

Impact case study (REF3b)

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| <p>Institution: University of Roehampton</p> |
| <p>Unit of Assessment: Panel D, UoA 36 Communication, Cultural and Media Studies</p> |
| <p>Title of case study: <i>The Act of Killing</i></p> |
| <p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Michael Uwemedimo's research on re-enactment in non-fiction filmmaking has contributed to the development of innovative methods and approaches to documentary practice as a means of precipitating critical national and international reflections on histories of political violence. <i>The Act of Killing</i> (2012, 116mins) demonstrates the potential of film production and exhibition as a means of popular mobilization and political intervention through which accepted discourses around history and genocide are reframed. This work has had a significant impact in the following contexts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Influencing critical understandings of documentary practice and reaching new audiences; • Intervening in and reframing the cultural representation of the 1965-66 Indonesian genocide both nationally and internationally • Mobilising debate about Indonesia's history of political violence. • Contributing to wider public understanding of basic standards of human rights. <p>Key indicators of the reach of this impact include the range of stakeholders in the project, such as local advocacy networks in Indonesia, the Indonesian Government's National Human Rights Commission, human rights NGOs, and international documentary makers, programmers and audiences.</p> |
| <p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Since joining Roehampton in 2005, Michael Uwemedimo (Lecturer in Film Studies 2005-present) has been researching and developing innovative methods and approaches to documentary practice as a means of precipitating critical national reflection on histories of political violence and as a process through which affected communities might gain a greater measure of control over their history and representation. The work has focused on the role of re-enactment in critical explorations of image, memory and historical representation in relation to human rights violations, in particular the 1965-66 Indonesian genocide.</p> <p>In part practice-based, research has taken the form of book chapters and journal articles [including: 2005; 2007; 2012], conference presentations [including: <i>Experimental Repetitions</i>, Contemporary Arts Centre, Utrecht, 2008] and master classes [including: CPH:DOX New Trends Master class, 2007]. Critically it has also taken the form of film production and film exhibition. A pilot production in Indonesia, <i>Show of Force</i>, [screened at the Centre for Contemporary Art, Sheffield, 2007 and analysed in depth in Oppenheimer and Uwemedimo 2012] was key to the development of <i>The Act of Killing</i>. Cinema programmes and exhibitions have been staged in a wide range of venues from BFI Southbank, London [After the Fact: Re-enactment and the moving image 2007] to the New School for Social Research, New York [Inhabiting Fictions' <i>Cenethnography</i> 2007].</p> <p>As a founding member of the production collaboration, Vision Machine, and producer of <i>The Act of Killing</i>, Uwemedimo's research findings and their creative applications fed into an evolving filmmaking practice developed by the collective and culminated in <i>The Act of Killing</i>. As producer, he took a central role in translating his research findings into a conceptual framework that informed the production and was involved with planning shoots, reviewing and feeding back on footage, working on and responding to edits, as well as engaging in the sustained debates around documentary ethics that affected the film's production. In particular his work contributed to the development of a performance-based historiography of political violence that draws extensively on historical re-enactment and genre re-stagings, which he terms 'archaeological performance'. This method progresses from primary interviews with historical actors (both perpetrators and survivors) to re-enactments at historical locations, and onwards to ever more elaborate genre dramatisations. This material is then reworked according to the conventions of film genres as it becomes increasingly 'fictionalised' and scenes are screened to the participants. The screenings and participants' reactions are incorporated in the film and serve as points of departure for subsequent stylized re-enactments. The process of strategically staging screenings and folding the responses back into the film has been a vital element of the practice and a significant vector of impact.</p> <p>What <i>The Act of Killing</i> does is set up the apparatus of fiction film production, situate a documentary practice within it, and record the stories that a group of gangsters and ageing genocidaires tell to each other and the camera. In so doing, the film intervenes in the country's history of genocide by reframing</p> |

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these historical events through the lens of genre and memory, challenging official versions of history and inviting contemplation and debate over the performance of political violence.

3. References to the research

'Show of Force: A Cinema-séance of Power and Violence in Sumatra's Plantation Belt', in *Killer Images: Documentary Film, Memory and the Performance of Violence*, Eds. Joram Ten Brink and Joshua Oppenheimer, Wallflower/Columbia University Press, November, 2012 (co-authored with Oppenheimer).

