Congo and Herman kept filming more and more scenes of torture in different styles. At the same time, Congo began to be afflicted by horrific nightmares in which his past victims would come back to exact revenge as female spirits. Staging these nightmares proved an occasion for mass

amusement, especially for Herman who had considerable experience in performing female roles (he was a member of an Army theater group that had no female performers). But these experiences brought no relief to Congo; on the contrary, as the “filming” progressed, he became gloomy and dejected. Instead of exorcising his ghosts, re-enacting interrogations in the style of his favorite films seems to have multiplied the phantoms.

Who is Congo? The film gives us no direct answer. There is no attempt to categorize or explain him. He may be an execrable human being, but even then he is not one thing. The director regularly intercuts Congo’s cinematic exploits with scenes from his everyday life. Congo is a kaleidoscope: he is a veteran of the national struggle and a celebrity invited on a TV show; he is a caring grandfather eager to spend time with his grandchildren; he is practical joker who also likes a good song and a good laugh; he is an elder respected in his community; he is an actor preoccupied with how he looks on film; he is a neurotic compulsively fixing his teeth with a wire and a frequent visitor at the dentists. But since Oppneheimer does not use voice-over and lets the events unfold in front of the camera in long takes, what are we to make of these juxtapositions? What is the guiding thread connecting his mythology of the gangster as the centerpiece of his identity, the artistic choices he makes for his film (musical, cowboy film, gangster film, horror film) and his compulsive need to appear youthful, attractive, “happy”? The answer to these questions lies in a phenomenon that could be called a “flight into the cliché.”

The Splendor of Permanent Self-Creation, or Flight into the Cliché

Clichés, stock phrases, adherence to conventional, standardized codes of expression and conduct have the socially recognized function of protecting us against reality, that is, against the claim on our thinking attention that

all events and facts make by virtue of their existence.

Hannah Arendt, *The Life of Mind*

“Officialeze [*Amtzsprache*] is my only language”

Adolf Eichmann, quoted in Arendt,
Eichmann in Jerusalem

How to explain this propensity of mass murders to flee into clichés? What does attachment to a standardized, pre-approved piece of signification have to do with commission of atrocities? Clichés have an almost magic capacity to create distance and depersonalize one’s actions, making them look as socially-approved or someone else’s. Clichés permit removal of responsibility for one’s thinking or action, letting socially pre-approved language to speak for oneself, either for instrumental purpose (“if I use fancy jargon, I will get the promotion”) or purely psychological benefit (“if I use fancy jargon, people will think I am smart; I like the idea of people admiring my intelligence, therefore, I should use these words”); this removal of responsibility resulting from ceding center-stage to the social action of language itself, and placing the agent in the position of the innocent observer. During trials, Eichmann’s “debilitating” incapacity to speak but in bureaucratic jargon allowed him to shift their guilt on others and make himself look helpless against the overwhelming power incarnated in language (“since all of us used the language of final solution, others are responsible as much as I am, and may be more; in fact, I was no one, and thus not really responsible for everything”). But Eichmann was not a victim of jargon as Arendt inferred from her experience of trial (she mocked his “heroic” struggles with the German language). He was also an enthusiastic producer of the Nazi phraseology, a graphomaniac who left behind mountains of words and who went to his death practically pen in hand. He was not a victim of clichés, but their passionate, dedicated, compulsive creator. In the case of Congo, the flight into cliché appears in his overwhelming passion for Hollywood films, that, he tell us, inspired him to borrow techniques of killing (or invent his own).

The connection between mass diffusion of American culture and commission of atrocity may seem either a bizarre accident (a peculiarity of Indonesia with no wider significance) or an extreme case of the capacity of film to incite subjects to commit violent acts it depicts. I would argue that both of these interpretations of Anwar's cinephilia would be mistaken. The root of his passion for American film is the same as of Eichmann's florid logorrhea – the power of cliché to absolve the agent of responsibility, to normalize and even ennoble the acts which the agent feels are unacceptable to himself or to others, to encourage a variety of self-deceptions which may then be built up into an alternative self. Eichmann's self-perception as a misunderstood and unlucky visionary of the great Movement was entirely a product of his constant cliché-ridden verbalizing; Anwar's meticulously maintained image of the "free-man" depends on the continual involvement with the clichés of Hollywood film. When he claims that he learned technique of torture from the films, this tells us very little about cinema; but it reveals how the clichés allow someone who seeks to repudiate responsibility to keep saying "I didn't do it; the films killed all these people, and I was just playing along, caught in these acts like an actor on the screen." This is madness, of course; but it is a madness that, even though frequently involved in the commission and concealment of the acts of killing, is extremely banal.

