Mass killings represented: the movies of Panh and Oppenheimer

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Acts of killings

Oppenheimer’s ‘The Act of Killing’ (jugal or ‘Executioner’) in Indonesia was the big surprise of 2012. Unlike Rithy Panh, Oppenheimer exclusively used the staged memory of criminal and paramilitary vigilantes who did the dirty business for the Indonesian army and the politicians who toppled President Sukarno in 1965. The diktat of 30 September 1965 brought Suharto’s military junta to power. In a wave of killings lasting five months, members of the Special Forces, ad hoc criminal gangs and religious Muslim fanatics destroyed the lives of at least, and possible more than, half a million people. Unlike the Khmer Rouge leaders, these people were never brought to justice. Instead, they continue to be feared and in a certain way respected, still enjoying the admiration of many in Indonesia. Two protagonists prominently figure in The Act of Killing: Anwar Congo (72) and Adi Zulkadry (69) – both re-enact their own roles during the murderous events. Anwar was a petty thug in the mid-1960s, trafficking in movie tickets. Adi was a leading founder of the paramilitary Pancasila Youth and a member of its elite death unit, the Frog Squad. Embarrassingly for Indonesia’s democratic rulers, Anwar maintained personal relations with a local newspaper editor who played a coordinating role during the massacre. But similarly uncomfortable is the appearance in the film of the current-day politician Jusuf Kalla, who is seen congratulating members of Indonesia’s youth movement, Pemuda Pancasila, for their share in exterminating Indonesian communism. Revealing is the applauding audience of a TV talk show that visibly enjoys Anwar stories of his killing sprees. Adi reminds the viewer of the victor’s justice: “War crimes are defined by the victors. We won.”

The near absence of victims in Oppenheimer’s movie is for good reason. Filmmakers in Indonesia are confronted by an officially encouraged conspiracy of silence about the past, this is unlike in Cambodia where, already in 1979, the Vietnamese advisors of the Heng Samrin government tried to bring Pol Pot and Khmer Rouge Foreign Minister Ieng Sary to justice. This trial, often considered a ‘show trial’, resulted in death penalties, which for lack of defendants in custody were never actually carried out. And it took nearly two decades to successfully arrest and imprison some leaders of the Khmer Rouge, where after the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC, better known as the Khmer Rouge Tribunal) could finally start proceedings in 2004. Whatever one’s opinion of the tribunal, at least the Cambodians have sought justice for the victims. Legal actions have been ongoing since 1979, despite disagreement from the UN, which regarded the Khmer Rouge as the official representative of Cambodia until 1993.

References
1 E DFA master class in Amsterdam, 22 November 2013.