

Memory and Mass Killings: How Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing* Engages with Indonesia's Collective Memory of the 1965 Tragedy

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ABSTRACT

In the early morning of October 1, 1965, six Indonesian generals were slain, their bodies later found in *Lubang Buaya* (Crocodile Pit). Shortly after, the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) was officially blamed for the murders and the supposed coup attempt, and General Suharto seized power. Over the proceeding months, a wave of violence emerged, and nearly one million Indonesians, including PKI members as well as those deemed disloyal to the state ideology Pancasila, were executed, and hundreds of thousands more were jailed or exiled. Throughout the next 31 years, Suharto's New Order regime constructed a collective memory of the 1965 Tragedy which portrayed the PKI as the orchestrators of an attempted coup and as a threat to Pancasila. This narrative was reinforced by various *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory), with perhaps the most notable example being the 1984 state-sponsored film *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* (The Treason of the 30 September Movement). Recently, the documentary *The Act of Killing* (2012) has brought new attention to the Tragedy, re-examining it through the eyes of some of its killers. This paper seeks to explore how Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing* engages with the collective memory of the Tragedy, arguing that his work adds to the memory by establishing new *lieux de mémoire* which may facilitate reconciliation while also forcing us to transcend the "good and evil" dichotomy through which we usually view the Tragedy.

Keywords: 1965 Tragedy, 30 September Movement, The Act of Killing, Collective Memory, Lieu de Memoire, Oppenheimer, Pengkhianatan, PKI

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PROLOGUE

Before I traveled to Indonesia for the first time in 2016, I was given a student handbook which contained all the “dos” and “don’ts” for Americans living in the country. Most guidelines seemed straightforward: *Don’t do drugs. Don’t break the law. Don’t go out alone at night.* But one specific bit of advice stood out to me. *Don’t say you’re an atheist.* I was puzzled by this seemingly arbitrary rule. At first, I assumed it had to do with the religiosity of Indonesia. After all, as I would later learn, religion is an important aspect of Indonesian life. However, the reason for this advice was more complex. It turned out that atheism is associated with Communism, and half a century ago, between five hundred thousand and one million suspected Communists were killed in Indonesia (Wieringa 2002).

Coincidentally, one of my International Relations professors had mentioned a film called *The Act of Killing* to me before my departure, explaining how it was a documentary about some of the killers from a genocide in Indonesia. However, I did not put the pieces together until then. From that moment on, I was extremely curious about how this Tragedy was regarded in Indonesia. As I explored the topic there, I continuously encountered one particular narrative: The Communists had orchestrated the coup and murders of the generals in 1965, were a threat to the nation, and deserved to die. My curiosity surrounding this seemingly one-sided depiction ultimately inspired me to explore the collective memory of the event.

This paper will begin by briefly explaining the events of October 1, 1965. It will then discuss Indonesia’s collective memory of the tragedy, focusing particularly on the state-sponsored film *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI*. The paper will then explore how *The Act of Killing* engages with Indonesia’s collective memory of the 1965 tragedy, examining how Oppenheimer’s work complicates the traditional narrative and introduces new sites of memory.

GERAKAN 30 SEPTEMBER (THE 30TH SEPTEMBER MOVEMENT)

In the early morning of October 1, 1965¹, six Indonesian generals were kidnapped and killed in a supposed² Communist coup. Their bodies were later discovered in *Lubang Buaya* (“crocodile’s pit”), a place which has since become a metonym for the coup. As an official memorial site, it is often visited by those seeking to learn more about the treacherous Communist event and to pay homage to the fallen generals. As Zurbuchen (2002) notes, there are various scenarios that attempt to explain this event, ranging from a plot by the *Partai Komunis Indonesia* (PKI - the Indonesian National Party) to foreign interference to internal struggle. However, as she clarifies, the “true” explanation of events is irrelevant (566). Rather, what is important is that only one official version was broadcast in Indonesia: that the PKI had attempted to overthrow President Sukarno’s government (566). Therefore, as Suharto’s new regime declared, the PKI were traitors and deserved to be killed. In fact, according to Hadiz (2006), “[Saving] Indonesia from the clutches of communism” was “the original *raison d’être* of what became Suharto’s ‘New Order’” (555). What followed that event was a “tidal wave of violence,” in which the military, paramilitary, religious, and other groups targeted Communists in Indonesia. However, the targets of these mass killings were not only “card-carrying” Communists; anyone deemed to be anti-national or sympathetic to the PKI, including ethnic Chinese and atheists, were targeted. By 1966, between five hundred thousand and one million people were killed, and hundreds of thousands more imprisoned (Wieringa 2002, 284).

