



# THE LOOK OF SILENCE

**A film by Joshua Oppenheimer**

**Executive Produced by Errol Morris and Werner Herzog**

**Produced by Final Cut for Real**

Awards and Official Selection

Grand Jury Prize - Venice Film Festival 2014  
Critics Prize (FIPRESCI) - Best Film of Venice Film Festival 2014  
European Critics Prize (FEDEORA) - Best European and Mediterranean Film of Venice Film Festival 2014  
Online Critics Prize (Mouse d'Oro) - Best Film of Venice Film Festival 2014  
Human Rights Nights Award - Venice Film Festival 2014  
Best World Documentary (Cinephile Prize) - Busan International Film Festival 2014  
Grand Prize (DOX Award) - CPH:DOX 2014  
Best Documentary - Denver Film Festival 2014  
Prize of the Danish Arts Council - 2014  
Don Quixote Prize - Tromsø International Film Festival 2015  
Audience Award - Angers Premiers Plans 2015  
True Life Fund Recipient - True/False Film Festival 2015  
Peace Film Award - Berlin International Film Festival 2015  
Best Documentary - Danish Film Academy Award (Robert Prize) 2015  
Best Documentary - Danish Film Critics' Award (Bodil Prize) 2015  
Audience Award: Festival Favorite - SXSW Film Festival 2015

2014 / 103 min / not yet rated

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# SYNOPSIS

*The Look of Silence* is Joshua Oppenheimer's powerful companion piece to the Oscar®-nominated *The Act of Killing*. Through Oppenheimer's footage of perpetrators of the 1965 Indonesian genocide, a family of survivors discovers how their son was murdered, as well as the identities of the killers. The documentary focuses on the youngest son, an optometrist named Adi, who decides to break the suffocating spell of submission and terror by doing something unimaginable in a society where the murderers remain in power: he confronts the men who killed his brother and, while testing their eyesight, asks them to accept responsibility for their actions. This unprecedented film initiates and bears witness to the collapse of fifty years of silence.

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

### Joshua Oppenheimer

*The Act of Killing* exposed the consequences for all of us when we build our everyday reality on terror and lies. *The Look of Silence* explores what it is like to be a survivor in such a reality. There is a scene in *The Look of Silence*, filmed in January 2004, which is the genesis of both films: two former death squad leaders lead me along a road and down to the banks of North Sumatra's Snake River, re-enacting with apparent glee how they helped the army kill 10,500 people at a single clearing on the riverbank. At the end, they pose for snapshots—souvenirs of what for them was a happy and memorable afternoon out. Experiencing one of the most traumatic days of my life, I knew I would make two companion films.

What chilled me was not the facts of the genocide, nor even the boasting—an obvious manifestation of the killers' impunity and on-going power. Rather, what terrified me was the fact that the two men had never met before, yet seemed to be reading from a shared script. They both felt that boasting was the acceptable way of speaking about these events. I realized that the boasting was systemic.

So I decided that neither film would be a historical documentary about the events of 1965 per se. Instead, both would explore the *present-day legacy* of the genocide. One film—what became *The Act of Killing*—would explore the stories victorious perpetrators tell themselves so that they can live with themselves, and the consequences of these lies on their own humanity and on society. The other film would tackle an equally important question: what happens to a whole society and its people when they live in fear and silence for fifty years. That film would be *The Look of Silence*.

Making any film about survivors of genocide is to walk into a minefield of clichés, most of which serve to create a heroic (if not saintly) protagonist with whom we can identify, thereby offering the false reassurance that, in the moral catastrophe of atrocity, we are nothing like the

perpetrators. But presenting survivors as saintly in order to reassure ourselves that we are “good” is to use survivors to deceive ourselves. It is an insult to the experience of the survivors, and does nothing to help us understand what it means to survive atrocity, what it means to live a life shattered by mass violence, and to be silenced by terror. To navigate this minefield of clichés, we have had to explore silence itself.