The cumulative effect of Congo's flight into the clichés comes into focus at the only time in the film where the director intervenes into his subject's reaction. The last re-enactment we witness resorts to the aesthetics of American gangster films, and features yet another horrible interrogation that culminates in the suffocation of the victim by the wire, Congo's signature weapon. Congo acts as interrogator first, with Hermann playing the victim; then they switch roles. Forcing the executioner into the place of the victim is a brilliant conceit on the part of the director. This is a phantasy of anyone who has suffered or thinks that he did, and the cinematic power of this reversal is considerable. As Anwar's collaborators begin to suffocate him, he seems to experience discomfort. While he tries to display his usual machismo under pressure, he finds himself unable to do so. At one point, he remarks that he felt

like he died for a moment. After several takes, Anwar & co. stop the shoot. Later on, we see Congo reviewing the footage at his house. Evidently proud of his achievement, he insists on waking up his grandchildren so that they can see “grandpa being killed.” While, thankfully, grandchildren seem to lose interest in the film and walk away, Anwar seems to be transfixed by the image of himself dying on screen. In what is his only impulse to empathy in the film, he confides to the director that, while being suffocated, he could feel what his victims felt. It is at this point the director exposes the extraordinary shallowness of Congo’s reasoning and reminds him that, unlike his victims, he was only playing at dying. The peculiar horror of this moment has to do with the extraordinary price that immersion into self-constructed mythology of the gangster has exacted upon him. What horrifies is not only Congo’s mindboggling callousness, but the fact that there is apparently no limit to the neutralizing power of generic representations (such as clichés or genre films). What other moral monstrosities can these powers conjure, nurture and support? What sort of symbolic counter-environment needs to be constructed in order to deploy these powers of the symbolic to the ends of promoting reflection and autonomy, rather than a narrowly narcissistic pursuit of greatness, a trademark connecting Congo and Eichmann? It is enough that *The Act of Killing* helps us formulate these questions with the urgency they require.

The Documentary of Imagination and the Crypt of the Political

A documentary of imagination, whatever this means...

Anthony Lane, *The New Yorker*

Terror is not only dreamed, but dreams themselves are part of Terror.

As the reviewer for *The New Yorker* did not omit to mention, the director of *The Act of Killing* created a special term to describe his film, namely, a documentary of imagination. Lane's quick dismissal of the term – "a documentary of imagination, whatever this means," he writes -- shows that joining documentary and imagination does not seem intuitive; more important, it does not seem to be justified in a film bringing to the screen evidence of crimes against humanity. The issue here is normative: for occasions such as this, we need facts and explanations, not imagination. Whatever we imagine has little to do with our actions, and matters only in those cases where we appear as isolated individuals, rather than social agents, such as art or dreams, for instance. Yet, given the "insane dimension" (Adorno) that usually accompanies systematic commission of atrocities, can't we turn this argument around? Taking into account that atrocities tend to occur in the frenzy of political self-creation, would this not mean that ideological delirium and collective fetishism cannot be simply opposed to historical reality as "subjective" illusions to "objective" facts? What if atrocity itself was an affair of imagination, inasmuch as imagination *repudiates* the reality of the very things it represents? And by what measure can one distinguish *a priori* to what extent imagination enables the commission of atrocity and to what extent it serves to cover up, distort or even repress memories? Perhaps, Joshua Oppenheimer's "documentary of imagination" is nothing but a quest for such a measure, or, at the very least, a call to think our concept of imagination beyond the limits of aesthetics.¹¹