COLLECTIVE MEMORY

Memory installs remembrance within the sacred; history, always prosaic, releases it again. Memory is blind to all but the group it binds... History is perpetually suspicious of memory, and its true mission is to suppress and destroy it (Nora 1989, 9).

In “*Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire*,” Nora (1989) distinguishes between memory and history. Memory, Nora writes, “is life, always embodied in living societies and as such in permanent evolution, subject to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting” (2). History, in contrast, “is reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer” (2). Nora (1989) explains how societies were once based on memory, but rapid change has driven them to use history as a means to remember (2). Moreover, collective memory is a “deliberate effort” to remember the past and ensure it remains in our memory (7). His focus is on *lieux de mémoire*⁴, that is, places of memory, such as museums, archives, festivals, monuments, treaties, and so forth (7). These places reinforce memory, especially when they become official government or museum sites. Through text, images, or demonstrations, these sites deliberately portray a particular narrative, cementing the state-sponsored memory of the event.

Films have also become mediums of collective memory. Rosenstone discusses the concept of historiography, that is, representing history through writing and verbal images (White 1998). He argues that collective events are best represented via film. White contrasts historiography with historiophoty, that is, “representation of history and our thought about it in visual images and filmic discourse” (White 1998, 1193). According to White (1998), imagistic evidence provides for a reproduction that is more “accurate” than simply from verbal testimony (1194). However, Rosenstone notes that film documentaries, though meant to be straightforward and objective, are always “shaped” or stylized in some way (1195). Jarvie agrees, observing the “constructivist nature of the historian’s enterprise” (1196). A reconstruction or reenactment, particularly in a filmic medium, requires certain choices to be made regarding what to include, emit, focus on, etc., and is therefore subject to bias. Furthermore, Erll (2008) explores how some media can “create and mold collective images of the past” (390).

An example of state-sponsored collective memory in Indonesia is the annual children’s drawing competition “Reformasi di Mata Kami” (Reformation Through Our Eyes), a contest held by Indonesian museums to document the post-Suharto *Reformasi* period. Strassler (2006) analyzes this event and describes how the children were positioned as an “ideal authentic lens through which the nation might see itself and remember its history” (53). The competitions celebrated the children for their innocence and heralded their pieces as a true reflection of the times and of the nation’s image (65). These children served both as symbols for Indonesia’s post-Suharto future and as a means of framing the violence of the reform movement as part of national progress (54). According to Strassler, the winners of the competition were selected based on what the museum believed children *should* be witnessing (67). These drawings were “sanitized, idealized [images] of national unity and nationalist ‘struggle’” which helped soothe fears of the chaos of *Reformasi* (67–68).

Strassler (2006) describes the flaws with this idealization and advises that such pieces must be viewed within the context of nation-building and society. She recounts stories of students only drawing landscapes in school, forbidden to draw party symbols. An image of a two-peaked mountain top was easily recognizable as a typical child drawing, illustrating how a seemingly

impartial drawing was in fact shaped by socialization and censorship. Strassler (2006) describes that history teachers had “virtually stopped” teaching recent Indonesian history, and children were prohibited from discussing current events. Students were forbidden from discussing anything “off-topic,” including the May 1998 riots, the upcoming independence referendum in East Timor, or corruption (56).

Like with the drawing competition, Nora (1989) discusses how history and nationalism have sometimes gone hand-in-hand, resulting in a single interpretation of an event a collective memory. It is this notion through which this paper will assess Indonesia’s collective memory of the 1965 tragedy and how *The Act of Killing* engages with it.

INDONESIA’S COLLECTIVE MEMORY: 1965 AND THE THREAT OF COMMUNISM

From 1965 until the end of Suharto’s reign in 1998, many Indonesians lived in either “willed amnesia or fearful silence” regarding the events of September 30th and the mass killings that followed (Zurbuchen 2002, 569). Suharto’s regime created a collective memory of the event, one in which the PKI had plotted a coup and violently tortured and slain the generals, necessitating Suharto’s power grab from Sukarno. Van Klinken (2001) describes how the 1965 Tragedy was “immortalized in massive monuments and graphic museum dioramas” (327). These monuments served as *lieux de mémoire*, reinforcing a state-sponsored collective memory of the Tragedy. One of the most notable of these sites was *Lubang Buaya*, the pit where the slain generals had been found. After the event, “army-backed press” circulated stories that the generals had been tortured and that their genitals were mutilated by a Communist-aligned women’s group Gerwani at *Lubang Buaya* (McGregor 2002, 41).