The result, *The Look of Silence*, is, I hope, a poem about a silence borne of terror—a poem not only about the necessity of breaking that silence, but also about the trauma that comes when silence is broken. Maybe the film is a monument to silence—a reminder that although we want to move on, look away and think of other things, nothing will make whole what has been broken. Nothing will wake the dead. We must stop, acknowledge the lives destroyed, and strain to listen to the silence that follows.

## ***THE LOOK OF SILENCE***

### **Story of the Production**

I first went to Indonesia in 2001 to help oil palm plantation workers make a film documenting and dramatizing their struggle to organize a union in the aftermath of the US-supported Suharto dictatorship, under which unions were illegal. In the remote plantation villages of North Sumatra, one could hardly perceive that military rule had officially ended three years earlier.

The conditions I encountered were deplorable. Women working on the plantation were forced to spray herbicide without protective clothing. The mist would enter their lungs and then their bloodstreams, destroying their liver tissue. The women would fall ill, and many would die in their forties. When they protested their conditions, the Belgian-owned company would hire paramilitary thugs to threaten them, and sometimes physically attack them.

Fear was the biggest obstacle they faced in organizing a union. The Belgian company could get away with poisoning its employees because the workers were afraid. I quickly learned the source of this fear: the plantation workers had a large and active union until 1965, when their parents and grandparents were accused of being “communist sympathizers” (simply for being in the union) and put into concentration camps, where they were exploited as slave labor and ultimately murdered by the army and civilian death squads.

In 2001, the killers not only enjoyed complete impunity, but they and their protégés still dominated all levels of government, from the plantation village to the parliament. Survivors lived in fear that the massacres could happen again at any time.

After we completed the film (*The Globalisation Tapes*, 2002), the survivors asked us to return as quickly as possible to make another film about the source of their fear—that is, a film about what it's like for survivors to live surrounded by the men who murdered their loved ones, men still in positions of power.

We returned almost immediately, in early 2003, and began investigating one 1965 murder that the plantation workers spoke of frequently. The victim's name was Ramli, and his name was used almost as a synonym for the killings in general.

I came to understand the reason this particular murder was so often discussed: there were witnesses. It was undeniable. Unlike the hundreds of thousands of victims who disappeared at night from concentration camps, Ramli's death was public. There were witnesses to his final moments, and the killers left his body in the oil palm plantation, less than two miles from his parents' home. Years later, the family was able to surreptitiously erect a gravestone, though they could only visit the grave in secret.

Survivors and ordinary Indonesians alike would talk about "Ramli," I think, because his fate was grim evidence of what had happened to all the others, and to the nation as a whole. Ramli was proof that the killings, no matter how taboo, had, in fact, occurred. His death verified for the villagers the horrors that the military regime threatened them into pretending had never occurred, yet threatened to unleash again. To speak of "Ramli" and his murder was to pinch oneself to make sure one is awake, a reminder of the truth, a commemoration of the past, a warning for the future. For survivors and the public on the plantation, remembering "Ramli" was to acknowledge the source of their fear—and thus a necessary first step to overcoming it.

And so, when I returned in early 2003, it was inevitable that Ramli's case would come up often. The plantation workers quickly sought out his family, introducing me to Ramli's dignified mother, Rohani, his ancient but playful father, Rukun, and his siblings—including the youngest, Adi, an optician, born after the killings.

Rohani thought of Adi as a replacement for Ramli. She had Adi so she could continue to live, and Adi has lived with that burden his whole life. Like children of survivors all across Indonesia, Adi grew up in a family officially designated "politically unclean," impoverished by decades of extortion by local military officials, and traumatized by the genocide.

Because Adi was born after the killings, he was not afraid to speak out, to demand answers. I believe he gravitated to my filmmaking as a way of understanding what his family had been through, a way of expressing and overcoming a terror everybody around him had been too afraid to acknowledge.

I befriended Adi at once and together we began gathering other survivors' families in the region. They would come together and tell stories, and we would film. For many, it was the first time they had publicly spoken about what happened. On one occasion, a survivor arrived at Ramli's parents' home, trembling with fear, terrified that if the police discovered what we were doing, she would be arrested and forced into slave labor. Yet she came because she was determined to testify. Each time a motorcycle or car would pass, we would stop filming, hiding what equipment we could. Subject to decades of economic apartheid, survivors rarely could afford more than a bicycle, so the sound of a motor meant an outsider was passing.

