***I had to dispense with the facts or you wouldn’t have perceived the truth***

When the phrase ‘political documentary’ comes to mind, one would expect the typical tropes of a dark, revealing & pretentiously high-minded story, cataloguing the cruelty of life; hours of footage of war crimes, genocides, conspiracies or miscarriages of justice, layered over with the philosophical musings of a soulless narrator, packaged up nicely in the form of ‘Oscar bait’. So it comes as some surprise then, when “The Act of Killing” bids to outdo all its genre predecessors by breaking down the very foundations upon which documentary genre was built.

Ironically, the The ‘Act of Killing’ key selling point as a documentary film lies in its flexibility to mould itself to become something less documentary-esque, opting to depict scenes that seem that seem to manipulate facts in a genre meant to reveal the truth. The film introduces us to several Indonesian mass murderers, correction, ‘movie stars’, who revel in the opportunity to chronicle their golden years carrying out an anti-Communist purge in 60’s through a production of their own movie. This movie, set as a backdrop to Oppenheimer’s documentary highlights Oppenheimer’s genius in his ability to manipulate false appearances and subtly underscore the realities the film depicts. The characters of the mass murderers, who so candidly demonstrate, re-enact and acknowledge their monstrous crimes, dominate the film with their rambunctious belief in their impunity, and in doing so, deliver unshielded performances and testimonies that shake the audience’s belief in the verisimilitude of the film. The motif of facades such as the character of Anwar being unable to accept his own image, going to extents of applying cologne to mask the scent of death & purchasing a new set of teeth to veil the vileness of his disposition, whilst simultaneously struggling to come to terms with the sadistic nature of his actions, are represented as metaphors for the clash between image and reality. Similarly, the blurring of lines between scenes where the mass murderers are in character and scenes which actually document the murderer’s lives & interactions through mise en abyme pave a way for a metatheatrical representation of the dichotomies of appearance and reality, delving into surrealist film and leading the audience to question everything from their instilled belief of the inherently evil nature of these men, to the truthfulness of the film, to the extents of Oppenheimer’s honesty to the audience and to the characters, and even to the genre of film. The “Act of Killing” is a film that lies to deliver the real truth to the audience, and the sheer genius of this concept alone is one that should be lauded.

The character development in “The Act of Killing”, is, even at its dullest, extremely rewarding to observe. Anwar Congo, the film’s protagonist/antagonist is initially presented to us as a 2-dimensional character, portrayed to the viewers as a remorseless, antagonistic and morally unjustifiable figurehead for the film. Scenes such as the one where the character confesses to drinking and dancing whilst killing, underlines his trivial perception of life. The viewer is left to lap this up, as they once again reinforce Kant’s concept of radical evil, whilst simultaneously comforting themselves that they will never be capable of such actions. And that is where the two-dimensionality stops. Immediately, Oppenheimer launches into a juxtaposing portrayal of Anwar vulnerability, depicting scenes where Anwar loudly drowns his sorrows in alcohol or booze, scenes that delve into the Anwar’s hellish nightmares of his victims’ haunting, even scenes where the awkwardness of his character is manipulated to become a tool of laughter. Even as we question the legitimacy of this transformation, something primal within the audience responds to this character’s vindication. Anwar begins empathise with his victim’s suffering, and Oppenheimer seizes this to leverage Anwar’s realisation as to the true extents of his actions. The character’s road to ‘redemption’ is cemented on the ending shot, as a monster who could have been a good man suffocates on the truth. When the journey towards redemption is applied towards a figure that symbolises so much wrong with humanity, the film truly hammers in the concept on the banality of evil, showing that despite all depths of evilness, we are all still human. In turn the “Act of Killing” ends on a note that allows us to empathise with a monster, consequently portraying our own potential to commit evil. It is this hard-hitting truth that truly catalyses the subtle brilliance of the film.

“The Act of Killing” is a work that many reviewers can only hope to see in their lifetimes, a work that cuts through the tropes of genre and delivers a frankly nuanced yet powerful message on the nature of humanity. A work that truly entertained, whilst simultaneously playing on the audience to question their personal values. “The Act of Killing” is a film that slowly and carefully climbed a mountain of lament and shame, and even as it cut to an ominous black, we were left to marvel at the perfectly empty feeling of the majestic sadness that lies in this film’s crux.

10/10 – “Rate it don’t hate it”