Wieringa (2002) provides an important feminist analysis of the event, explaining how the Coup was “founded on careful manipulation of sexual symbols” (281). She explains how the story of the Gerwani at *Lubang Buaya* was used to spread the narrative of the coup as a PKI-led effort and to demonize Communism. These reports, such as one by *Angkatan Bersenjata*, a widely published newspaper, described how Gerwani members “touched the genitals of the Generals and exhibited their own and danced in front of their victims nakedly, like cannibalistic ceremonies executed by primate tribes” (cited in Wieringa 2002, 305). Ultimately, Wieringa (2002) writes, the “campaign infiltrated the deepest psychic levels of Indonesian society, linking Communism... to *fitnah*, the Islamic concept of sexual disorder” (282). While there is little evidence linking the group to the *Lubang Buaya*, Suharto justified taking power by repeatedly recreating “the myth of the perverted communist beast” (281).

Soon after the coup, the site was dedicated as the *Monumen Pancasila Sakti* (Sacred Pancasila Monument), and every 1 October for the next thirty years, President Suharto held a *Hari Kesaktikan Pancasila* (Sacred Pancasila Day) commemoration at the site to honor Indonesia’s state ideology.⁵ In reality, the day functioned as a reminder to the people that the coup occurred and that it was led by the Communists (40). At the same time, the state attempted to minimize June 1, *Hari Lahir Pancasila* (the date that Sukarno first introduced Pancasila in 1945), as “the government perceived [that it competed]” with the 1 October holiday (40). On another day of the year, 11 March⁶, newspapers would share “eyewitness accounts” describing how Suharto decisively restored order

and “arranged for President Sukarno to sign over most of his powers” (11–12). While challenges to this hegemonic narrative did arise, they were all swiftly minimized or censored by the government (12). In fact, more than 2,000 books were banned during Suharto’s three-decade-long rule, and political dissidents⁷ were sent away to islands far from the capital, particularly Maluku (12).

Interestingly, however, it was not until nearly two decades later, 1984, when the state released a film about 1965. According to Emont (2015), a Suharto loyalist had actually produced a film in 1968 chronicling the army’s victory over the PKI. When asked why this film was not released, Suharto’s minister of information at the time stated, “Why would we advertise a civil war?”⁸ That 1965 was indeed a civil war warrants further discussion. Roosa (2016) describes how 1965 was a “*rahasia umum*” (open secret), which has led to difficulties in fully understanding the event (281–282). In Medan, where *The Act of Killing* (TAOK) was filmed, we see the mass killings were led largely by the *preman*, that is, the civilian militia. Yet Roosa (2016) discusses how such portrayal may lead viewers to believe that the military does not bear responsibility for the killings (282), a point Oppenheimer refutes by arguing that references to the army suffice (Melvin 2013). Regardless, Roosa (2016) also notes that circumstances differed across the Indonesian archipelago (282). He ponders, was it “neighbor killing neighbor” or vertical violence? Historians have brought forward a “dualistic thesis” which “denies an overarching pattern to the killings and rejects the idea that the killings were the responsibility of a single person, group of people, or institution” (282). These questions aside, by 1984, the situation in Indonesia had changed. Suharto’s regime began facing “popular resistance,” leading the government to revisit the triumph-over-the-PKI trope through the creation of a docudrama on the event.

The four-and-a-half-hour film *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* (The 30th September Movement Treason) tells the Suharto-sanctioned narrative of 1965 through a movie that combines documentary-like elements with “fictionalized re-enactments of events” and horror and melodrama (Paramaditha 2013, 44). Arifin C. Noer, by then a well-known Indonesian director, wrote and directed the film; it was Indonesia’s most expensive film ever made at the time (Wargadiredja 2018). From its release until 1998, it was broadcast every year on September 30, and all Indonesian youth were compelled to watch the film, either in school or at movie theaters (Heryanto 1999, 154). Students were also often required to write essays about the film the following day (Strassler 2006, 57). In 1996, the government alleged a Communist revival in the People’s Democratic Party (RPD) and instructed primary and secondary schools to establish special sessions every Monday in September “where the school principal read out a standard text in Communist cruelty” (154). Students were also given “school projects” where they would collect news clippings that condemned the PKI (*Forum Keadilan* 1996b, 28–9). Heryanto (1999) discusses how Suharto’s regime established a “hyper-reality” through the film and its depiction of the events, calling *The Treason* Suharto’s most salient simulation of the victory over the PKI (154).