The Army, which is stationed in every village in Indonesia, quickly found out what we were doing and threatened the survivors, including Adi's siblings, not to participate in the film. The survivors urged me, "Before you give up and go home, try to film the perpetrators. They may tell you how they killed our relatives." I did not know if it was safe to approach the killers, but when I did I found all of them to be boastful, immediately recounting the grisly details of the killings, often with smiles on their faces, in front of their families, even their small grandchildren. The contrast between survivors being forced into silence and perpetrators boastfully recounting stories far more incriminating than anything the survivors could have told made me feel as though I'd wandered into Germany 40 years after the Holocaust, only to find the Nazis still in power.

When I showed these testimonials to those survivors who wanted to see it, including Adi and Ramli's other siblings, everybody said, more or less: "You are on to something terribly important. Keep filming the perpetrators, because anybody who sees this will be forced to acknowledge the rotten heart of the regime the killers have built." From that point on, I felt entrusted by the survivors and human rights community to accomplish work that they could not safely do themselves: film the perpetrators. All of them would enthusiastically invite me to the places they killed, and launch into spontaneous demonstrations of how they killed. They would complain afterwards that they had not thought to bring along a machete to use as a prop, or a friend to play a victim. One day, early in this process, I met the leader of the death squad on the plantation where we had made *The Globalisation Tapes*. He and a fellow executioner invited me to a clearing on the banks of Snake River, a spot where he had helped murder 10,500 people. Suddenly, I realized he was telling me how he had killed Ramli. I had stumbled across one of Ramli's killers.

I told Adi about this encounter, and he and other family members asked to see the footage. That was how they learned the details of Ramli's death.

For the next two years, from 2003–2005, I filmed every perpetrator I could find across North Sumatra, working from death squad to death squad up the chain of command, from the countryside to the city. Anwar Congo, the man who would become the main character in *The Act of Killing*, was the 41st perpetrator I filmed.

I spent the next five years shooting *The Act of Killing*, and throughout the process Adi would ask to see the material we were filming. He would watch as much as I could find time to show him. He was transfixed.

Perpetrators on film normally deny their atrocities (or apologize for them), because by the time filmmakers reach them they have been removed from power, their actions condemned and expiated. Here I was filming perpetrators of genocide who won, who built a regime of terror founded on the celebration of genocide, and who remain in power. They have not been forced to admit what they did was wrong. It is in this sense that *The Act of Killing* is not a documentary about a genocide 50 years ago. It is an exposé of a present-day regime of fear. The film is not a historical narrative. It is a film about history itself, about the lies victors tell to justify their actions,

and the effects of those lies; it is a film about an unresolved traumatic past that continues to haunt the present.

I knew from the start of my journey that there was another, equally urgent film to make, also about the present. *The Act of Killing* is haunted by the absent victims—the dead. Almost every painful passage culminates abruptly in a haunted and silent tableau, an empty, often ruined landscape, inhabited by a single lost, lonely figure. Time stops. There is a rupture in the film's point of view, an abrupt shift to silence, a commemoration of the dead, and the lives pointlessly destroyed. I knew that I would make another film, one where we step into those haunted spaces and feel viscerally what it is like for the survivors forced to live there, forced to build lives under the watchful eyes of the men who murdered their loved ones, and remain powerful. That film is *The Look of Silence*.

Apart from the older footage from 2003–2005 that Adi watches, we shot *The Look of Silence* in 2012, after editing *The Act of Killing* but before releasing it—after which I knew I could no longer safely return to Indonesia. We worked closely with Adi and his parents, who had become, along with my anonymous Indonesian crew, like an extended family to me.

Adi spent years studying footage of perpetrators. He would react with shock, sadness and outrage. He wanted to make sense of that experience. Meanwhile, his children were in school, being taught that what had happened to them—enslavement, torture, murder, decades of political apartheid—all of this was their fault, instilling them and other survivors' children with shame. Adi was deeply affected—and angered—by the boasting of the perpetrators, his parents' trauma and fear and the brainwashing of his children. Rather than pick up where we left off in 2003, gathering survivors together to recount their experiences, Adi wanted to meet the men involved with his brother's murder. By introducing himself to them as the brother of their victim, he hoped they would be forced to acknowledge that they killed human beings.

