

Sculpting a Lethal Landscape/Producing a Crime Scene: Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Look of Silence*

by Janet Walker with best regards to Joshua and the Visible Evidence 21 gathering in New Delhi, India, December 2014

In *The Act of Killing*, Joshua Oppenheimer's 2012 masterwork about the Indonesian massacres of 1965-66, lethal surroundings proliferate: the street along which two of the perpetrators drive, reminiscing companionably as they catch sight of the newspaper office where they tortured and killed their victims; the open rooftop where the film's protagonist Anwar Congo reenacts his killing methods; the rubber plantation where what he did to others was so horrific he still has nightmares about it. And then there are the settings created specifically for the film: a village built and burnt to the ground to reenact the destruction of Kampung Kolam, office interiors constructed on a studio set for the melodramatic reenactment of scenes of mortal interrogation, with Anwar alternating between the roles of exuberant genocidaire and suffering victim.

This is the creative repertoire through which *The Act of Killing* presents its testimonies, and these are the spaces through which it establishes the area in and around Medan for what it is: a crime scene heretofore unmarked as such. Of course survivors, bystanders, and perpetrators are well aware of North Sumatra as an environment where corporal violations and deaths—the massacres were part of an anti-communist purge in the transition to the Suharto government—took place. But this knowledge has been suppressed by the continuity and force of the regime in power. The work of *The Act of Killing* therefore, as I have argued in the *Film Quarterly* dossier devoted to its study, is not only to illuminate an obscured history of atrocity, but actually to produce a new geography of public realization, accounting, and change: a crime scene fully rendered.

Oppenheimer's remarkable new film, *The Look of Silence*, concentrates and intensifies this place-making labor to an extraordinary degree. Of the hundreds of thousands of deaths, the film narrows its focus, first to the 32 murders by a particular pair of killers, and then to one agonizing death: that of Ramli, the son and older brother of the film's main family. *The Look of Silence* also narrows its spatial focus, returning several times to a certain stretch of road and the path that veers off down to the Snake River.

Some twenty minutes into the film we are on that road, an apparently ordinary by-way carved by vehicle tracks on either side of a grassy median strip. And we are there with Amir Hasan and Inong, heads of the village death squad, formerly. Walking along on foot, away from the town center, they recount and reenact—with Inong playing the victim—how they loaded their perceived enemies into a truck and beat and hacked them with machetes. Then, across a cut, it is another occasion and we are with another small group: Kemat, a man who escaped the truck and survived; Adi, Ramli's brother born two years after his death, the central person of the film; and Adi's own son taking it all in. "Is this the place where Ramli realized he would be killed?" asks Adi. Suddenly another cut, and we are back to Amir and Inong making their way down the slope toward the river. "It's slippery," they remark. "Please don't kill me," Inong protests, simultaneously playing victim and narrator. Back again to Kemat, saying a prayer as

he walks along with Adi, and then he too makes his way down the slope: “my old body is heavy now.” This is how the past is reanimated in the present and, importantly, on site, now with the killers and then with a rare survivor and the facilitator of his return, treading the once bloody path. Adi also transports his mother on the back of his bicycle to what may be that same vicinity—or looks as much. As we see them riding through the trees we hear her voice telling how Ramli fled to her with his body ripped open, but how they came for him the next day and took him away in a truck. We are not spared the knowledge of exactly how Ramli died—a protracted death. For a bit later in the film we are once more at the edge of the river with Amir and Inong who reenact how they continued to hack and stab Ramli, throwing him in the river, fishing him out, and cutting off his penis: from behind, like this, they demonstrate. “He was probably a good person,” they conclude. Now we understand the import of the nighttime images of moving trucks that haunt the film’s beginning and end.

Some will say—have said—that the film has no ethical right to retraumatize this man, Adi, who abides at its heart. In front of a monitor showing footage of Amir Hosan and Inong demonstrating their killing acts Adi appears stoic but distressed. Likewise, he musters good humor when scouring the area, moving from one interlocutor to the next, invoking the savage past (while plying his optical trade): his own mother, his uncle, the speaker of the regional legislature, the family of Amir, and Inong. “I don’t like deep questions; you ask much deeper questions than Joshua ever asked,” protests Inong. Moreover, it may seem that Oppenheimer has put Adi up to this work, thereby placing the man’s life at risk (the legislator threatens Adi on camera, sure of his power and immunity). Some may wonder about Adi’s own ethics in confronting Amir’s aged widow, a woman who might otherwise have lived out her days in whatever peace she could muster. “My mom is ill and this will retraumatize her,” protests her son. She says she knew nothing of her husband’s killing spree (but isn’t that her we see standing next to Amir as he brags to Joshua about the picture book he drew to document his deeds?). At any rate, the woman has the decency to offer Adi an emotional apology for her husband’s acts.

When I have screened *Shoah* in the classroom, some of the students have questioned the skew of Lanzmann’s ethical compass where we see him pressuring survivor witnesses or using a hidden camera to film his interview with a former Auschwitz SS Unterscharführer. Sure, the man’s a Nazi, but documentary ethics balance atop a slippery slope, they hold, and must not be shaken. Whatever one’s opinion about that particular dilemma, *The Look of Silence* differs in the aspect of its currency (among other aspects). Adi’s and Oppenheimer’s questions are thrown down *in medias res*, in the midst of an unreconciled landscape that their persistent inquiries are now materializing as a scene of crimes-committed, and that their bodily movements are now resculpting in the name of the dead. Enactment and reenactment are necessary operations of Oppenheimer’s new masterwork.

Adi’s father, lost in a room he doesn’t recognize, cries out “Where am I?” The camera operator follows; the screaming persists. The Indonesian silence has continued long enough; as the film also demonstrates, it is time to make an impression.