The film, which Emont (2017) describes as a “reefer madness style horror flick,” begins in 1965 with the country in chaos, full of poverty and political turmoil. The film builds up to the night of September 30th by showing the PKI members planning their attack.⁹ Later, the film brutally depicts PKI members capturing and killing the generals. They are shot multiple times, tortured, and their eyes are gouged out.¹⁰ Afterwards, Suharto, who is appointed head of the military, retrieves the bodies from *Lubang Buaya* and explains the Communist’s role in this event. The film

ends with Suharto condemning their actions and urging the Indonesian people to continue the fight against Communists in the name of the fallen generals.

Noer's directorial choices throughout the film, particularly the audiovisuals, illustrate the dichotomy between the PKI as wrongdoers and Suharto and his forces as the country's saviors. One such example is the scene where the PKI kidnap the generals (2:19:00); here, the audiovisuals create a sense of tragedy and despair. This is created by the music soundtracks which establish different emotions, the palpable moments of near-silence which are suddenly pierced by noises of bullets and shouting, and the sounds of crying. The soundtracks provide, in horror movie fashion, audio cues for the audience that something terrifying is about to occur. As the PKI enter the general's house, ominous music begins playing, reminding the audience of the PKI's frightening nature and of the approaching tragedy. The absence of a soundtrack at times also creates a notable effect, as it brings focus to the general and his family. Moreover, the silence allows the audience to focus on the sounds of the general's movements, his footsteps and the adjustment of his uniform, as he prepares to turn himself over to the PKI.

This quietness ultimately creates a sense of tranquility, which shows the audience that the general is brave, unafraid of the PKI. With this quietness, Noer lures the audience, like the family of the general, into a fleeting moment of calmness, where we are to believe everything will be all right. However, Noer suddenly shatters this near-silence with gunshots and shouting, destroying any sense of optimism the audience had. Moments later, near-silence returns to soothe the audience, the crisp sounds of the general being heard as he walks down the stairs, about to greet his fate. The camera sits at the bottom of the stairs, a low-angle shot which Noer uses to make the general look powerful. Right as we begin to relax again, the general is greeted by a soldier at the bottom of the staircase, creating further anxiety for the viewer. The next scene, shot from above, shows the general praying, with angelic music playing in the background. The angle of the shot, which makes the audience feel like a helpless bystander, coupled with the music, emphasizes the distinction between the "good" loyalists and the "evil" PKI. Looking from above, we feel powerless as the general is shot to death while praying, the music continuing to crescendo throughout. Noer engenders this feeling of powerlessness to channel our frustration against the PKI.



Figure 1. An army general prays next to the PKI.
Moments later, he is shot to death. (*The Treason*, 2:21:15)

Additionally, Noer creates a *lieu de mémoire* through one of the final scenes (4:09:00), where the army discovers *Lubang Buaya*, the site where the slain generals had been buried. After the generals discover the pit filled with bodies, a flashback shows the PKI burying the generals. Like before, the audiovisuals produce an unsettling feeling. In the beginning of the flashback, tribal-sounding music plays as we witness the generals waiting for their executions near the pit. The music emphasizes the barbaric nature of the Communist members. Additionally, the sounds of flies buzzing produce an almost palpable scent of rotting flesh, further disgusting the audience. The darkness produces a sinister feeling, which is contrasted by the daylight which comes moments later. This light is soon followed by ominous music again, as the soldiers prepare the bodies. As before, these elements cause the viewer to associate the PKI with the sinister acts we are observing. Moments later, their bodies are exhumed by the army, and patriotic music plays. Noer uses this contrast between this audio and the ominous music from seconds before, the same ominous music from when the generals were slain, to again juxtapose the army with the PKI. Ultimately, Noer applies these melodramatic and horrific elements to implant this *lieu de mémoire* in the minds of the viewers.