Contrary to a version of the banality of evil thesis that argues that mindlessness, thoughtlessness and absence of imagination are responsible for the acts of killing, the materials placed at our disposal by recent scholarship on the Holocaust – and by *The Act of Killing* -- show that these acts are affairs of imagination through and through.¹² As we immerse ourselves into this "hell on Earth," we

become aware that the imagination we are dealing with is not reactive or secondary, but constitutive and *symbolic*, in Claude Lefort's sense of the term. Whether we are dealing with Eichmann the writer or Anwar Congo the film director, we are struck by the baroque, over-elaborate nature of their imaginings, their florid articulations, their compulsive, mechanical rhythms that seem to do violence to their purported authors. This sort of imagination does not seem to reflect the world the subject inhabits, or probe for a hidden "spiritual" dimensions in it; rather, the imagination of the perpetrator does not cease to inaugurate a World in which his acts would seem significant, necessary, heroic and glorious; and it is only by sustaining this imaginary world that the executioner can commit, remember, and survive the unthinkable. The costs of this survival are considerable, and it is not least of *The Act of Killing's* achievements to show them to the viewer. Recording Anwar Congo's torment does evoke sense of poetic justice ("at least the perpetrator suffers from the phantoms of his victims"), but that effect is incidental to the film's avowed purpose: to display the act of killing in all of its psychic, symbolic, sociological and political ramifications, no holds barred, whatever "it may be or might have been."¹³

Besides conceptual reasons to take "documentary of imagination" seriously outlined above, *The Act of Killing* also had a precise historical motivation for encouraging its subjects to engage into improvised filmmaking on the subject of their "glorious political deeds." In a manner that recalls Leni Riefenstahl's creation of *The Triumph of the Will* (1935) for NSDAP, or the uses of Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1927) in the USSR, Suharto's New Order also produced a cinematic fetish of its own, *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* (1984), a state-produced fiction film that narrates the heroic origins of the regime.

A lengthy, 213 minute epic, *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* presents the official version of the September 30th events and designates *Partai Komunis Indonesia* (PKI, the Indonesian Communist Party) as the instigators of the behind the '30th September Movement,' and goes on to portray them as

ruthless killers of civilians that had to be stopped.¹⁴ The General Suharto's role is, naturally, intervene into the bloody havoc created by the Communists thugs, and restore order, avenge the innocents and bring lasting peace and rescue the nation from havoc. Like Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* was created retrospectively with the aim of shaping the identity of the regime while appearing to be recalling its origins. Exploiting the alchemy of the cinematic medium, the film consists in the fictional enunciation of pseudo-historical assertions which thereby become the content of the official memory and the proof of its authenticity. Just as *The Battleship Potemkin* used techniques of montage in order to shock the viewer, systematically inducing confusion of the emotional impact of the image with its documentary truth, *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* also resorted high production values and ambitious film techniques (point-of-view angles, lurid color, montage, discordant music) in order to impress upon the audience the living reality of the horror from which the regime rescued them. Both the Soviet and the Indonesian film deploy the capacity of the cinematic medium to inflict virtual trauma in order to implant pseudo-historical memories; through repeated viewings, these prosthetic memories become the founding blocks for the melding disparate ethnic groups and social strata into a unified national consciousness, or "the people." Since *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* was a required annual viewing in Indonesian secondary schools, the new collective could be built and rebuilt each year through the memories of viewing this horrific film, as one grows up, and thus systematically mistake one's ability to explain or tolerate its cinematic horrors for gaining a better understanding of nation's history.¹⁵ Thereby, the capacity of film to inflict virtual trauma and to trigger the rationalizations that seek to master it became a foundational force in Suharto's project of creating a new national unity.

It comes as no surprise to learn that the state-produced film said nothing about the real massacres of the Communists and the Chinese that took place at the regime's inception in 1965. But, significantly, the film does not suppress this foundational act of killing entirely. Instead of erasing the atrocities, *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* projected the acts of killing upon the "blood-thirsty Communist

thugs” who had to be stopped. By means of this displacement, Suharto’s regime implicitly justified the commission of the very murders whose memory it was eager to suppress. In a perverted logic of disavowal, the film authorized those involved in the events of 1965 to keep saying to themselves something along the lines of “We didn’t commit atrocities, the Communists did; but even if we did kill the Communists indiscriminately, we had to do it, since they were Evil and had to be stopped.” Thereby, the imaginary crimes of the Communists permitted the perpetrators to heroicize the real crimes which the official history continued to deny.