For a victim to confront a perpetrator in Indonesia is all but unimaginable, as one can see from *The Act of Killing*. I set out to do something unprecedented: make a film where victims confront perpetrators while the perpetrators still hold power. The confrontations were dangerous. When we'd meet more powerful perpetrators, we would bring only Adi and my Danish crew, cinematographer Lars Skree and producer Signe Byrge Sørensen. Adi would come with no ID card. We would empty all numbers from our telephones and bring a second car we could switch to minutes after leaving, making it harder for the perpetrators to send police or thugs to follow us. But none of the confrontations ended violently, largely due to Adi's patience and empathy, and the fact that the perpetrators were not quite sure how to react to us because they'd known me from years before.

Still, the confrontations were tense. Again and again, Adi says the unsayable, leaving the audience to feel what it is like to live as a survivor, and to perceive the contours of an oppressive silence borne of fear.

# THE RELEASE OF *THE LOOK OF SILENCE* IN INDONESIA

The first Indonesian screenings of *The Act of Killing* were held in secret, although ultimately there were thousands of public screenings across Indonesia, and we ultimately made the Indonesian-language copy of the film available for free on the internet.

By contrast, the Indonesian premiere of *The Look of Silence* took place on November 10, 2014, and was hosted by Indonesia's National Commission on Human Rights and the Jakarta Arts Council—both agencies of the government—and the screenings were held in Indonesia's largest theatre. There were banners advertising the screening in the streets of Jakarta, and twice as many people came for the screening as there were seats. The organisers added a second packed screening. Unannounced, Adi Rukun arrived to answer audience questions, and when he appeared on stage, the audience rose for a 10-minute ovation.

*The Act of Killing* helped open the space into which *The Look of Silence* is now doing its work. If *The Act of Killing* forced the Indonesian media and public to speak about the genocide as a genocide, *The Look of Silence* enters that space and shows how torn the social fabric is and how desperately Indonesia needs truth, reconciliation, justice and healing.

On December 10, 2014, International Human Rights Day, the film opened across Indonesia. Tens of thousands of Indonesians came out for hundreds of public screenings across the country. Screening organisers put up billboards advertising the screenings on the streets of Indonesian cities from one end of the country to the other. Large public screenings in Medan went peacefully, with a powerful and reflective atmosphere. Wherever Adi attended screenings, he received standing ovations for his courage. Numerous tweets exclaimed that Indonesia has a new 'national hero.' On the whole, younger Indonesians are reacting with outrage that they've been lied to, and recognize in Adi's dignified example what truth and reconciliation might look like.

Over the next three weeks, the film screened 950 times in 116 cities in 32 out of 34 provinces across Indonesia. Numerous public screenings were held in Medan, the city where we made both *The Act of Killing* and *The Look of Silence*. Screenings were organised by cinemas, universities, film clubs, NGOs, religious organisations and community groups. Not every organisation screening the film informed us how many people were present, but 53,000 people attended screenings that did inform us of their audience numbers. Repeat screenings are held daily, and new bookings are coming in at a rate of 20 a week.

The press coverage has been phenomenal. There have been more than 731 articles and television reports and counting since the film's Venice premiere. A Jakarta Globe readers' poll for Indonesia's 'Person of the Year' placed the crew of *The Look of Silence* at number 3, after the new President and the Governor of Jakarta (perhaps the leading figure in Indonesia's movement for democratic reform).

*The Look of Silence* inevitably became a major topic of national conversation throughout mid-to-late December, with numerous Indonesian media declaring the film to be the best film of the

year. (This did not happen with *The Act of Killing*). *Tempo Magazine*, which published a special double edition on *The Act of Killing*, published a 15-page section on the film's debut at Venice, Telluride and Toronto. And on December 10, 2014, Senator Tom Udall (D-NM), who screened *The Act of Killing* just before the 2014 Academy Awards, introduced a Senate Resolution demanding that the US declassify all documents pertaining to America's role in the genocide, and that it apologise for America's part in the slaughter.

