

3. *The Act of Killing*

Investigative strategies for a 'Post-Political' Age.

Abstract: Unusually for a political documentary, *The Act of Killing* provides its audiences with little information, no overarching argument, nor a call-to-action. Instead, director Joshua Oppenheimer uses two unconventional investigative strategies—re-enactment and an examination of media affect—to uncover the 1965 Indonesian genocide and the shadow it casts over present-day Indonesia. Although these techniques have been used previously in documentary cinema, Oppenheimer employs them in innovative ways to dig under Indonesia's social unconscious and expose the artifice of the 'official' history of the genocide. This article provides a close analyses of *The Act of Killing*'s use of these strategies. It argues that they are not only integral to the documentary's political success in the Indonesian context, but can also be used by political documentarists and committed journalists to mobilise otherwise disengaged audiences in our 'non-ideological' and 'post-political' age.

Keywords: death of journalism, democracy, end of ideology, Indonesia, media affect, political documentary, political journalism, post-politics, re-enactment, *The Act of Killing*

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THE ACT OF KILLING (Byrge-Sorensen & Oppenheimer, 2012) is an Oscar-nominated documentary about the executioners of the 1965 Indonesian genocide. Instead of interviewing his subjects, director Joshua Oppenheimer provided them with all the materials necessary to re-enact their memories in a number of Hollywood-style scenes. He then filmed them as they prepared for and performed in their re-enactments, and again when they watched their work on-screen. The documentary therefore uses two unconventional investigative strategies—re-enactment and an examination of media affect—to uncover the 1965 genocide and its influence over present-day Indonesia. Film critics widely credit these strategies for their innovation, and Oppenheimer has echoed their reaction by referring to his film as a 'new form of documentary [...] a documentary of the imagination' (cited in Bradshaw, 2013, p. 38). This overstates the film's innovation, however, as it neglects previous use of these techniques by other documentary-makers. Testing the validity of *The Act of Killing*'s purported innovation thus requires situating it within the canon of documentary cinema. I argue that while Oppenheimer borrows heavily from previous documentary-makers, he uses these techniques as 'investigative strategies' in order to achieve different political ends. Moreover,

The Act of Killing's use of re-enactment and media affect must be understood within the 21st century 'postmodern', 'post-documentary' and 'post-political' era in which the film was made. Its political achievements are all the more innovative in light of this different social context. The success with which *The Act of Killing* politically engages its viewers could therefore indicate the future direction of the political documentary, as documentary-makers require new ways of responding to our ubiquitous media environment and the so-called 'end of politics'.

***The Act of Killing* (2012)**

The Act of Killing never began as a series of surreal re-enactments by past-executioners. The project Oppenheimer initially embarked on was much more conventional: a documentary interviewing the genocide's survivors, many of whom are (still-marginalised) Chinese Indonesians. He found, however, that this documentary was impossible to make. Local armies learnt of the project and pressured its participants to withdraw (VICE, 2014). Furthermore, Oppenheimer and his crew were arrested, and their equipment was seized, each time they tried to interview their subjects (Bradshaw, 2013, p. 38). While the genocide's survivors faced suppression, the perpetrators willingly made themselves available to Oppenheimer and boasted about their violent past. The documentary thus grew into a film about the killers and their impunity in present-day Indonesia. Tellingly, these executioners remain politically powerful and, unlike their Cambodian counterparts, have never testified at an international tribunal. At the time of *The Act of Killing*'s production, the genocide had not been formally acknowledged by the Indonesian government and was not discussed openly in Indonesian society. Worldwide it was little-known and, in the rare event it received mention, was referred to euphemistically as 'the 1965 killings', even though over 500,000 alleged 'communists' (most of whom were ethnic Chinese) were systematically killed within a year (Morris, 2015). This euphemistic understanding is likely a cover for the complicit role the West—particularly the United States—played at the time of the genocide, as part of their 'containment of communism in Southeast Asia' (Morris, 2015). Curiously then, for a documentary with an overtly political subject matter, *The Act of Killing* provides very little information about the genocide, no explicit argument about the perpetrators' guilt, nor a call-to-action mobilising audiences to lobby for their arrest. Its political ambitions are, on the surface, confined to the film's main character—a past-executioner called Anwar Congo. It is implied that Anwar undergoes a psychological transformation through the process of creating, performing in, and watching his re-enactments. By the film's end, he is no longer boastful, but (allegedly) ashamed and disturbed. *The Act of Killing* contentiously suggests that Anwar is more affected by the mediated processes of film-making and film-viewing than he was committing the violence in real life.