Figure 2. To this day, *Lubang Buaya* is a memorial site for the six generals killed on October 1, 1965. The monument reads: “The ideals of our struggle to uphold the purity of the Pancasila cannot be broken only by burying us in this well.” (Courtesy of *Tribun News*)

***THE ACT OF KILLING:* A NEW COLLECTIVE MEMORY?**

One aspect from 1965 is notably absent from *The Treason*: the purge of one million Communists that followed the 30th September incident. That is where Joshua Oppenheimer’s *The Act of Killing* (2012) comes in. *The Act of Killing* (*TAOK*) is a contemporary film that explores the 1965 tragedy through the lens of several of its killers¹¹¹² and centers around three “protagonists.” These main

characters are *preman*, that is, Indonesian “gangsters,” who oversaw the killings of PKI members and others who were deemed to be anti-Pancasila, in addition to extorting money from ethnic Chinese communities. Oppenheimer, an American who speaks fluent Indonesian, encourages the protagonists to recreate the events of 1965 through the creation of their own film, which we witness being developed throughout *TAOK*. In that way, *TAOK* and *The Treason* are similar; both deal with recreations of 1965. Through this recreation process in *TAOK*, the audience gains insight into the mindset of the killers—their apparent apathy, their sense of impunity, and their belief that what they did was justified.

Nichols, an American film critic and documentary film historian, describes the history of reenactments. Nichols (2008) describes how reenactments were once considered “as staples of documentary representation,” but the 1960s became viewed as inauthentic (72). While reenactments have since returned, they are once again “taken for granted” (72–73). They are found as simulations of wars, escapes, protests, and more. These reenactments, Nichols writes, occupy a “strange status” where they must be recognized as simulations of prior events while “also signaling they are not a representation of a contemporaneous event” (73). According to Bateson (2000), such a shift may suggest a change in the discursive framework. Bateson compares this to how animals distinguish between play and fighting. Bateson (2000) writes, “These actions, in which we now engage, do not denote what would be denoted by those actions which these actions denote” (180). Nichols (2013) connects this idea to the reenactments in *TAOK*, describing how reenactments serve as a form of “meta-commentary” for an original event (25). There is a “retrospective interpretation,” one not present during the original event. This is what makes *The Act of Killing* unique; Oppenheimer gives the film’s subjects free rein to offer their own unchallenged interpretations of 1965. For example, we see Adi Zulkadry, a death squad leader, boast of his murder of his girlfriend’s father because he was Chinese.

The reenactments convey what Nichols (2008) describes as a parodic or ironic tone, which calls the convention of reenactment into question and treats past occurrences comedically (86). What we see in *TAOK* is not “realist dramatization” (84), a common form of reenactment which simulates an event in a realistic style, but rather “stylization” and “typification.” Stylization involves selective exaggerations, highlighting certain aspects of a story (86). Typification occurs when a documentary does not depict specific historical events but rather typifies past routines, behaviors, and patterns. This technique is common in many early documentaries depicting native peoples (84–85), focusing on their “primitive” way of life rather than particular historical events.

One scene that captures the uniqueness of *TAOK*’s reenactment style is when Anwar Congo, one of the gangsters and death squad leaders in Northern Sumatra, tries on costumes with friends (0:30:20). It is the notable lack of horror or dramatic cues that chill the audience and highlight the complexities of the tragedy. Oppenheimer creates this chilling effect through the juxtaposition of the humorous props and relaxed demeanor of the protagonists with the terrible acts they describe. In this particular scene, Anwar places a cowboy hat on Herman’s head, a fellow perpetrator. Herman then exclaims, “What the fuck is this?” to which Anwar explains, “it matches your body shape.” It is frankly a humorous moment. Anwar then places a pink fedora on his own head, giggling and clearly pleased with his new look. The camera appears hand-held and makes us feel like we are in the room. Oppenheimer uses this filming technique to allow us to get comfortable and familiar with the characters. This familiarity is what makes the next scene, which Oppenheimer cuts to soon after, so shocking. The same characters are present, wearing the same

outfits, but in a different room, where Anwar begins discussing how he would use a table to kill his victims. Unlike in *The Treason*, there is no background music, no cue that something “scary” is about to happen. Usually, horror films use ominous music to foreshadow a scary moment that is about to happen, allowing the viewer to essentially prepare himself for that moment: to perhaps look away from the screen and dissociate from the characters and events. Instead, however, Oppenheimer draws us into the characters through these comedic scenes—and we are thus not able to look away in time when their “scary sides” come out. The two scenes, although ultimately quite different in content, are framed very similarly at first, with no initial indication that they are different beyond a very quick cut. This lack of differentiation makes their discussions that much more disconcerting. We see that the killers are not impersonal monsters, but rather people like us. As Hadiz (2006) notes, “Ordinary people, it must be remembered, were active participants, or were at least complicit in the massacres of the 1960s (565).”