The massive impact of *The Look of Silence* inevitably provoked a backlash in a way that *The Act of Killing* did not. Within a few days of the release on December 10, the police and army began to organise groups of thugs who threatened to attack screenings. Police or military would often approach screening organisers, warning them of an impending attack and demanding that the organisers cancel the screening 'to prevent violence' (violence that the authorities were most likely instigating themselves). 25 screenings were cancelled in this way, from major cities to remote villages.

There have been eloquent and brave expressions of outrage in response to this form of censorship and demands that the police should protect freedom of expression from thugs, rather than bow to the demands of thugs. A number of articles and speeches condemning the police response have pointed out that the thugs are themselves organised by the police. Impassioned responses came from the rector of one of Indonesia's most prestigious universities, from Indonesia's National Commission on Human Rights, from the Alliance of Independent Journalists, and from editorials in much of Indonesia's quality media. The Interior Minister declared his support in response to the thugs disrupting screenings.

Police in a city in East Java asked the censors for an official determination as to whether the film could be screened—this was after the military and thugs cancelled several screenings in Malang. In their reply, the censors banned the film entirely from public cinema screening, though exempted community screenings. Their arguments could easily have been written during the Suharto regime. They argued, incorrectly, that the film creates sympathy for communist ideology, and that it lacks objectivity because the main character is the child of communist party members. In fact, as the film makes clear, no one in Adi's family was a member of the communist party, and such false statements are part of a long tradition of stigmatising the survivors.

The media responded with outrage. Indonesia's leading newspaper condemned the decision with the headline "The Film Censors Betray the Spirit of Democratic Reform" ("LSF Mengkhianati Semangat Reformasi"). The National Human Rights Commission has published a letter asserting that the decision is invalid and illegal, and expressing their continued support for screenings. They are also appealing the decision.

Finally, we are working hard to ensure Indonesian President Jokowi receives a copy of the film and is encouraged by his progressive aides and supporters to view it.

# IMPACT OF *THE ACT OF KILLING*

*The Act of Killing* had the impact the survivors hoped for when they first encouraged me to film the perpetrators. It has been screened thousands of times in Indonesia and is available for free online to anyone in the country. This has helped catalyze a transformation in how Indonesia understands its past. The media and public alike are now able, for the first time without fear, to investigate the genocide as a genocide and to debate the links between the moral catastrophe of the killings and the moral catastrophe of the present-day regime built, and still presided over, by the killers.

In October 2012, Indonesia's most important news publication, *Tempo Magazine*, published a special double edition dedicated to *The Act of Killing*, including 75 pages of boastful perpetrators' testimony from across Indonesia. The magazine's editors gathered this testimony to show that the film could have been made anywhere in Indonesia, that there are thousands of feared perpetrators enjoying impunity around the country, and that the problems of corruption and gangsterism are systemic. This special edition broke a 47-year silence about the genocide in the mainstream media.

Indonesia's National Commission on Human Rights issued this statement about the film: "If we are to transform Indonesia into the democracy it claims to be, citizens must recognize the terror and repression on which our contemporary history has been built. No film, or any other work of art for that matter, has done this more effectively than *The Act of Killing*. [It] is essential viewing for us all."

For a long time, the Indonesian government ignored *The Act of Killing*, hoping it would go away. When the film was nominated for an Academy® award, the Indonesian president's spokesman acknowledged that the 1965 genocide was a crime against humanity, and that Indonesia needs reconciliation—but in its own time. While this was not an embrace of the film, it was incredible because it represents an about-face for the government: until then, it had maintained that the killings were heroic and glorious.

There is a scene in *The Act of Killing* in which I accuse one of the perpetrators of committing war crimes, and he responds by accusing the West of hypocrisy, noting that the US slaughtered the Native Americans. More to the point, the US and the UK helped engineer the Indonesian genocide and for decades enthusiastically supported the military dictatorship that came to power through the slaughter.