The political achievements of *The Act of Killing*, however, go beyond the perpetrators' moments of self-realisation. Despite its post-political appearance, the documentary

has successfully provoked political engagement in its audiences. As a result of the film's release, two of Indonesia's largest news publications ran special editions calling for the country to confront its traumatic past. These reports broke 'a 47-year silence about the genocide in the mainstream media' (Oppenheimer, 2014). Moreover, the film has 'been screened thousands of times in Indonesia' (Oppenheimer, 2014). These screenings were mostly 'underground'; hosted by activists, academics and journalists with 'extremely tight security' (Cooper, 2013). However, several screenings have been held openly and 'without incident' (Cutsworth, 2014). For those unable to attend (due to fear of reprisal or otherwise), Oppenheimer and his crew uploaded a full version of the film online, available to view freely in Indonesia. It had been 'downloaded from YouTube more than 30,000 times' within a week after it was first posted (Cochrane, 2014). *The Act of Killing's* 2014 Oscar nomination also provoked a reaction in China, where the Indonesian genocide is 'little publicised' despite the targeting of ethnic Chinese (Li, 2014). According to the *South China Morning Post*, bloggers were 'startled by the atrocities the film revealed' and 'demanded that the Chinese government take a tougher stance against Indonesia' (Li, 2014). Moreover, Joshua Oppenheimer has since released *The Look of Silence* (Byrge-Sorensen & Oppenheimer, 2015), a companion documentary, which builds upon the 'regime of fear' uncovered in *The Act of Killing* to 'explore what it is like to be a survivor in such a reality' (*Director's Notes*, 2015). The film was screened publicly at 480 locations across Indonesia on International Human Rights Day last year (Danish Film Institute, 2014). While there is no unequivocal measure of political success, *The Act of Killing* has managed to prompt public discussion of a national trauma that is actively suppressed by Indonesia's social and political elites.

Documentary and democracy

The Act of Killing's lack of informative and persuasive functions distinguishes it from documentary cinema's conventional engagement with politics. According to Bill Nichols, 'expository argument' is a defining convention of documentary cinema (1991, p. 4). Documentary-makers adopt informative (expository) and persuasive (argumentative) conventions in the hope of achieving wider political goals. In doing so, documentary audiences are addressed not as entertainment consumers, as with fictional films, but agentive citizens who can be called upon to address social injustices. John Corner likewise argues that documentary is historically linked to 'the project of democratic civics'; its 'expository realism' resonates with a 'public rhetoric of reform and progress' (2002, pp. 269; 265). This democratic function is closely linked with documentary's modernist roots. Michael Renov reminds us of documentary's three-fold 'linkages to the scientific project, to observational methods and the protocols of journalistic reportage' (2004, p. 174). Modernity gave credence to techno-scientific modes of discovery, as technology and science were privileged as the modes by which one could uncover the 'objective' truth. Cameras, as a 'reproductive technology' were imbued 'with the power to preserve and represent

the word in real time' (Renov, 2004, p. 172). A relationship was thus forged between filmic documentation of social injustices, public dissemination of this information, and wider political progress. In this modernist period, documentary cinema was primarily a form of evidence-gathering, or 'journalistic reportage', used to 'induce social action' (Renov, 2004, pp. 174; xvii). The concurrent movements of American direct cinema, European new wave and British social realism speak to the popularity of observational film-making methods, and their social advocacy underpinnings, in the mid-20th century.