While *The Battleship Potemkin* was only one of the pieces of the mythology of the “Great October Revolution,” it appears that, in virtue of its inclusion in the state-mandated curriculum, *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* has been the primary initiation rite for the entire country. This attempt to derive historical identity from virtual trauma, to use film as generator of pseudo-memories which can then be mobilized for production of loyalty or conformity among citizens, such direct intertwining of the powers of the medium and the needs of the criminal state to expunge the oppressive memory of its founding crimes is quite unprecedented. Sensitive to the singular symbiosis between medium and power in Indonesia, *The Act of Killing* cites *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* repeatedly and to a great effect. The director is clearly aware of the role of *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* played in formation of the official historical sense of Indonesian nationhood under Suharto. As the film unfolds, the viewer realizes that *The Act of Killing* is meant to function as a long overdue riposte to *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI*.

In fact, *The Act of Killing* can be understood as a point-by-point negation of *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI*’s ideological cunning. While *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* is fictionalized account of “true events,” *The Act of Killing* is explicitly artificial, non-transparent attempt to come to terms with the suppressed past; while *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* is “true to life,” *The Act of Killing* is true to the medium of documentary film; while *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* dramatizes the past “as it really was,” *The Act of*

Killing stresses the resistance that the event participants to the facts they acknowledge, but whose meaning they desperately wish to control; while *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* seeks to impose the same mnemonic identity on all citizens-viewers, *The Act of Killing* emphasizes the different ways in which *Pencosila* killers repudiate their crimes; finally and most importantly, while *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* draws on the notion of recollection as the total recall of historical truth, the methodology of *The Act of Killing* asserts that re-enactment, rather than *anamnesis*, provides the key to grasping the political constitution of a community which is Indonesia today. By matching the emotional impact of its toxic predecessor, *The Act of Killing* attempts nothing less than to extract the poisonous fetish-memories from the collective mind of Indonesia, and awaken its viewers to reparative remembrance and, perhaps, the regeneration of the political.

“The Burden of These Events”: The Act of Killing and *The Act of Killing*

It means, rather, examining and bearing consciously the burden that events have placed upon us – neither denying their existence nor submitting meekly to their weight as though everything that in fact happened could not have happened otherwise. Comprehension, in short, means the unpremeditated, attentive facing up to, and resisting to, reality – whatever it may be or might have been.

Arendt, *The Origins of
Totalitarianism*

Joshua Oppenheimer’s film could hardly have been more felicitously named. Though its title evokes death and dying, it refuses to deal with this subject abstractly. His topic is the act of killing, i.e., bringing about a violent death of another human being. As the film begins, the intertitles inform us what sort of killing is to be discussed: an organized, political, mass killing of helpless civilians in the interest of a political cause. Spectator thereby is forced to confront the specificity of the case at hand. This act of

killing is not murder, a crime against the law; rather, this act of killing must be recognized as atrocity, and hence something different. It is an act that occurs outside of the law; an act that, because it involves state structures, perverts the very idea of jurisprudence as a function of the State; an act that does not upset the law but ignores it; an act that does not strike against the coercive force of the law for the sake of private satisfaction (as in theft or blackmail), but strikes against humanity for the sake of the new law of the new state. With horror, the spectator of *The Act of Killing* recognizes this “act of killing” belongs to the category of atrocity, with all the inevitable questions this categorization brings: no, not again; no, not there too, yes, again and again; yes, there too. The unhappy pendulum of these thoughts forces upon the spectator something historians of the modern era had known at least since Arendt and Adorno. The commission of atrocity, the “act of killing” in the sense described above, does not express isolated pathologies of political modernity, but belongs to one of its recurrent manifestations.

Western art certainly did not fail to register the emergence of the act of killing as a political instrument, rather than juridical procedure (death penalty) or military phenomenon (mass slaughter) and to point to this newness in a way that disrupts the conventional forms of mourning. Goya’s drawings of French atrocities in Spain, Daumier’s political caricatures and the photographs of Paris after the mass executions of the Communards in 1871 all evade the theological tropes of martyrdom for a good cause, and force the viewer to abandon the security of the metaphysics of death for a far more disquieting confrontation with the new political reality acquired by the act of killing. What political ruptures do these exorbitant acts seek to heal? What logic makes these acts not only plausible, but necessary? What social mechanisms underwrite these violations of the codes of military honor by the subjects who, presumably, held them in high regard? What impact do such disruptions in the symbolic framework of society – after all, murder is a sin and, post-treaty of Westphalia, the law is the foundation of warfare -- have in the long run? These artworks do not supply any answers to these questions. No pre-given symbolic or allegorical meanings emerge from the perceptual schemata of these works. They

do no more and no less than bear the “burden of history” in Arendt’s sense, and thus make this burden perceptible; for a brief moment, they may even make us suspect that this burden is ours.