When *The Act of Killing* was awarded a BAFTA, I used my acceptance speech to note that neither the UK nor the US can have an ethical relationship with Indonesia (or so many other countries across the global south) until we acknowledge the crimes of the past, and our collective role in supporting, participating in and—ultimately—ignoring those crimes.

A film cannot change a country's political landscape. Like the child in *The Emperor's New Clothes*, it can only create a space for the people who see it to discuss a nation's most painful and important problems without fear, and for the first time.

Into this space comes *The Look of Silence*.

## **THE 1965–1966 MASSACRES IN INDONESIA**

### **Historical Context**

*Edited from observations on the massacres, their aftermath and implications, by Historian John Roosa (Professor of History, University of British Columbia; Author of "Pretext for Mass Murder: The September 30th Movement and Suharto's Coup D'Etat in Indonesia"). Additional opening and closing notes by Joshua Oppenheimer.*

In 1965, the Indonesian government was overthrown by the military. Sukarno, Indonesia's first president, founder of the non-aligned movement, and leader of the national revolution against Dutch colonialism, was deposed and replaced by right-wing General Suharto. The Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), which had been a core constituency in the struggle against Dutch colonialism, and which had firmly supported President Sukarno (who was not a communist), was immediately banned.

On the eve of the coup, the PKI was the largest communist party in the world outside of a communist country. It was officially committed to winning power through elections, and its affiliates included all of Indonesia's trade unions and cooperatives for landless farmers. Its major campaign issues included land reform, as well as nationalizing foreign-owned mining, oil, and plantation companies. In this, they sought to mobilize Indonesia's vast natural resources for the benefit of the Indonesian people, who, in the aftermath of three hundred years of colonial exploitation, were, on the whole, extremely poor.

After the 1965 military coup, anybody opposed to the new military dictatorship could be accused of being a communist. This included union members, landless farmers, intellectuals, and the ethnic Chinese, as well as anybody who struggled for a redistribution of wealth in the aftermath of colonialism. In less than a year, and with the direct aid of western governments, over one million of these "communists" were murdered. In America, the massacre was regarded as a major "victory over communism," and generally celebrated as good news. *Time Magazine* reported "the West's best news for years in Asia," while *The New York Times* ran the headline, "A Gleam of Light in Asia," and praised Washington for keeping its hand in the killings well hidden. (The scapegoating of the ethnic Chinese, who had come to Indonesia in the 18th and 19th centuries, was done at the incitement of the US intelligence services, which sought to drive a wedge between the new Indonesian regime and the People's Republic of China. The slaughter of village-level members of the PKI and its affiliate unions and cooperatives was also

encouraged by the US, who was worried that without a “scorched earth” approach, the new Indonesian regime might eventually accommodate the PKI base.)

In many regions of Indonesia, the army recruited civilians to carry out the killings. They were organized into paramilitary groups, given basic training (and significant military back up). In the province of North Sumatra and elsewhere, the paramilitaries were recruited largely from the ranks of gangsters, or “preman.” Ever since the massacres, the Indonesian government has celebrated the “extermination of the communists” as a patriotic struggle, and celebrated the paramilitaries and gangsters as its heroes, rewarding them with power and privilege. These men and their protégés have occupied key positions of power—and persecuted their opponents—ever since. The pretext for the 1965–66 genocide was the assassination of six army generals on the night of October 1, 1965.

On October 1, 1965, the Thirtieth of September Movement (Gerakan 30 September, or G30S), made up of disaffected junior Indonesian Armed Forces Officers, assassinated six Indonesian Army Generals in an abortive coup and dumped their bodies down a well south of the city. At the same time, the Movement’s troops took over the national radio station and announced that they intended to protect President Sukarno from a cabal of right-wing army generals plotting a seizure of power. The Movement was defeated before most Indonesians knew it existed. The senior surviving army commander, Major General Suharto, launched a quick counter-attack and drove the Movement’s troops from Jakarta within one day.