The documentary culture of the present, however, is markedly different. This is the context in which we need to place *The Act of Killing* in order to recognise the significance of its investigative strategies and political achievements. 21st century culture is characterised as both 'postmodern' and 'post-documentary'. Postmodernism, according to Zygmunt Bauman, is the cultural realisation that 'an ethics that is universal and "objectively founded" is a practical impossibility' (1993, p. 10). It is an attitude towards knowledge that rejects both modernity's belief in universal truths and its privileging of techno-scientific modes of discovery. Given documentary's modernist foundations, then, how is the genre able to survive in our postmodern era? John Corner responds to this question by arguing that postmodernism has provoked a 'post-documentary culture', marked by a 'new playfulness for documentary credibility' (2002, pp. 255; 269). Documentarists are 'playing with instability, irony and outright manipulation', thereby 'disrupting traditional assumptions of authority and immediacy' (Geiger, 2011, p. 191). Recent examples of this authorial playfulness and manipulation include *Exit through the Gift Shop* (D'Cruz & Banksy, 2010) and *The Imposter* (Doganis & Layton, 2012). Postmodern scepticism about macrosocial truth claims, or 'grand narratives' as Lyotard famously described it (1984, p. xxiii), has also led documentary cinema towards an interest in 'microsocial narratives' (Corner, 2002, p. 265). Documentaries like *Man on Wire* (Chinn & Marsh, 2012) and *Spellbound* (Welch & Blitz, 2002), for example, have protagonist-driven narrative structures resembling Hollywood films. As postmodernism erodes the traditional boundary between fiction and reality, the genre's claims to realistic depiction are met with suspicion and mistrust. This includes the social injustices that the genre had once 'objectively' documented.

In addition to the influences of postmodernism and post-documentary culture, it is important to also consider the political atmosphere in which *The Act of Killing* was both made and released. The 21st century is an allegedly 'post-political' era characterised by the twin deaths of ideological critique and journalism. Famously diagnosed by Francis Fukuyama as 'The End of History', we find ourselves in a state of ideological stasis where political progression beyond capitalist liberal democracy cannot be imagined (1989, p. 1). Fukuyama wrote 'The End of History?' in 1989 but the collective atrophy he describes has only intensified in recent years. In the face of growing inequalities, climate change and global conflict, we fail to re-imagine and re-build our political institutions in response. Moreover—and Fukuyama is also guilty of this—capitalist liberal democracy

has taken on a non-ideological mythology, signifying an 'absence' of ideology. In this environment, 'the traditional critique of ideology no longer works' (Zizek, 1989, p. 28). As an alleged 'non-ideology', capitalist liberal democracy cannot be subjected to an ideological 'symptomatic reading' by 'confronting it with its blank spots' (Zizek, 1989, p. 28). In this political environment, Slavoj Zizek argues that we have adopted an attitude of 'cynical reason', *not* false consciousness, in which one 'is quite aware of the distance between the ideological mask and the social reality, but nonetheless still insists upon the mask' (1989, p. 28). Unlike the Frankfurt School's subjects of 'false consciousness' (Marcuse, 1964, p. 12), who can be brought to consciousness through education, the cynical subject already *knows* (or at least *suspects*) the dissonance between appearance and reality. In this climate of knowing cynicism, what role remains for information and education? The 'end of ideology' thus links with the 'death of journalism'. As Adam Curtis argues, journalism 'is in a static way'; it tells us what we already know and fails to connect with 'those uncertainties in the back of our minds' (cited in Pollard, 2014). These are the very uncertainties that, if properly mobilised, could be used to negate our cynicism. Documentary, as an informative medium, thus faces the same problems in the 21st century as journalism. It is in this post-political context that *The Act of Killing's* investigative strategies, and political accomplishments, need to be judged.

Re-enactment and media affect as investigative strategies

The Act of Killing's use of re-enactment is by no means new; it has always featured in documentary cinema. Since the early 20th century, documentary-makers have relied on re-enactment as a way of circumventing the geographic or temporal inaccessibility of the original event, person or location. These documentary-makers, however, still aimed for realism in their reconstructions of the original. Documentary's tendency to construct subjectivity as 'a kind of contamination to be expected but minimalised' (Winston, 2008, p. 128), meant that a differentiation was maintained between 'sincere and justifiable reconstruction' and that which was 'unacceptable—fiction' (Renov, 2004, p. 174). In contrast, documentary-makers of our post-documentary culture recognise that 'realistic' re-construction is a practical impossibility. As Harun Farocki states, 'we aren't talking about a remake [...] today's artists can't believe that a kind of realism, or naturalism, can be mimesis' (2012, p. 73). Rather than a practical means of circumventing spacio-temporal restrictions, artists and film-makers are turning to re-enactment 'as both topic and technique' (King, 2013, p. 30). Used as an investigative technique, re-enactment 'provides a way to approach the past, in particular the traumatic past' (King, 2013, p. 30). 'Trauma' is important here as it points to something repressed or unresolved which continues to exert influence over the present. In needing to uncover how the genocide is (mis)remembered in present-day Indonesia, Oppenheimer therefore found good reason to employ re-enactment as a strategy. As he states in an interview, 're-enactment reveals more of the narratives in operation in the present than it provides an adequate picture

