Mass killings represented: the movies of Panh and Oppenheimer

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Published in:
IIAS Newsletter

Citation for published version (APA):
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Acts of killings

Panh's film The Act of Killing (jugal or ‘Execution(er)’ in Indonesian) 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 Atrocities 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 possibly more than, half a million people. Unlike the Khmer Rouge leaders, these people were never brought to justice. In fact, they continue to be feared and, of course, to enjoy a certain point of power. Exclusion on a large scale leads to extermination at a certain point within special compartments, which have been physiologically and mentally eradicated by the genocide acting on behalf of killers. But this doesn’t mean that everybody becomes a killer when circumstances are ‘right’. De Swaan repeatedly warns. And he categorically calls into doubt Hannah Arendt’s ‘banality of evil’. The occasion enables the act, but individuals are still able to refuse under extreme circumstances, as is shown by Panh’s not Oppenheimer’s movie.

Indonesia and Cambodia

In his book, De Swaan deals with a large number of genocidal regimes, ranging from Nazi Germany to the nearly forgotten campaign against the Mayan Ixil Indians of Guatemala under the regime of Efrain Rios Montt in 1982 and 1983. Suharto’s regime started as a reign of terror driven by an organized military group and ended with a mega-program. To suggest that the massacres of people like Anwar Congo were commonplace, seriously underestimates the ways in which they became involved in these killings. In Cambodia, the mysterious Communist Party went on a rampage against its own population. In both cases the compartmentalization of their self-created atrocities was the motive and the orchestrated means of the killers. The Khmer Rouge’s mass slaughtering did contain elements of an enacted utopia, inspired by Maoist China, and the temptation of the experiment is cynically voiced by the French radical philosopher Alain Badiou, who needed 35 years to apologise for his former defense of the Khmer Rouge: ‘Mieux vaut un désastre qu’un désert’ (“better a disaster than a desert”). It explains very neatly why Rithy Panh, in his movie, avoided confronting the victims with their executioners.

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References

1 IDFA master class in Amsterdam, 22 November 2013.