Suharto accused the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI) of masterminding the Movement and then orchestrated an extermination of persons affiliated with the party. Suharto’s military rounded up over a million and a half people, accusing all of them of being involved in the Movement. In one of the worst bloodbaths of the 20th century, hundreds of thousands of individuals were massacred by the army and its affiliated militias, largely in Central Java, East Java, Bali, and North Sumatra from late 1965 to mid-1966. In a climate of national emergency, Suharto gradually usurped President Sukarno’s authority and established himself as the de facto president (with the power to dismiss and appoint ministers) by March 1966.

The massacres were out of all proportion to their ostensible cause. The Movement was a small-scale conspiratorial action organized by a handful of people. In total, it killed twelve people. Suharto exaggerated its magnitude until it assumed the shape of an ongoing, nationwide conspiracy to commit mass murder. All the millions of people associated with the PKI, even illiterate peasants in remote villages, were presented as murderers collectively responsible for the Movement.

Indonesian government and military officials, to the very end of the Suharto regime in 1998, invoked the specter of the PKI in response to any disturbance or sign of dissent. The key phrase in the regime’s argument was “the latent danger of communism.” The unfinished eradication of the PKI was, in a very real sense, the *raison d’être* of the Suharto regime. The original legal act under which the regime ruled Indonesia for over thirty years was Sukarno’s

presidential order of 3rd October 1965, authorizing Suharto to “restore order.” That was an emergency order. But for Suharto, the emergency never ended.

In constructing a legitimating ideology for his dictatorship, Suharto presented himself as the savior of the nation for having defeated the Movement. His regime incessantly drilled the event into the minds of the populace by every method of state propaganda: textbooks, monuments, street names, films, museums, commemorative rituals and national holidays. The Suharto regime justified its existence by placing the Movement at the center of its historical narrative and depicting the PKI as ineffably evil. Under Suharto, anti-communism became the state religion, complete with sacred sites, rituals, and dates.

It is remarkable that the anti-PKI violence, as such a large-scale event, has been so badly misunderstood. No doubt, the fact that both military personnel and civilians committed the killings has blurred the issue of responsibility. Nonetheless, from what little is already known, it is clear that the military bears the largest share of responsibility and that the killings represented bureaucratic, planned violence more than popular, spontaneous violence. The Suharto clique of officers, by inventing false stories about the Movement and strictly controlling the media, created a sense among civilians that the PKI was on the warpath. If there had not been this deliberate provocation from the military, the populace would not have believed the PKI was a mortal threat since the party was passive in the aftermath of the Movement. (The military worked hard to whip up popular anger against the PKI from early October 1965 onwards, and the US Government actively encouraged the Indonesian military to pursue rank-and-file communists). It prodded civilian militias into acting, gave them assurances of impunity, and arranged logistical support.

Contrary to common belief, frenzied violence by villagers was virtually unheard of. Suharto’s army usually opted for mysterious disappearances rather than exemplary public executions. The army and its militias tended to commit its large-scale massacres in secret: they took captives out of prison at night, trucked them to remote locations, executed them, and then buried the corpses in unmarked mass graves or threw them into rivers.

The tragedy of modern Indonesian history lies not just in the army-organized mass killings of 1965-66 but also in the rise to power of the killers, of persons who viewed massacres and psychological warfare operations as legitimate and normal modes of governance. A regime that legitimated itself by pointing to a mass grave at the site of the well, vowing “never again,” left countless mass graves from one end of the country to the other, from Aceh on the western edge to Papua on the eastern edge. The occupation of East Timor from 1975 to 1999 similarly left tens, if not hundreds, of thousands dead, many anonymously buried. Each mass grave in the archipelago marks an arbitrary, unavowed, secretive exercise of state power.

The obsession with a relatively minor event (the Movement) and the erasure of a world-historical event (the mass killings of 1965-66) has blocked empathy for the victims, such as the relatives of those men and women who disappeared. While a monument stands next to the well in which the Movement’s troops dumped the bodies of the six army generals on October 1,

1965, there is no monument to be found at the mass graves that hold the hundreds of thousands of persons killed in the name of suppressing the Movement.

