

Matt Easton Writer and consultant

The Look of Silence and the End of Fear

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A decade ago, Joshua Oppenheimer filmed two men by an Indonesian riverbank as they recounted their part in a political genocide. The army had seized power in 1965, organizing gangs and Muslim groups to kill up to a million suspected leftists. As Oppenheimer described the scene in an email:

Two aging death squad leaders take me to a riverbank, reenacting with apparent glee how they helped the army to kill 10,500 people at a single clearing on the banks of the Snake River. At the end, they pose for snapshots -- souvenirs of what for them was a happy afternoon out. For me, though, it was among the most traumatic days of my life.

That afternoon was the genesis of two documentaries. In 2013's Oscar-nominated *The Act of Killing*, another aging gangster named Anwar Congo recreated his part in the killings as film noir, action movies and westerns, as well as staging lush musical numbers. (I wrote about it [here](#)). The surreal and macabre recreations were deeply unsettling, even as the near-total absence of victims allowed viewers to begin to identify with this likable grandfather, responsible for perhaps a thousand deaths by garrote and machete.

Some audiences described a resulting feeling of queasiness, and Oppenheimer also faced criticism for giving killers a platform to boast and lie. But this approach allowed perpetrators to implicate both themselves and a state still insisting on perverse fictions while rewarding killers with wealth and power. Oppenheimer always knew he would make a second movie. When *The Act of Killing* was finished -- but before it was released -- he

rejoined Indonesian colleagues (kept anonymous for safety) to film a quiet optician named Adi, his fierce and furious mother, and his ancient father.

Fifty years ago, Adi's brother Ramli was taken from a prison camp to be executed. He was stabbed repeatedly before he escaped and crawled home, asking his mother for some hot coffee. In the morning men came for him, promising to bring him to a hospital. Instead, as his mother knew they would, they killed him by the river. Adi was born a couple of years later, a miracle to his grieving parents.

Adi had encouraged Oppenheimer to interview the boastful perpetrators, leading to the first film. The director showed him footage over the years, including the two men sunnily describing Ramli's death by the banks of the Snake. The look on Adi's face as he absorbs this scene partly inspired the title, *The Look of Silence*.

But the film is ultimately about speaking. Seeing his parents trapped in silence, and his children taught in school that their uncle's killers were heroes, Adi suggested something unprecedented: On camera, he would confront the men who killed his brother and thousands of others.



Not strictly a sequel, this film is most effective when watched after *The Act of Killing*. The first film depicted the lies the killers -- and the rest of us -- tell to live with terrible truths. In a glittering and gauzy sequence conceived by Congo, a victim lifts the garrote from his own neck, and offers the old gangster a medal and his gratitude, as "Born Free" swells in the background. As Oppenheimer explained to me, it is

"A film about escapism, fantasy... and guilt. Inevitably, it is a flamboyant film, a tropical Hieronymus Bosch, a fever dream."

The second film has a clear narrative and a true hero in Adi, and when he identifies himself as Ramli's brother, the mood shifts. The boasts and fantasies give way to denials, threats

and demands to leave the past alone. In some countries, Holocaust denial is a crime. In Indonesia, it is progress.

Adi seems ready to attempt reconciliation if only he sees some remorse, and the title could also refer to the pauses during these confrontations. Adi's facial muscles twitch as he awaits a response, and in these moments it's possible to imagine that a victim has at last made the perpetrators fall silent in their shame.



Ultimately, Adi never gets the remorse he seeks, but we get a glimpse of what is possible. A daughter appears shaken to hear her father describe drinking the blood of his victims (a superstitious effort to ward off insanity), and apologizes for him. The film focuses on this personal level, especially through the deeply intimate view of Adi's family. There are only hints of the role larger forces played in the 1965 killings such as the Indonesian army, the U.S. government, and the Cold War. Asked about these gaps at the NY Film Festival, Oppenheimer agreed these were crucial topics, but were not his subject.

The films have a purpose apart from a political expose, and distinct from each other. Oppenheimer has described the first as a bomb to blow open the space to talk about the past, while *The Look of Silence* hints at how to fill that space with the truth, and then perhaps justice and healing. Sociologist Ariel Heryanto [writes](#):

The *Look of Silence* offers a glimmer of hope for the future of Indonesia. It provides a model and an inspiration for Indonesian audiences to dare to confront and accuse those involved in the violence of 1965-66, violence that, to this day, some deny while others glorify.

I will give the remarkable Adi the last word, in a message sent to me through Oppenheimer:

When I first told Joshua that I wanted to meet the perpetrators, he refused. He felt it would be too dangerous. But I explained why: I wanted them to acknowledge what they did was wrong. I hoped that by meeting me, a brother of one of their victims, they would be forced to realize they killed human beings, and acknowledge it was wrong... This way, we could live side by side as human beings, instead of as perpetrator and victim, divided by mutual suspicion and fear. In this way, I hoped to lift my family out of the trap of fear in which we were living for so long.