of the past' (cited in Roosa, 2014, p. 417). His use of re-enactment to uncover insidious political issues—like trauma, impunity and the banality of evil—illustrates how it can be employed as an 'investigative strategy' rather than a practical tool.

The use of re-enactment as an investigative strategy also requires a self-reflexive understanding of on-camera performance. In observing how documentary subjects stage themselves on-camera, previously unknown information is revealed. This self-reflexive awareness of performance is evident in some prior documentaries; however, it has only intensified in our postmodern post-documentary culture, as scepticism towards the 'truthfulness' of on-screen representation has become widespread. In 1956, sociologist Erving Goffman drew attention to our every-day performance as 'social actors' (cited in Marquis, 2013, p. 48). For Goffman, 'all communicative social activity qualifies as performance and can be fruitfully studied as such' (Marquis, 2013, p. 46). The study of *technologically-mediated* performance adds another layer, however, as an awareness of the cinematic apparatus places different demands on people (as actors). In knowing their performance will be captured indefinitely, on-camera subjects are conscious that they have a much larger group of observers than those immediately present (in both a spatial and temporal sense). It is therefore important, as Elizabeth Marquis argues, 'to consider the ways in which the process of being filmed interacts with and affects [...] self-presentational methods' (2013, p. 49). Awareness of these 'self-presentational methods' can then be harnessed as an investigative strategy. Journalistic interviews, in their efforts to 'extract [...] information they can treat transparently,' often avoid confronting the self-presentation of their subjects (Meyer, 2013). However, as Oppenheimer argues, 'that moment of [...] self-consciousness is something also worth exposing' (cited in Meyer, 2013). Using re-enactment as an investigative strategy, to study a subject's self-consciousness, can bring to the fore hitherto unacknowledged social mechanisms – including the political power and impunity they have within their society. This strategy will only become more pertinent in our increasingly ubiquitous media environment (the age of the 'selfie'), as we are now on display more often and to ever-wider audiences.

The Act of Killing also uses an examination of media affect as an investigative strategy. By giving his subjects responsibility for filming their own re-enactments, Oppenheimer was able to document them in the processes of film-making and film-viewing. This enables his audiences to study the perpetrators' reactions as they create and watch their violent reconstructions on-screen: a study of media affect is defined by Carl Platinga as 'any felt bodily state [...] including emotions, moods, reflex action, autonomic responses, mirror reflexes, desires, and pleasures' (2009, p. 87). However, while emotions are often intentional (in the sense that they are consciously *about* something), affect 'lacks this intentionality or *aboutness*' (Platinga, 2009, p. 87). Likewise, Jasbir Puar argues that 'affect can anchor claims about [...] physiological processes that are not contained or representable by language or cognition alone' (2009, p. 37). Media affect is therefore the process in which technologically-mediated content evokes these non-cognitive,

psychological and/or physiological reactions within viewers. Carol Clover has referred to physiologically-affecting film genres as 'body genres', namely 'horror and pornography' (1987, p. 189). These are 'specifically devoted to the arousal of bodily sensation' (Clover, 1987, p. 189). Viewers' bodies are provoked into autonomous reactions, as if circumventing the rational conscious mind. More importantly, however, each of us has *different* physiological and psychological reactions to mediated content. This personalised response therefore provides information about an individual that often remains hidden in cognitive interactions. While re-enactment, as an investigative strategy, attempts to capture the subject's *self-consciousness*, media affect draws upon their *unconscious* mind as an informative resource. Oppenheimer employs both of these unconventional strategies for their ability to get at underlying structures, on both an individual and societal level, in ways that traditional documentary and journalistic techniques cannot.

