

Film Reviews

The Look of Silence

Directed by Joshua Oppenheimer, 2014, 102 minutes, color. Distributed by Drafthouse Films, Austin, TX 78749, <http://drafthousefilms.com/>

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With *The Look of Silence*, American director Joshua Oppenheimer presents an intimate, groundbreaking, and masterfully crafted portrait of the human cost of impunity. The film is the companion to the Oscar-nominated picture *The Act of Killing* (2012)¹ and the culmination of Oppenheimer's multi-year engagement with Indonesia. In 2001, Oppenheimer traveled to North Sumatra to assist palm oil plantation workers in documenting their efforts to organize a labor union in the aftermath of the Suharto dictatorship.² As he learned more about the challenges facing his collaborators, his inquiry shifted focus toward the perpetrators of the anti-communist mass killings (1965/1966) who have maintained power and prestige, and the survivors who have largely remained in fearful silence for half a century. Together, the films reveal a haunting of the present in which memory is performed and remembering is documented in striking and revelatory ways. In this diptych, Oppenheimer has called *The Look of Silence* a "poem to silence" that seeks "to disrupt the functioning of fear."³

The protagonist of the documentary is an optometrist named Adi Rukun. Adi's brother, Ramli, was tortured and murdered by paramilitary forces two years before Adi's birth. His mother, Rohani, tells him that he is the answer to her prayers—after Ramli's death, she would have gone mad without Adi. We witness as Adi confronts his brother's murderers, traveling from perpetrator to perpetrator, inquiring into the trauma that has devastated the lives of his elderly parents. We observe as Adi listens closely, measuring answers and determining responses. These interactions are shot in frontal close-up, creating a breathless tension as perpe-

trators glorify, justify, and deny their actions. The camera covers the weight of the unspoken between Adi and his interlocutors. Silence itself is a protagonist. The film is neither word-driven nor journalistic in its approach to the present-day and real-time impact of the massacres. Rather, the film lays bare the urgent need for truth and reconciliation, while also evoking the painful impossibilities of the same through a spacious filmic unfolding. Throughout the film, Adi's mother, Rohani, speaks to her lost son, Ramli. In this way, *The Look of Silence* is also a poem to Ramli—to the wound of his murder and to the ongoing presence of loss in the wake of atrocity.

In the brilliantly edited opening sequence, we observe Adi looking in fixed silence at something off-screen. We hear a man singing, his voice present and up close. The film cuts to video footage played from a small television; Adi's gaze is focused on the perpetrators of the mass violence, the footage that Oppenheimer filmed over several years. The man in the footage sings a love song. He croons, "Why should I remember if remembering only breaks my heart?" We hear the director's voice offscreen inquire about a killing. The man recounts how he ripped people open, laughing as he reenacts torture and murder. Adi's gaze (and our observation of Adi as he watches the footage) is what unites the diptych. The footage sets the foundation for Adi's inquiry into his brother's murder, in the absence of any formal investigation or truth and reconciliation proceedings. But what is at stake in remembering? When Adi begins speaking to village members, he is warned that he "asks too many questions." When he wonders how his mother feels that the mayor and teachers of their village "were all killers," his mother replies, "There's no use raising it now. It's up to God." One of the survivors of the Snake River massacre where Ramli was killed tells Adi, "The past is past. I've accepted it. I don't want to remember. It's just asking for trouble. It's covered up. Why open it again? The wound has healed." One of the former commanders of the Komando Aksi death squads threatens Adi, "If you keep making an issue of the past, it will definitely happen again." These

interactions are heartbreaking, riveting, and frightening because they occur at a time when the perpetrators of the violence remain in power and reap the benefits of a history that has cast them as victorious heroes. In a classroom scene, a teacher tells his students, “The communists were cruel so the government had to oppress them. Let’s thank the heroes who struggled to make our country a democracy.” These scenes underscore not only the bravery of the protagonist and the human rights community in Indonesia, but also the challenge of memory in the face of impunity—the very fragility of those involved in this project, Adi, his family members, the film crew and director, and the anonymous collaborators.

Archival television footage is employed only once, and with great impact. A 1967 NBC news report heralds the mass killings as a welcome victory over communism. The footage serves to situate the massacres ideologically within a global context and to evidence the uncritical and celebratory stance prevalent among Western countries at the time. The wholesale sanctioning of death camps, forced labor, and large-scale paramilitary assassination as presented in the report is chilling and raises timely questions about international responsibility and U.S. implication in the crimes.

The film exhibits an exquisitely metaphorical visual language not often seen in documentary productions. The ghostly shot of military trucks traveling silently at night; the devastating shot of Adi’s father terrified and lost in his own home; mysterious jumping beans that simultaneously evoke entrapment and possibility; the sound of insects that persists intermittently throughout the film without visually revealing its source: these images and sound create a stunning ambience of anxiety, pain, empathy, and curiosity. They formulate a space in which the viewer is asked to consider the implications of an atrocity in which the perpetrators have not only remained in power, but at times benefited financially, politically, and socially from their acts of killing.

Oppenheimer’s adroit and sensitive storytelling explores issues of concern to anthropologists, human rights activists, film scholars, and documentary filmmakers. The film can be analyzed as part of a broader curriculum exploring memory and political violence, the ethics and politics of representation and recognition, the limits and possibilities of truth and reconciliation initiatives, U.S. foreign policy, documentary and sensory ethnography, and engaged and public anthropology. In seminar settings, the film can be screened in conversation with other recent documentaries about memory and mass trauma—for example, *El Lugar Más Pequeño*⁴ (2012) directed by Tatiana Huezo Sánchez, and

*Nostalgia de La Luz*⁵ (2010) directed by Patricio Guzmán. For visual anthropologists, *The Look of Silence* offers rich material from which to critically consider the role of the filmmaker in documenting and engaging society through the lens. The influence of Jean Rouch (specifically his practice of intense collaboration with his protagonists and his concept of a camera that catalyzes) is notable in Oppenheimer’s filmmaking. Within a context of long-term engagement and implicated practice, what happens in front of the camera happens precisely because the camera is filming, the protagonists are performing, and the director is directing. This is not to say the film is fiction, but rather to say that Oppenheimer, as a documentary director, is highly conscious of the role that imagination and performance play in the construction of our truths.

Notes

- ¹ See Susan Falls (2015), The Act of Killing Film Review. *Visual Anthropology Review* 31(1): 111–117.
- ² Master class with Joshua Oppenheimer, Gothenburg Film Festival, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wJ9_EWfJ8Dc. Accessed July 25, 2015.
- ³ *The Look of Silence* Panel Discussion, Berlinale 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5qBJ70lTgcs>. Accessed July 25, 2015.
- ⁴ Distributor website: <http://icarusfilms.com/new2012/tiny.html>. Accessed July 25, 2015.
- ⁵ Distributor website: https://www.trigon-film.org/en/movies/Nostalgia_de_la_luz. Accessed July 25, 2015.

Manakamana

Directed by Stephanie Spray and Pacho Velez.
Produced by Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel, 2013, 118 minutes, color. Distributed by Cinema Guild, 115 West 30th Street, Suite 800, New York, NY 10001, <http://www.manakamanafilm.com>

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“High above a jungle in Nepal, pilgrims make an ancient journey by cable car to worship Manakamana” (<http://manakamanafilm.com>). This minimalist one-sentence synopsis encapsulates the *histoire*, or story, of Spray and Velez’s 2013 film; what it cannot possibly convey, however, is the great cinematic experience and the moving encounters that await the viewer in lofty heights.