Focus on who killed the army generals on September 30, 1965 has functioned as a fetish, displacing all attention from the murder of over one million alleged communists in the months that followed. Suharto's regime produced endless propaganda about the brutal communists behind the killing of the generals, and still today most discussion of the genocide has been displaced by this focus. And this is true even in most English-language sources. To me, participating in the debate around "who killed the generals" feels grotesque, which is why it does not feature in *The Act of Killing*. The Rwandan genocide was triggered when Rwandan president Juvénal Habyarimana (a Hutu) died after his airplane was shot down on its approach to Kigali. To focus on who shot down the plane (was it Tutsi extremists? was it Hutu extremists acting as provocateurs?) rather than the murder of 800,000 Tutsis and Hutu moderates over the next 100 days would be unconscionable.

Similarly, who started the Reichstag fire is irrelevant to an understanding of the Holocaust. Whether or not the disgruntled army officers behind the killing of the six generals had the support of the head of the PKI is much more than beside the point: it plays the pernicious role of deflecting attention from a mass murder of world-historical importance. Imagine if, in Rwanda, the fundamental question about what happened in 1994 was "who shot down the president's plane?" This would only be thinkable if the killers remained in power.

# DIRECTOR BIO

## Joshua Oppenheimer

Born in 1974, USA, Joshua Oppenheimer is a recipient of the MacArthur “Genius” Fellowship (2015–2019). His debut feature film *The Act of Killing* was nominated for the 2013 Academy Award® for Best Documentary, and has been released theatrically in 31 countries. The film was also named Film of the Year in the 2013 Sight & Sound Film Poll and won 72 international awards, including the European Film Award 2013, BAFTA 2014, Asia Pacific Screen Award 2013, Berlinale Audience Award 2013, and Guardian Film Award 2014 for Best Film. Oppenheimer is a partner at Final Cut for Real in Denmark and Artistic Director of the International Centre for Documentary and Experimental Film at the University of Westminster in London.

## DIRECTOR FILMOGRAPHY

*The Act of Killing* (159 min / 117 min / 95 min, 2012; winner of 72 international awards, including the European Film Award 2013, BAFTA 2014, Asia Pacific Screen Award 2013, Berlinale Panorama Audience Award 2013, Guardian Film Award 2014 for Best Film; nominated for the 2013 Academy Award® for Best Documentary; released theatrically in 31 countries; screened in countless film festivals, including the Telluride Film Festival, Toronto International Film Festival, New Directors/New Films, and Berlin International Film Festival)

*The Globalisation Tapes* (71 min, 2002; produced with Christine Cynn)

*The Entire History of the Louisiana Purchase* (50 min, 1997; Telluride Film Festival, 1997; Gold Hugo, Chicago, 1998)

*These Places We Learned to Call Home* (short, 1997; Gold Spire, San Francisco, 1997)



Indonesian Research and Outreach	Anonymous Anonymous Anonymous Anonymous
Editing Assistant	Virgil Kastrup
Post Production Managers	Maria Kristensen Lina Wichmann
Post Production Services	Hinterland AS Duckling Nordisk Film Shortcut Dicentia Studios
Colorist and Visual Effects	Tom Chr. Lilletvedt
Assistant Colourist	Joakim Hauge
Special Effects	Nordisk Film Shortcut
Office Manager (Norway)	Oddleiv Vik
Graphics	NR2154
Motion Graphics Artist	Emil Thorbjørnsson
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Auditing	Tore Kristian Tjemsland Pauli Aaltonen Beierholm, Jan Arildslund and Morten Staghøj
Insurance	Jens-Georg Hansen Lyberg & Partnere
Archive material	Courtesy of NBC Universal Archives
Music	Seri Banang (traditional) Mana Tahan (traditional)  Lukisan Malam Composer: E. Sambayon Lyrics: Sakti Alamsyah Performed by Sam Saimun Courtesy of Irama Record  Rege Rege (traditional)
Subtitle Consultants	Dansk Videotekst Shusaku Harada

## **Very Special Thanks**

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DR K - Flemming Hedegaard Larsen

NRK - Tore Tomter

YLE - Iikka Vehkalahti

VPRO - Nathalie Windhorst

Vision Machine Film Project

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Anonymous

Making Movies Oy

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Cinephil - Philippa Kowarsky

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Danish Film Institute

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## **ABOUT THE FILM**

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