The Act of Killing is not the first documentary to use re-enactment and media affect as investigative strategies. *S21: The Khmer Rouge Death Machine* (Couteau & Panh, 2003) documents former guards of Tuol Sleng prison as they re-enact their daily routines during the 1975-1979 Cambodian genocide. In addition, *S21* also uses an examination of media affect. Audiences observe the Tuol Sleng guards' reactions as a former prisoner confronts them with paintings depicting his abuse. However, the Cambodian genocide is internationally condemned and the perpetrators' actions have been declared criminal. Unlike the Indonesian genocide's executioners who boast with impunity, Cambodia's executioners are now well-versed in apologising, denying, or finding excuses for their past actions. The documentary therefore takes its shape as an investigation of the genocide *as an historical event*, rather than exploring its unresolved effects on present-day Cambodia. This is reinforced by the historical authenticity of the reconstructions: the re-enactments take place in Tuol Sleng and original objects are used. A sense of realism is created, drawing audiences' attention towards the actions the former guards are performing rather than the self-consciousness of the performers. *The Act of Killing's* re-enactments, in contrast, are stylised to resemble the perpetrators' favourite Hollywood genres. Oppenheimer states that it was 'never conceivable' that 'in the name of improving a re-enactment, we would do it in the real locations where atrocities occurred' (cited in Roosa, 2014, p. 416). His motivation, instead, was to unearth the repressed historical structures operating in the present, which required the use of imagination rather than 'accurate' reconstruction.

A more suitable intertextual comparison can be drawn between *The Act of Killing* and the cinéma vérité films of Jean Rouch. *Chronicle of a Summer* (Dauman, Rouch & Morin, 1961) also uses re-enactment and examination of media affect, and does so with *The Act of Killing's* same self-reflexivity towards on-screen performance. Silent re-enactments are used to depict subjects' everyday routines living in post-war, postcolonial Paris. At the end of the film, Rouch and Morin screen the final footage to their subjects, capturing their reactions and the discussions between them. Like *The Act of Killing*, *Chronicle of a Summer* invites audiences to examine the affective responses of its subjects. Oppenheimer

borrowed heavily from Rouch, who also believed that performance did not mean ‘a lack of truthfulness’ but simply revealed ‘another aspect’ of a subject’s character (The Criterion Collection, 2013). Interestingly, however, this final scene was initially cut out of *Chronicle of a Summer* because it contradicted Rouch and Morin’s hypothesis about their subjects (Di Lorio, n.d.). They had predicted that the ‘accurate type of representation’ achieved by their ethnographic method would move their subjects into a ‘cathartic understanding of their relationships with others’ (Di Lorio, n.d.). When the post-screening discussion instead turned into heated debate about the levels of ‘realism’ in each other’s performances, Rouch and Morin were disappointed and initially cut the scene (Di Lorio, n.d.). This desire for ‘accurate’ representation is also evident in the neorealist style of the re-enactments, as seen in the gritty depiction of a Renault factory employee re-enacting his work routine—markedly different from *The Act of Killing*’s fantasmatic re-enactments. Moreover, Oppenheimer consistently employed his examination of media affect as an investigative strategy in order to uncover new information about his subjects, rather than test preconceived hypotheses.

The Act of Killing also shares commonalities with one of Rouch’s ethnofiction films: *Moi, Un Noir* (Braunberger & Rouch, 1958). Rouch’s subjects—a group of Nigerian men looking for employment—are invited to ‘play out their own fantasies as movie stars’ (Nichols, 2013, p. 29). However, as Bill Nichols argues, the blurring of fantasy and reality in *Moi, Un Noir* is still ‘interpreted by Rouch’s voice-over commentary,’ which is ‘the very device Oppenheimer refuses to employ’ (2013, p. 29). Oppenheimer’s authorial presence is near invisible, leaving audiences to interpret the re-enactments on their own, ‘much to our initial distress’ (Nichols, 2013, p. 29). The perpetrators’ self-directed re-enactments are given no contextualisation by Oppenheimer. To do otherwise would be dishonest and irresponsible journalism, as it would imply directorial control over the still-powerful perpetrators and an unresolved national trauma. *The Act of Killing* evidently has its generic predecessors, particularly the films of Jean Rouch. However, Oppenheimer revises previous use of re-enactment and media affect in order to engage with politics in innovative ways.