The Look of Silence is showing at film festivals before a US release in Summer 2015.

The [trailer](#) is here.

<http://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/aug/27/the-look-of-silence-review-act-of-killing-venice-film-festival>

The Look of Silence: Act of Killing director's second film is as horrifically gripping as first - Venice film festival review

5/5stars

Joshua Oppenheimer is back with another backstage take on the Indonesian death squads of the 1960s. This follow-up is more personal, more combative. But it's just as much a must-see as its predecessor



The Look of Silence uses the image of seeing and not seeing to confront Indonesia's response to its bloody past



Peter Bradshaw in Venice

@PeterBradshaw1

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Joshua Oppenheimer's [The Look of Silence](#) is a stunning companion piece, or possibly narrative development, to that extraordinary 2012 documentary *The Act Of Killing*. Its enigmatic title may indicate the numb silence which is the only possibly reaction to a certain kind of savagery and inhumanity, but perhaps mean the way that a nation sees but not see, sees in such a selective and slanted way as to suppress meaning, sees in such a way as to smother dissent into silence.

[The Act of Killing](#) showed Oppenheimer tracking down the grinning, ageing members of the Indonesian civilian militia who with the tacit approval of the army and government carried out the wholesale slaughter of a million suspected communists after the 1965 Suharto coup; sensationally, Oppenheimer persuaded them to re-act their crimes in the styles of their favourite movies.

This technique — a veritable Marat/Sade of 20th-century history — exposed the nature of the offence more effectively than traditional documentary procedure. It revealed that the barbarity was not merely an act of ideological brutality, but group dysfunction, a convulsion of mass psychosis, and that the

perpetrators were moreover entirely unrepentant. Indeed, the idea of submitting their acts to some kind of ethical assessment or justification had never occurred to them. Oppenheimer has a claim to have made a sort of history with that film.

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This new movie is far more conventional, and conventionally confrontational than the previous one, and the people involved seem at last to have grasped how horrendous they are appearing and so there is more of the familiar embattled-interviewee choreography: the demands to stop filming, the shrill addresses to the director “Josh” behind the camera, and the removal of the radio microphone.

But this film is just as piercingly and authentically horrifying as before. It is filmed with exactly the same superb visual sense, the same passionate love of the Indonesian landscape, and dialogue exchanges are captured with the same chilling crispness.

The person at its centre is Adi, an ophthalmologist in his early 40s who travels around making housecalls, fitting people for spectacles — and so the imagery of seeing and willed myopia is established from the outset. Adi’s brother Ramli was killed by the militia just before Adi was born, a petty criminal who was dragged out of prison along with hundreds of others and slaughtered so that the militia could boost their own version of a “bodycount” a righteous tally of supposed communist-slayings. Ramli was butchered in various sickening ways which the perpetrators chillingly boast about.



The Look of Silence

Oppenheimer has the killers on video tape doing just that — he appears to have discovered these stomach-turning characters around 10 years ago, while researching *The Act of Killing*. We see Adi impassively watching their giggling performance on television, and then going around to interview the killers, in some cases fitting them with glasses, in interview situations set up by Oppenheimer. Incredibly, “Josh” is still not especially suspected or loathed by these villains, and they are of course utterly indifferent to his film and how it has been received.

With great calm and dignity, Adi sets out the facts, and then he — and we — have to listen to good deal of sub-Nuremberg bluster about obeying orders, or a sort of introspective silence, perhaps indicating the glimmerings of conscience or a strategic retreat into Alzheimer’s. But often there is the same cackle that this was something that needed to be done.

We get one macabre detail. Many of them seemed to believe that drinking the blood of their victims would prevent them from going mad. Just as Tom Lehrer believed that Kissinger’s Nobel Peace Prize rendered satire obsolete, so this blood-drinking detail renders futile any kind of political or psychological analysis. It is pure reactionary-murderous voodoo, and it does appear to be believed by people who, perhaps, deep in their heart, recognised that they had already gone mad. And what is still more painful is that Adi finds that his now 82-year-old uncle was a prison guard who colluded in the killings.



The Look of Silence

The extra stratum of heartbreak in Adi's life is his parents: they had him in late middle-age when Ramli was killed, and seemed to regard his birth as some kind of providential divine gesture of comfort. But now his mother and father are extremely old, over 100, his father blind (that image again) and wizened, and his poor stooped mother dedicated to looking after this tiny little creature. It is as if they are cursed never to die, a terrible Struldbrugian existence. The horror they have gone through lives interminably on.

After *The Act of Killing*, Oppenheimer was criticised in some quarters for sensationalism and exploitation and it is conceivable that his unsparing view of Adi's desperately unhappy parents will expose this director to more objections on this score. For me, the film about Adi, his parents and his homeland has a tragic dimension, and it is obvious that he has still only scratched the surface. *The Look of Silence* — like *The Act of Killing* — is arresting and important film-making.