We may think we know how to mourn a loss of an individual human being; but what are we to do with a politically calculated, meticulously justified killing *en masse*? I would argue that Oppenheimer’s *The Act of Killing* belongs to this tradition of the phenomenology of atrocity. But the real significance of his work has to do with the ways in which he mobilizes the resources specific to the genre of the documentary so as to go beyond the tradition of politically-aware art to which *The Act of Killing* belongs. For no other genre possesses the ability to stage the interplay of spontaneous and deliberate reaction, or, to put it in Arendt’s terms, “unpremeditated, attentive facing up to” and “resistance” with quite the same intensity as a well-executed documentary; and, consequently, no other genre faces quite the same possibility of abysmal failure or even unintentional perversion of its own attempt to know. Arendt’s statement does make something else clear – a proper commemoration of atrocity goes beyond establishing historical record (which remains a necessary task, needless to say). The point behind Arendt’s puzzling, equivocal apposition to “reality” -- “whatever it is or might have been” -- seems to be the following: the absence of record should not stop this commemoration, nor the presence of historical records could ever exhaust or complete this task on its own; the political value of the burden of “these events” always goes beyond documentation of the acts of killing, and entails a regeneration of the political. These intolerable events demand a renewal of the techniques of commemoration and, perhaps, a search for a catharsis without forgiveness.

The Missing Subject of Human Rights and the Cosmopolitanism of the Stranger

In this way, the concept of emancipation can only remain effectual if it is though iteratively: as a constant challenge to reduce or bridge the hiatus still existing between what is legally and intellectually necessary, what can be legally

formulated, and what is socially and politically practicable”

Reinhard Koselleck, “The Limits of Emancipation”

This is how Hannah Arendt describes the status of human subjectivity relative to social practice in *The Human Condition*: “Somebody began it and is its subject in the twofold sense, namely its actor and its sufferer, but nobody is its author” (184). Something similar can be said about the subject of human rights, which is neither legal (since there is no force that can guarantee these rights, and without force, there is no law in the traditional sense) nor historical in an uncomplicated sense (what type of history do the subjects of human rights belong to? National? Legal? Military? Global?). There is no simple way in which one can enjoy human rights or bear them as attributes or entitlements of one’s legal person. From our history, however, we do know that “human rights” tend to appear there where they have been violated and tend to “belong” to those who lost them, often along with their lives. A singular legal construction, “human rights” seems to be a process without an author. The state, of course, is expected to be this author or, at least, to act like one. But, as the thirtieth article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights from 1948 stipulates, the state can always become the violator of the very rights it has vowed to protect: “Nothing in this Declaration may be interpreted as implying for any State, group or person any right to engage in any activity or to perform any act aimed at the destruction of any of the rights and freedoms set forth herein.” ; the non-governmental institutions may be agents for “human rights,” but they cannot author or guarantee them in any way; and the subjects who are supposed to possess these rights always seem to have lost them.

This peculiar “authorlessness,” the orphaned or ghostly status of human rights, comes to the fore in *The Act of Killing* when Adi Zulkadry, Congo’s chief collaborator in 1965 and now a successful state bureaucrat, decides to stop collaborating with Anwar in the making of his film. Dramatically