Investigating the social unconscious in *The Act of Killing*

1. Re-enactment

The Act of Killing’s re-enactments start off realistic in style but become increasingly fantasmatic as the perpetrators’ film progresses. The film’s second re-enactment shows Anwar on the rooftop where he executed the majority of his victims. This scene was shot on the first day Oppenheimer met Anwar and before production of the re-enactments was handed over to him and his peers (Roosa, 2014, p. 414). Like the perpetrators in *S21*, he acts out his preferred torture methods with verbal narration, authentic props, and in the original setting. This rooftop re-enactment is played back to Anwar in one of *The Act of Killing*’s early screening scenes, and he and his friends critique

the inaccuracy of his performance. With his palm to his forehead, Anwar disappointedly remarks: ‘Look, I’m laughing. I did it wrong didn’t I?’. He also finds fault with his costume because he appears ‘dressed for a picnic’ when, in reality, he would have looked more ‘brutal’. At this early stage in their film-making and film-viewing process, the perpetrators are invested in the realism of their representations and avoid uncovering the underlying structures informing their realities. However, as they progress with their film, the perpetrators’ interest in realistic representation wanes. This is particularly so for Anwar who seems compelled to confront his past and its influence on his present. Towards the end of the filmmaking process, Anwar chooses to construct his re-enactments in the style of fantasy and horror films. This is important because of the *affective* dimensions of these genres: fantasy, as a psychologically-affecting genre, and horror, as a physiologically-affecting genre. Due to years of repression, traumatic memories of the genocide are buried deep within Indonesia’s social unconscious. Traditional investigative strategies—like interviews—would therefore be insufficient at penetrating Indonesia’s carefully-constructed and closely-guarded ideological mask. Re-enactment and its affective dimensions, on the other hand, can draw upon the unconscious as an informative resource to get beneath the mask in ways that traditional techniques often cannot.

In *The Act of Killing*’s major fantasy re-enactment (titled *Anwar’s Nightmare*), Anwar awakes to a ghost approaching him, to whom he yells: ‘I thought I’d killed you!’. The mise-en-scene chosen by the perpetrators for this re-enactment is significant. Animal statues (tigers, hyenas, bats) are scattered across the bedroom, a smoke machine distorts visibility, and the stage lights are filtered with glaring red and green gels. The costuming of the ghost is simultaneously sinister and absurd. Like most fantasy creatures, its freakishness is the result of its unrecognisable, and therefore unsettling, features. The ghost does not verbally communicate with Anwar but ‘laughs frighteningly’—though the object of its laughter is unclear. At the end of the re-enactment scene, Oppenheimer cuts away to an observational shot of Anwar in his bed at night staring at the ceiling. The relational editing here suggests that Anwar’s re-enactment depicts genuine experiences of feeling haunted. Returning to Jasbir Puar’s definition of affect (that which ‘can anchor claims not contained or representable by language or cognition alone’ [2009, p. 37]), Anwar appears to have chosen a fantasmatic style of re-enactment because it operates *affectively* at a non-cognitive, non-verbal level. The unintelligibility of his repressed thoughts is clear when a member of Anwar’s crew asks about the ghost: ‘Maybe it’s the communists we killed in 1965?’ To this, Anwar replies: ‘I don’t imagine it in such detail’. Given this response, the ‘you’ in Anwar’s cry ‘I thought I’d killed you!’ is uncertain; does the ghost represent the victims he thought he had killed, his memories of the genocide, or his own guilt? Fantasy, as a psychologically-affecting genre, brings forth thoughts, memories and desires repressed in our unconscious mind. By using fantasmatic re-enactment, Anwar begins to expose his closely-guarded unconscious for the first time since the genocide.

In another late re-enactment, the perpetrators adopt the style of the horror subgenre—

