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

Oppenheimer’s ‘The Act of Killing (jugal or ‘Execution(er)’ in the video) 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 Act of Killing, shot by China-trained Khmer Rouge cameramen with stills of the clay puppets, Oppenheimer leaves us puzzled by phantasmatic shots of a bizarre opera-buffa near Tobo Lake, or by a mediated act of remorse by Anwar Congo at the scene of one of his former crimes. Both movies confront us with the phenomenon of the mass destruction of human life. In Panh’s film strategy to unnerve the Khmer Rouge’s demons, one sees the panic of a regime that felt on its own sword. This led to its demise but also to a catastrophe for its victims. Oppenheimer’s movie is so disturbing because he suggests that civil psychopaths or lunatics were mainly responsible for the act of killing.

In a recent book, Dutch sociologist Abram de Swaan makes a more convincing argument than Oppenheimer does. The killings of hundreds of thousands of people, often randomly executed, go back in history far beyond modern times, but the organized mass killings we have seen in the last century have been possible only in societies where social compartmentalization has taken place. The killings are enabled by a deliberate cutting off of social contacts between the majority and a persecuted minority. Exclusion on a large scale leads to extermination at a certain point within particular compartments, which have been physically or mentally encircled by the genocide acting on behalf of the 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 newly forgotten campaign against the Mayan indians of Guatemala under the regime of Efraín Ríos 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-project. To suggest that the murderous 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 adversaries was the motivating 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 utopian dream, inspired by Maoist China, and the temptation of the utopian dream. The Act of Killing is a global film in the mould of Witness and Schindler’s List.

References

1 IDF master class in Amsterdam, 22 November 2013.