speaking, Adi Zulkadry is a direct counterpoint to Anwar Congo: while the latter radiates perpetual youthfulness, the former is immersed in the stagnation of the interminable middle age; while the latter brims with local color, the former projects a generic appearance of Westernness; while the latter exudes demonic and mischievous playfulness, the former speaks with a time-tested, respectable, calculating wisdom of a man who had learned how to put the lessons of experience to a good use. This wise persona vanishes only when Zulkadry suddenly reverses his previous views and begins to question Anwar's wishful notion that the film they are making will be ideologically useful to the country, and quits production. All of a sudden, Zulkadry, becomes the advocate of silence: "We need to hide the truth," he now says. Cornered by the director in the car on the way to fly out of Medan, Zulkadry becomes defensive and openly mocks the idea that he can be prosecuted by "the Hague" (International Criminal Court). On the one hand, he admits that his crimes are real, but argues that ICC was established too late for him to be prosecutable. On the other hand, he denies that his actions were crimes at all. To defend this view, he invokes the U.S. invasion of Iraq. In both cases, Zulkadry submits, history is being written by the winners. This is the way of the world, he implies, for the winners get to choose what counts as "crime against humanity" and what counts as "regime change"; for one such power (the US, and, by extension, Joshua Oppenheimer, a "nosy American") to prosecute another can be nothing but hypocrisy or just another way to impose its will on others. In other words, in Zulkadry's mind, "human rights" is just another way for the U.S. to exercise its global hegemony. At this rather tense moment, the film viewers feel fortunate not to be in Joshua Oppenheimer's shoes. What can one say in response to such shallow and self-serving relativism? What does one appeal to in the effort to go beyond it? How to convey the notion that that two crimes can never be made to cancel each other out, and need to be investigated separately? Dispiriting though it is, this scene has the merit of showing that "human rights" have no determinate historical reality that can anchor them where they are needed most; that making questions such as these comprehensible, or exposing the equivocations those who ask for "human

rights” regularly face, may turn out to be all that the “human rights” can achieve in Medan, for the time being.

In addition to eliciting and recording the words and acts of Adi Zulkadry, Joshua Oppenheimer’s film also casts “Adi” as a character with a specific function within the documentary scene *The Act of Killing* constructs for its audience. More than an exhibit in the gallery of Indonesian horrors, Adi’s function is to mediate between the audience and the “documentary events” unfolding in front of it. What does it mean to call “Adi” a mediator? I have in mind the use of techniques of editing in order to make the spectator not just to see Adi Zulkadry as a historically-existing individual from Indonesia, but also to see through him, that is, to use him as a medium through which the subject matter of the film can be seized upon in a manner which is native to the viewer. In a manner that is overtly disruptive, the director intercuts the scenes of re-enactment and production debates among former members of the paramilitary with tableaux of “Adi” visiting a local Western style air-conditioned mall. We see him staring at merchandise; looking at the sales girls selling fridges and vacations; we see him looking at his daughter who is busy with her smart phone. While the character of Anwar is exotic, Adi’s lifeworld is instantly recognizable to the Western viewer. These malls do not feel alien or remote. Or, rather, their remoteness and alienness, the mental paralysis conveyed by Adi’s face, is something very familiar. The editing of the film seems to insist on the significance of these scenes that seem extraneous to the major plot line of the film, i.e. the mental effects of re-enacting crimes upon perpetrators. These tableaux work to break down the distance built up by the exuberant foreignness of the Indonesia of Anwar and his sidekick Herman. They place Adi into the world that could also be ours; they show that in Indonesia Western life-style serves as a protective blanket against suppressed past. This kaleidoscope of distractions, though meaningless in themselves (as Adi’s lack of enthusiasm clearly shows), nonetheless allow the subject to keep “moving forward.” The Western viewer cannot but recognize the state of mental lethargy induced by abundance of commodities and thus can no longer relate to Adi as utterly

alien. In this way, the viewers own lethargy becomes somewhat uncanny, for what memories or actions does it serve to suppress? In what way the dull fascination of the malls, brightly illuminated, self-enclosed spaces where nothing can take place, contributes to the sense of the irrelevance of one's desires to history? In what way does it disable any sense that desires may not be individual and short-term, but collective and long-term endeavors too? In what way does the self-sufficient experience of the mall become a machine for the elimination and devaluation of the historical dimension of experience? To what extent is the mall a metaphor for spontaneous, impersonal repression of history by consumer capitalism? No one who had to sit through these languishing portraits of Adi or to occupy the place on the other end of his fatigued, vapid gaze, can avoid feeling the pressure of such questions. In this regard, *The Act of Killing* contains a minor documentary miracle. When we first see Adi Zulkadry arrive in Medan, he walks off the plane wearing a designer T-shirt clearly meant to signify his social success through its reference to Western fashion. In contrast to the colorful flamboyance of Anwar's "Hawaiian" shirts, Adi's black T-shirt bears large lettering in Helvetica. The word spelled out by his T-shirt is "Apathetic."