gore. In this scene, Herman plays a torturer and Anwar his victim. Anwar's character has been decapitated and disembowelled. His eyes are open and moving despite the decapitation; a direct reference to an interruptive thought Anwar has previously described of the open eyes of his beheaded victims. The action begins with Herman's character rubbing the victim's blood all over his face with his hands. He then proceeds to remove organs from the disembowelled corpse and places them in his mouth. 'Look! I'm eating you!' he says as he puts his victim's 'liver' (a cut of raw meat) in his mouth, the blood dripping down his chin, neck and hands. He spits the liver out and proclaims: 'It's rotten!'. At this point, Anwar breaks away from the diegesis of the re-enactment and starts to audibly gag. I describe the action of this scene in graphic detail not out of fetishistic compulsion but in order to emphasise horror's affective dimensions. As a body genre, horror provokes non-cognitive physiological reactions in its viewers. Anwar's gagging is a physiological reaction to his confrontation with gore. To use Julia Kristeva's terminology, faced with the mix of blood, spit and rotten meat (and, crucially, his traumatic identification with the actions of Herman's character), Anwar's body tries to 'abject' itself of this repugnance through vomiting (1982, p. 1). This speaks to the power of this affective confrontation, particularly its ability to disturb Anwar's sense of self. Film's capacity to produce these physiological reactions is politically significant. Given powerful efforts to construct a false narrative of the Indonesian genocide, these affective strategies pose a threat to hegemonic structures whose longevity relies upon the containment of unconscious doubts.

2. *Media Affect*

It is a very simple process: we would shoot one scene, Anwar would watch it, respond emotionally, propose the next scene and we would shoot that. [...] In that sense it's like a man painting his own portrait, painting a little, stepping back to look at the canvas, painting a little more. (Oppenheimer cited in Roosa, 2014, pp. 420-421)

In addition to the affective dimensions of the perpetrators' re-enactments, *The Act of Killing* also examines the affect of their film-viewing when Anwar and his friends watch their footage on-screen. Oppenheimer adopted this investigative strategy as a process, over a five year period (Roosa, 2013, p. 416). Given cultural memory of the genocide has been carefully shaped by elites for over fifty years, a journalistic investigation of Anwar's affective development would have been artificial and ineffective if conducted over a shorter period. The documentation of Anwar's changing reactions over the five years is significant, as it illustrates the subtle ability of technologically-mediated content to unearth underlying structures at both an individual and societal level. In the early screening scenes, Anwar and his fellow death squad members repeatedly express their concern that each re-enactment is not 'realistic' enough: that they have failed to accurately depict their past experiences. The hyper-self-consciousness uncovered in these scenes reveals the perpetrators' anxiety around maintaining the government's 'official'

narrative of the genocide. Oppenheimer then uses this self-consciousness as the basis for his examination of media affect. He remarks that in the first re-enactment screening, Anwar ‘looked disturbed but didn’t dare say what was really bothering him’ (cited in Roosa, 2013, p. 415). Instead he began a process of ‘proposing embellishment after embellishment’, trying to fix the inaccuracy of the previous re-enactment rather than confront ‘what’s really wrong [...] namely that it was horrible and that what he did was horrible’ (Oppenheimer cited in Roosa, 2013, p. 415). Audiences see Anwar engaging in this process of embellishment again when he instructs a crew member to create authentic costumes. Using old photos as evidence, Anwar informs him that ‘for massacres, [he] usually wore jeans’. Elsewhere, Oppenheimer has described Anwar’s process of embellishment as an attempt to ‘build up a cinematic-psycho scar tissue over his wound’ (cited in Bradshaw, 2013, p. 39). However, this cinematic-psycho scar tissue starts to break away as Anwar’s film-making and film-viewing progresses. Rather than offering interruptive comments on the mise-en-scene’s (in)accuracy, the later screening scenes are marked by Anwar’s reflective silence. The screening of an improvised detective-style re-enactment starts with Anwar proudly calling for his grandsons to ‘come watch grandpa get beat up’, but progresses into uncomfortable silence and then disintegrates completely when Anwar starts to cry. Speaking to Oppenheimer (off-screen), Anwar says: ‘Is it all coming back to me? I really hope it won’t. I don’t want it to, Josh’. *The Act of Killing*’s examination of media affect illustrates that mediated imagery can provoke uncontrollable psychological reactions that, if unearthed, are able to undermine the political status quo.