'History and Histrionics: Vision Machine's digital poetics', in *Fluid Screens/Expanded Cinema*, eds. Janine Marchessault and Susan Lord, University Toronto Press, 2007 (co-authored with Oppenheimer).

'The Globalisation Tapes' [Video work and text], in *Public No. 31*, ed. Susan Lord [a multi media edition of the interdisciplinary journal], York University Press, 2005 (co-authored with Oppenheimer).

'Inventing the interview: the interrogatory poetics of Jean Rouch', in *Building Bridges: the cinema of Jean Rouch*, ed. Joram Tenbrink, Wallflower Press, 2007.

The Act of Killing (dir. Joshua Oppenheimer, prod. Michael Uwemedimo 2012), functions as both a research output and an example of research (as cited above) put into practice. The quality of the research is evidenced by the numerous festival awards and prizes the film has won internationally, including:

Berlin Film Festival 2013 – Prize of the Ecumenical Jury; Danish Film Academy 2013 – Best Feature Documentary; Danish Film Critics Association – Special Prize 2013; Festival de Cinéma Valenciennes 2013 – Grand Prize; Sheffield Doc/Fest 2013 – Grand Prize; BelDocs 2013 – Grand Prix for Best Film; Human Rights, Human Dignity Int. Film Festival Myanmar – Aung San Suu Kyi Award for Best Documentary; One World, Prague 2013 – Best Film; Geneva International Human Rights Film Festival 2013 – Gilda Vieira de Mello Prize; IndieLisboa 2013 – Amnesty International Award.

4. Details of the impact

This project sets out through a process of making and reflecting on images to deepen our understanding of rights violations and to increase our collective resources to promote and protect fundamental rights. The release of *The Act of Killing* (2012) internationally and its clandestine circulation in Indonesia has led to an intense and unprecedented debate on the 1965-66 genocide, after 40 years of disavowal and impunity for perpetrators.

Reach:

The film's high-profile screenings at festivals around the world, as well as theatrical distribution in the UK and the US, attest to the reach of this impact. The film has been screened at over 90 film festivals in 2012 and 2013. It is being distributed in over 12 countries and has been screened in 88 cities (112 cinemas) across the US. The film was featured on *The Daily Show* in the US (13/8/2013) and BBC's *Newsnight* (25/6/2013). Furthermore, as part of an anonymously funded outreach programme, 1,096 DVDs were distributed through the film's production company to 118 cities in 29 of the 33 provinces in Indonesia. This form of unofficial distribution enabled the film's dissemination to the widest possible national audience in Indonesia, without necessitating an official release which would have resulted in the film being banned. The reach of this impact is indicated by over 500 clandestine screenings in over 95 cities across the country. Such community screenings varied in size from 30-700 people. The screenings have created a space in which the public discourse on the genocide has been transformed, leading to demands for a historical re-examination of the killings of 1965-66 that would have been inconceivable before the film's release. The success of this distribution plan has led to the production company, along with Draft House Films, Vice, and VHX, to develop a plan to make the film available for free in Indonesia via download in Autumn 2013.

Significance

It has had a significant impact in the following areas:

Reframing critical understandings of the documentary genre:

One of the reasons for the film's profound impact is its innovative and disturbing form, influencing creative documentary practice and criticism by opening up critical expectations and understandings of the documentary to a new structural form and format of political intervention. Renowned filmmaker, Errol Morris, wrote of *The Act of Killing*, 'Every now and then a non-fiction film comes along that is unlike anything else I have seen. [...] And it asks the central question: what is real? Gabriel Garcia Marquez, in a Paris Review interview, wrote about reading Kafka's "Metamorphosis" for the first time, "I didn't know you were allowed to do that." I have the same feeling with this extraordinary film.' Werner Herzog claims simply, "*The Act of Killing* invents a new form of cinematic surrealism." Both Morris and Herzog were so impressed by the film in its editing stage that they joined the production as Executive Producers in order to help facilitate the film's theatrical distribution.

The **significance** of the impact is evident in the global critical reception of the film. Major articles have featured in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Der Spiegel* and the *Guardian*, each praising the film for its experimental form, in particular the use of re-enactment that not only allows for a glimpse into the minds of the killers but forces them to confront the horror of their actions. As Mark Kermode explains, the event becomes 'real only when unreal' (*The Observer* 29 June 2013). In an indicative response to the film, Ann Hornaday writes in the *Washington Post* (25 July 2013), 'This audacious, horrifying, boldly experimental plunge into the mind-set of murderers and the culture of impunity breaks so many rules of documentary decorum that it virtually creates its own genre [...] *The Act of Killing* is a brilliant, powerful reckoning with the wages of history, mendacity and denial.' Furthermore, the film has repeatedly won awards at internationally recognized documentary film festivals including CPH: Dox 2012, Best Feature Documentary at the Danish Film Academy 2013, First Prize of the Jury and Audience Award at the DocumentaMadrid 2013, and the Grand Prize and Audience Award at the Sheffield Doc/Fest 2013.