While no one had done more to awaken us to the implications of atrocity, Arendt's defeatism about responding to these events is striking. In a famous passage in *The Human Condition*, she writes: "This is the true hallmark of those offenses which, since Kant, we call 'radical evil' and about whose nature so little is known, even to us who have been exposed to one of their rare outbursts on the public scene. All we know is that we can neither punish nor forgive such offenses and they therefore transcend the realm of human affairs and potentiality of human power, both of which they radically destroy wherever they make their appearance"(241). While legal, retributive justice may never supply a satisfying response to the acts of killing, does this mean that thereby the "potentiality of human action" is exhausted? Perhaps, it is not the potentiality of human action which is exhausted in the knowledge of these events, but only the potential of *lex talionis*. These events can also be seen as demanding that we

create other forms of justice, a kind of justice that neither punishes nor forgives; perhaps, while punishment and reconciliation undeniably have their place, they do not exhaust the possibilities of justice. Perhaps, suffering can be commemorated without being occulted or reduced to a moral precept. This is the hope that *The Act of Killing* allows us to have.

In *The Act of Killing*, Joshua Oppenheimer managed to create a documentary space that, rather than recording history “as it really was,” catalyzes the psychic underside of repressed history into manifestation. His film has successfully parted ways with the two ideals of documentation that seem contradictory: setting down things as they really happened or catching them on the run. This contradiction is an apparent one, since both ideals evince the same fundamental commitment to authenticity and transparency, while choosing conflicting means of securing them. Instead of focusing on the *contents* of confessions or concealments, *The Act of Killing* exposes us to the *events* of confessing and concealing unrelieved of their almost intolerable ambiguity. This film does not prescribe a way of thinking about atrocity, nor does it seek to overwhelm us with horror. Instead, it acts as a mediator between our distressed spectatorial selves and a politics of counter-memory we have scarcely begun to define. This film shows us that societies may become so absorbed by maintaining their political crypts and warding off the phantoms trapped therein that only a stranger can awaken them from sleepwalking into disaster. The politics of counter-memory thus requires hospitality to the stranger because it relies on her as a stand-in for the always missing “author” of human rights. Any society where justice does not cease not to happen needs the kind of stranger that the oblique filmmaker of *The Act of Killing* was able to conjure for us.

Notes

¹ “Grim Tidings,” *The New Yorker*, July 22nd, 2013. I would like to thank Pacific Basic Research Center of Soka University of America for supporting this project with a Summer Research Grant.

² Robert Antelme, *L'Espèce humaine*, 23.

³ For a critical examination of the aporias of human rights, please see Chapter Nine of Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* as well as the essays by Christoph Menke, Werner Hamacher and Jacques Rancière.

⁴ For a recent version of this type of controversy, please see Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images Above All*. It was brought upon by the public exhibition of the only known photographs that were taken by the victims from inside a death camp, Auschwitz, in this case.

⁵ The 1948 removal of Hitchcock-directed film about Nazi concentration and death camps from concentration is a good indicator of this trend. As Bettina Stangneth demonstrates in abundant detail, former Nazi operatives have been integral to the security structure of post-war Europe. It was not until late 1950s when the prosecutions of Nazi criminals began to take place in Federal Republic of Germany, and even then they remained highly selective. Even though Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* was published in German in 1951, the book was not widely discussed. Heidegger, for one, simply ignored Karl Jaspers suggestion to look at the “masterpiece” (Jasper’s words) by his former student. For crucial historical details and archival documentation, see Stangneth, *Eichmann Before Jerusalem*.

⁶ Zygmunt Bauman has re-examined this connection in *Modernity and the Holocaust* and pointed out Arendt’s lapses of judgment.

⁷ Peter Berkowitz, “The Pearl Diver,” 49.

⁸ Didi-Hubermann cites the forty-thousand figure in *Images in Spite of All*, 24.

⁹ For a concise overview of the project of regenerative justice, see Barbara Cassin, “Removing the Perpetuity of Hatred: on South Africa as a model example,” *International Review of the Red Cross* 88.862 (2006), 235-244. In the final report, the TRC states its goals in the following terms: “Restorative justice is concerned not so much with punishment, as with correcting an imbalance, restoring broken relationships—with healing, harmony and reconciliation—such justice focuses on the experience of the victims, hence the importance of reparation” (*Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, Vol. 1 [Cape Town: Juta, 1998], 9). Priscilla B. Hayner retraces a history of the truth commissions in *Unspeakable Truths: Confronting State Terror and Atrocity* (New York: Routledge, 2001). On restorative justice, see W. J. Dickey, “Forgiveness and Crime: The Possibilities of Restorative Justice,” *Exploring Forgiveness*, ed. R. D. Enright and J. North (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 106–120. Mark Amstutz glosses the distinction between retributive and restorative justice as follows: “Retributive justice, which demands that offenses must be redressed, is expressed through reparations, purges and trials. Restorative justice, the alternative theory, emphasizes the restoration of community through amnesty, forgiveness and truth-telling.” (Mark Amstutz, *The Healing of Nations: The Promise*