Figure 3. Anwar describes how he used tables to execute Communists (*The Act of Killing*, 0:31:29).

Like in *the Tragedy*, *TAOK*'s penultimate scene establishes a *lieu de mémoire*; however, it also complicates the dichotomy of “victim” and “perpetrator.” In this scene (2:37:30), Anwar is standing on a roof where many victims had been killed. Like before, he begins by explaining how he killed his victims. Yet something is different this time; Anwar begins to retch, as if about to vomit. There is no background music or distraction, and our sole focus becomes this moment. This scene creates a sense of catharsis through Anwar's supposed guilt. As he clutches the wall, heaving, unable to stand, he appears disgusted by his own actions. “I knew it was wrong, but I had to do it,” he explains. Anwar's words show some remorse for his own wrongdoings, but he stops short of admitting 1965 itself was wrong. This remorse, albeit not fully developed, is satisfying to the viewer and perhaps to the families of victims. As Anwar finally leaves the roof, he walks down the stairs, slowly, purposefully. Unlike in *The Treason*, the camera is positioned at the top of the stairs, not the bottom. Oppenheimer uses this high angle shot to make Anwar powerless. Like with the general, it is as if we are witnessing Anwar about to meet his fate. However, *unlike* the general, his fate is not death. Rather, it is having to live with the guilt of recognizing what he did was wrong.



Figure 4. Anwar retches as he considers the numerous people he has killed
(The Act of Killing, 2:41:05).

GLOBAL RECEPTION OF *THE ACT OF KILLING*

TAOK has received overwhelmingly positive reviews from Western audiences, with an 85% “Audience Score” on rottentomatoes.com, a popular film review site¹³. Some sources have praised the film for encouraging discussion of the killings, including the “need for accountability and the consequences of impunity” (Simpson 2013, 10). However, its reception from film critics has been more mixed, particularly over its focus on the protagonists, lack of historical value, and its reinforcement of the “white man as discoverer” narrative. Fraser (2013), a well-known film critic, criticizes the scenes where the killers are encouraged to discuss their actions. He writes, “I find them upsetting, not because they reveal so much, as many allege, but because they tell us so little of importance” (21). In “Narratives of Discovery,” Paramaditha (2018) discusses how *TAOK* was framed as a groundbreaking film that “broke the 50 years of silence in Indonesia” and how these narratives of discovery “underpin the discourses” of the film (512). Paramaditha criticizes this paternalistic narrative; however, he notes that “Oppenheimer as a shorthand for the discovery of 1965” is not only produced by the Western media but also by local actors (519).

Interestingly, these activists do not reject the narrative. Rather, they use this for their own strategic purposes (520). Given political and geographic limitations, Paramaditha describes their need to “capitalize on Oppenheimer’s iconic status” to encourage such discourse (520). Tyson examines this situation as well. He notes that claims about *TAOK*’s positive contributions are difficult to verify, such as Oppenheimer’s BAFTA awards speech describing how his film was creating space for national reconciliation and justice (Tyson 2015). However, the film has caused a chain reaction and brought political questions and strategic goals into the forefront. While *TAOK* may serve as a useful tool for groups seeking justice, Paramaditha (2019) reminds us that this very need reminds us of the power imbalance between the North and South, with the former holding a cultural hegemony over the latter (520).

It is important to also focus on the film's reception in Indonesia. Paramaditha (2013) describes how at one screening of the film at the University of Indonesia, one of the nation's most prestigious universities, he witnessed laughter in several scenes among the audience of three hundred students (50). The students, mostly from middle-class backgrounds, periodically burst into fits of laughter, perhaps at the ridiculous costumes and antics of the gangsters. Paramaditha notes a separation between the Indonesian viewers and the subjects in the film. He discusses how the film leaves "very limited space for a critical Indonesian subject position" (47). For those who did not play a role in the killings, they are left to view the tragedy through the eyes of Oppenheimer. Through his eyes, "we might sympathize with the killers but maintain a certain distance to reveal 'the truth'" (47-48). The distance viewers put between themselves and the killers allows them to "put the finger on someone else" and maintain a "higher moral ground" (48). Moreover, the film's circulation primarily through underground screenings and on campuses rather than in mainstream theaters "enhances the feeling that the audiences are seeing atrocities by someone else" (47).