Enhancing public understanding and provoking unprecedented public discourse on genocide:

Writing for *Tempo* – Indonesia's premier news magazine – Ariel Heryanto, historian and cultural critic, claims, 'The Act of Killing is the most powerful, politically important film about Indonesia that I have ever seen. The arrival of this film is itself a historical event almost without parallel.' Following screenings for Indonesian press at the National Commission on Human Rights, the editors of *Tempo* decided to publish a double edition [7 October 2012] devoted to the film and the events it engages with. Their aim was to repeat the experiment of the film by sending their own journalists [47 journalists, 4 project managers, 12 editors, 3 researchers, 2 photo researchers, and 3 translators] around the country in an attempt to identify and interview perpetrators of the genocide, further unlocking this history of violence. They gathered over 1000 pages of testimony, edited down to 75 pages published alongside reviews, interviews and essays about the film. The aim of the issue is clearly explained in the opening editorial which states: 'Readers, no matter how tragic and painful, the mass murders of 1965-66 must, at one time or the other, be re-examined. Remembering, in the long run, is better than forgetting'.

In the space of this unprecedented debate and historical re-examination, the National Human Rights Commission of Indonesia released the following statement: '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.' Indicative of the **significance** of this research to the process of historical re-examination now underway in Indonesia is the fact that the findings of the North Sumatran section of the National Commission on Human Rights' 12 July report on the massacres are drawn from a review of the production company's archive and transcripts of *The Act of Killing*. According to the Margareth S. Aritonang of *The Jakarta Post*, this report resulted in the Commission declaring that 'the state sponsored purge that followed the 1965 aborted coup met all the criteria of a gross violation of human rights' (24 July 2012).

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Screenings of the film at International Human Rights Film Festivals, including Prague, Geneva, Romania, and Myanmar have positioned the Indonesian genocide within global discussions about human rights violations. International screenings of the film have also been used to initiate discussion and debate about similar, often hidden, histories of political violence, corruption, impunity and genocide in countries such as Spain, the Philippines, Turkey and Denmark. Organisers for the IF Istanbul Independent International Film Festival toured the film through Turkish Kurdistan, Armenia, Jenin, Ramallah and the West Bank, provoking debate among Turkish audiences about the genocide in Armenia. In the Philippines screenings of the film have been used to spark debate about the country's own history of political corruption. Tapol the Indonesian human rights NGO, co-sponsored a 10-day tour of the film and director around the UK, launching a petition demanding an apology for the atrocities. The petition has been taken up by human rights NGOs in the US in conjunction with the film's American release.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- *The Act of Killing* (2012)
- *Tempo* (special double edition – English Version), 7 October, 2012.
- Synge Byrge Sorenson – CEO & Producer Final Cut Productions ApS (Identifier 1)
- Margareth S. Aritonang '1965 Purge a Gross Violation of Human Rights' *The Jakarta Post* 24 July 2012. Available at: <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2012/07/24/1965-purge-a-gross-violation-human-rights.html>.
- Catherine Shoard 'Joshua Oppenheimer's surreal, astonishing documentary recreates the atrocities of 1960s Indonesian death squads' *The Guardian* 14 September 2012. Available at: <http://theguardian.com/film/2012/sep/14/act-of-killing-review>.
- Mark Kermode 'Joshua Oppenheimer's Bloody documentary restaging a wave of mass killings in 1960s Indonesia leaves our critic dumbfound' *The Observer* 29 June 2013. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/jun/30/the-act-of-killing-review>.
- Ann Hornaday 'The Act of Killing relives a murderous era in Indonesia' *The Washington Post* 25 July 2013. Available at: http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-07-25/news/40861583_1_killing-the-act-anwar-congo
- A.O. Scott 'Mass Murder? Gee, That Was Fun' *The New York Times* 18 July 2013. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/19/movies/act-of-killing-re-enacts-indonesian-massacres.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>