and Limits of Political Forgiveness [Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005], 18). For an incisive structural analysis of past prosecutions of the war criminals, see Jon Elster's *Closing the Books: Transitional Justice in Historical Perspective*.

¹⁰ For current historiography of Suharto's *coup d'état*, see Merle C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since 1200*, 318-21; Adrian Vickers, *A History of Modern Indonesia*, 156; Drakeley, *The History of Indonesia*, 110; Jean Gelman Taylor, *Indonesia: Peoples and Histories*, 356-7; Wood, *Official History in Modern Indonesia*, 124-5. I would like to thank Handrio Nurhan for his help in locating these sources and for his assistance in helping me and my students understand Indonesian history better.

¹¹ Gilles Deleuze outlined the path such rethinking may take in his *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*: "disavowal in general is not just the form of imagination; it is nothing less than the foundation of imagination, which suspends reality and establishes the ideal in the suspended world. Disavowal and suspense are thus the very essence of imagination, and determine its specific object: the ideal" (128). Through imagination, the subject escapes the claims of others, and places them into a suspended world that his actions inaugurate and maintain. The repudiation of the moral universe and the fetishistic insistence on the ideal are thus part of the activity of imagination. Consistent with Adorno's analysis of the onset of Nazi rule in Germany, the decadence or attrition of the symbolic, the weakening of symbolic ties, is a precondition (not just a consequence) for the primacy of imagination in totalitarian regimes. In other words, the subject must already experience the world as unbinding, weak, slipping or disintegrating, and thus feels that he can disavow its claims, i.e. his own conscience, with impunity. In order to commit unforgivable acts, the subject must already live the impunity he may or may not enjoy afterwards; to be able to disavow the atrocities later on, or minimize them through rationalization ("we did it because we had to"), one must have already repudiated the reality of what one does when one does it, to be able to live one's acts as if they are not happening, as if in a movie, as Congo would put it. This secret complicity between imagination and disavowal became a staple of the Suharto's New Order, as we will see in the "Documentary of Imagination, or the Crypt of the Political" section of this paper. The relation between imagination and disavowal is reciprocal: imagination disavows the claims of reality, and thus liberates the subject from bodily dislikes or claims of conscience; disavowal, in its turn, requires that the subject maintains absolute commitment to the imagined ideal, continues to embellish it at a frenzied pace, constantly extol its virtues, so as to convince others, but mainly himself, that the repudiation was worth it, that one's old body has been fully overcome, that the claims of conscience no longer apply, that others cannot truly understand one's motives and commitments; this type of subject must either continue to give birth to himself with every act, or face the return of the repressed; hence, the extraordinary role of rallies, music, parade, sports and film assume in totalitarian regimes: they distract the masses from the horrors visited upon them by their masters, while allowing the masses to convince themselves that these horrors were worth it, or will be so in the long run. In some fundamental sense, living in a totalitarian regime is all about learning to use one's imagination for the sake of disavowal. Those who do not, must leave.

¹² For this version of “banality of evil” idea, see Arendt, *Eichmann*, 48-53. Once again, one would do well to contrast Arendt’s analysis with Stangneth’s examination of Willem Sassen tapes and the full range of Eichmann’s copious writings, if that is the right word.

¹³ I am alluding to the quotation from Arendt used as in epigraph to the “The Burden of These Events” section of this paper.

¹⁴ The film is available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ddYExsNtX6w>. For a in-depth discussion of the film, see Ariel Heryanto, "Screening the 1965 Violence."

¹⁵ On the annual viewings of the film, see Roosa, *Pretext for Mass Murder*, 10. In a personal conversation, Handrio Nurhan has recalled watching the film on State TV, and the traumatic impact it had. In his own words, he found the experience of viewing it “long, arduous, violent, and terrifying.”

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