The film has also been criticized for its lack of historical accuracy and content. Besides opening text which describes the tragedy, there is little information about the mass killings. Oppenheimer provides little of his own commentary throughout the film, and claims of innocence, such as the journalist who states he was unaware of the killings happening in the room above him, go unchallenged. According to Crichlow (2014), the film attempts neither to explain or understand the tragedy. Rather, the film's task is to "[retell] events to encourage reflection about the costs of a repression that silences acknowledgment of genocidal history..." (41-42). Oppenheimer validates this idea in interviews. For example, when asked about the film's role in "exposing the role of the military behind the violence," Oppenheimer responds that *TAOK* is not meant to be a historical film; rather, its focus is "mainly on the present" (quoted in Lusztig 2013, 52). He also makes no claims that *TAOK* is "any kind of complete or coherent view of...1965" (52). In an interview with Melvin (2013), Oppenheimer elaborates that the film is "about the imagination of a regime of terror *today*. It is not a historical documentary" (emphasis by Oppenheimer).

MEMORIES AND THE COMPLEXITY OF RECONCILIATION

Ultimately, *TAOK*'s lack of historical elements does not lessen its contribution to Indonesia's collective memory of the 1965 Tragedy. On the contrary, the film sheds light on the perpetrators and their impunity and establishes new sites of memory. According to Trouillot (1995), "The ultimate mark of power is its invisibility; the ultimate challenge, the exposition of its roots" (19). Consequently, Crichlow (2013) believes the task of the film is to retell the events of 1965 and bring awareness to the costs of silence. However, he ends his review with an unanswered question, pondering what the emphasis on the perpetrators can do to help work through Indonesia's past or help with future reconciliation efforts (42). That is perhaps the central question of this piece. With that said, Heryanto (2012) notes that there have been a handful of other documentaries focusing on the victims of the tragedy. These films have been somewhat successful in forming a "counter-claim that boldly reverse the positions of good versus evil" seen in *The Treason*. Nonetheless, according to Heryanto (2012), such narratives reinforce the problematic narrative of the good and evil dichotomy. *TAOK*, then, is valuable for its critique of this model. Moreover, given Tyson and Paramaditha's analysis of the West's cultural hegemony, *TAOK* may be a more effective medium for discussion of 1965 than its local counterparts.

Erll (2008) reminds us that “historical accuracy is not one of the concerns of memory-making movies” (389). She wonders, however, what does turn some media into powerful “media of cultural memory” and not others (390). She writes that memory-making stems not from “unity, coherence and ideological unambiguousness of the images they convey” but rather the discussion it generates around them (396). The result is a “memory culture” on “certain media representations...and sets of questions” (396). While *TAOK*’s historical contributions are questionable, its encouragement of discussion of the Tragedy is more evident. The film has also produced more personal memories from 1965.

Some scholars have discussed the value of such accounts. In Zurbuchen’s (2002) essay “History, Memory, and the ‘1965 Incident’ in Indonesia”, she cites Leksono, an activist and scholar who believes that voicing personal memories plays an important role in reconciliation efforts (579). Though Leksono’s work focuses on the importance of hearing the voices of *victims*, there is perhaps an importance of hearing the voices of the perpetrators as well. As Anwar’s reflection from the aforementioned rooftop scene illustrates—“I knew it was wrong, but I had to do it”—the issue is not black and white. How does Anwar’s remorse, coupled with his lasting belief that the Communists needed to be killed, affect how we judge his acts?

CONCLUSION

Oppenheimer’s film contributes to the collective memory of the 1965 mass killings, though not in the ways we expect. As Nora (1989) notes, societal changes drive people to chase and study memory. Indonesia has certainly changed immensely since the end of the New Order in 1998. For one, Indonesians now enjoy greater freedom of expression (although Communism is still illegal), and the current regime seems more willing to acknowledge past wrongdoings. With these changes has come the desire to revisit the memory of 1965, making films like *TAOK* especially relevant. Oppenheimer’s work thus adds to this memory by establishing Communist mass killing sites as new *lieux de mémoire*. Doing so arguably helps to break the “willed amnesia” surrounding the events following October 1, 1965. Moreover, it sets forth a path for future reconciliation by increasing awareness about the killings, a fact which victim’s families would certainly herald. However, Oppenheimer’s work is in some ways unsavory as well, as it forces us to deal with the complex realities of this tragedy.

Perhaps *The Act of Killing*’s most important contribution, then, is that it reminds us to view the tragedy not through the lens of the traditional dichotomy of “good” and “evil” or “victim” and “perpetrator,” but through a more complex assessment. True reconciliation is perhaps only possible when this begins to occur.

NOTES

¹ Although the event took place on October 1, it is generally referred to as the 30 September Movement because the Indonesian abbreviation for 30 September Movement, *Gerakan Tiga Puluh September*, conveniently abbreviates to *Gestapu* in Indonesian.

² To this day, the motives and actors behind this coup remain ambiguous. Some have argued that the coup was actually orchestrated by Suharto himself, while others cite American influence behind the event. One notable theory that has emerged is that of Anderson and McVey (1971) who argue

that the coup was an “internal Army affair” to remove army staff that had collaborated with the United States Central Intelligence Agency.

³ The New Order refers to Suharto’s regime, which lasted from 1966 until 1998. Suharto was eventually forced to resign in May of 1998 after mass demonstrations, largely a consequence of the economic downturns caused by the Asian Financial Crisis (Emont 2015).

⁴ Nora’s *Lieux de Mémoire* project has not gone without criticisms. One such critique is Nora’s polarization of memory and history. To Nora, “real” memory no longer exists; it has been replaced by “artificial reconstructions” of the present vis-à-vis the past, that is, what we call “history” (Rothberg 2014, 4). A second criticism is Nora’s fixation on “linear” accounts of history (4) which neglect the heterogeneous nature of states.

⁵ Pancasila is composed of five values: Belief in one god, a just and civilized humanity, a unified Indonesia, democracy, and social justice.

⁶ 11 March 1966 is the date President Sukarno signed over authority to General Suharto, leading to the beginning of the New Order in Indonesia.

⁷ One of the most notable examples is Pramoedya Ananta Toer, author of the *Buru Quartet*, who was imprisoned from 1969 to 1979 in the Maluku island of Buru.

⁸ The quote is from a conversation between Rear Marshal Budijardjo, the Minister of Information at the time, and Krishna Sen, dean of Indonesian Studies at University of Western Australia, as mentioned in Emont, 2015.

⁹ For an in-depth analysis of September 30th, see Roosa 2016. Roosa describes how *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* exaggerates the plotters’ level of organization. In reality, they were more clumsy and indecisive (99).

¹⁰ Benedict Anderson has refuted the myth that the generals were tortured in this manner (1987).

¹¹ Oppenheimer, who co-directed the film with an anonymous Indonesian director, spent seven years living in Indonesia for this project, where he was undertaking his PhD studies. He originally arrived in Northern Medan to train plantation workers, who were being exploited, how to make a film. He soon learned that these workers were being threatened by *Pemuda Pancasila* (Pancasila Youth), who had been hired by the plantation’s international owners to intimidate the workers into submission. Oppenheimer then learned that many of these workers’ family members had been killed by that very same group in 1965. At first, Oppenheimer sought out to make a film from the perspective of the victims. However, the victims feared reprisal from the local military and encouraged Oppenheimer to speak with the perpetrators instead. This was ultimately the inspiration for the film (King 2013).

¹² *The Look of Silence* (2014), *TAOK*’s companion piece, flips the story on its head; it explores the tragedy not through the eyes of the “perpetrators” but rather the “victims,” specifically Adi, whose brother was killed in 1965. Within the film, Adi, who is an optometrist, visits several of the so-called evildoers under the guise that he will be inspecting their vision. However, each eye exam eventually involves into a pointed discussion about the events of 1965.

¹³ See https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_act_of_killing.

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FILMOGRAPHY

1. *The Act of Killing* (Director's Cut) is available for free on [Amazon](#) for Prime members and can also be purchased on [Youtube](#) for \$2.99.
2. *Pengkhianatan G30S PKI* (The Treason of the September 30th Movement) is available for free on [Youtube](#) (no English subtitles).