Anwar’s re-enactment screenings are not the only acknowledgment *The Act of Killing* makes to the affective powers of mediated imagery. Oppenheimer states that he was ‘intrigued by the relationship between cinema and killings’ after finding out that the Indonesian army recruited its soldiers from ‘the ranks of movie theatre gangsters’ (*Background*, 2012). Anwar was a ‘movie theatre gangster’ who worked at one of Medan’s cinemas during the genocide (*Background*, 2012). Throughout the film, he describes how he and his death squad members would mirror the machismo and the torture techniques of the Hollywood gangster figures they loved. Another media influence investigated in *The Act of Killing* is the Indonesian government’s propaganda film about the genocide. Up until the collapse of the Suharto regime in 1998, the film (with its violent re-enactments) was annually shown to all Indonesian school children (‘Indonesia’s Killing Fields’, 2012). The second screening scene in *The Act of Killing* shows Anwar watching this film. Medium close-ups of his face are repeatedly intercut with medium close-ups of the television screen. The use of editing and shot size here compresses the distance between the viewer (Anwar) and the mediating technology (the television). The shots of the TV are filmed straight on as if from Anwar’s point-of-view, suturing *The Act of Killing*’s audiences with Anwar’s perspective and further compressing mediated distance. Anwar observes the goriness of the re-enactments and remarks that ‘children were traumatised’ by the film.

This scene is significant as it informs a later scene in which Anwar proudly invites his grandsons to watch a re-enacted interrogation. In a rare moment, Oppenheimer interjects with ‘this is too violent, Anwar, are you sure?’. Anwar responds that it ‘is only a film’, so his grandsons are allowed to watch it. Yet, the same re-enactment has Anwar wincing and crying only minutes later. The idea that technologically-mediated content lacks affect—as encapsulated in the popular expression ‘it’s only a film!’—is disproven in this sequence almost immediately after it is suggested. A comparison can therefore be drawn between the grandsons watching Anwar’s re-enactment and the government propaganda film: both have conscious effects and unconscious affects on the children who were forced to watch them. In numerous ways, *The Act of Killing* illustrates a self-reflexive understanding of the affective power of all mediated imagery and draws upon this power as an informative resource. This helps *The Act of Killing*’s subjects and audiences to understand Indonesia’s social imaginary with greater success than traditional techniques.

3. ‘Even me—a journalist with the ears of an elephant—I never knew!’

Before moving to my discussion on the future of political documentary, there is one last scene from *The Act of Killing* that requires brief analysis. The aforementioned rooftop—where Anwar’s death squad killed the majority of its victims—is located directly above a newspaper office. During the genocide, the publisher of this newspaper (Ibrahim Sinik) was in charge of interrogating the alleged communists Anwar’s death squad would then be instructed to kill. Ibrahim admits this to Oppenheimer early on in the documentary, stating that he would conduct the interrogations in his office before handing the victims over to Anwar’s gang. Later in the film, one of Ibrahim’s past journalists (who was an employee during the genocide) is performing as an extra in one of Anwar’s re-enactments. A debate erupts between the journalist and the perpetrators over the journalist’s alleged ignorance. He maintains that he ‘never knew’ what Ibrahim, Anwar and his dead squad members were involved with over the years of the genocide.

Journalist: Joshua always asks me: ‘You worked in the same office, how could you have not known?’ I declare: I never saw anything. Now, seeing your re-enactment, I realise you were so smooth that even me, a journalist with ears of an elephant... with such sharp senses... I never knew!

Adi: I’m surprised. Because we didn’t hide what we were doing. If you didn’t know, I’d be shocked.

Journalist: I didn’t.

Adi: We were in the same office and we didn’t hide it... this man, a journalist distancing himself from these things, that’s predictable.

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The journalist's predictable distance is politically significant, here. His active avoidance of confronting Indonesia's open secret can also be applied to a wider critique of both documentary-making and journalism in the post-political 21st century.

The Act of Killing's successful use of unconventional investigative strategies to provoke political engagement signals the direction that documentary cinema needs to head in our 21st century era. The film lacks many traditional features of political documentaries: the presentation of 'facts', an overarching argument, a style of social realism, and a call-to-action. Instead, audiences are met with fantasy and horror re-enactments, and a director's self-reflexive fascination with the affective dimensions of technologically-mediated content. Yet, for all its postmodern post-political playfulness, *The Act of Killing* was successful at achieving Oppenheimer's political goals. It instigated open discussion of a long-repressed national trauma, and its Oscar nomination brought international awareness to this conveniently forgotten history. As Homy King argues, *The Act of Killing* does not 'attempt to furnish new evidentiary proof, usable testimony or official confessions'; instead, it tries to document 'the past's psychical reality and [...] the violence that it continues to engender in the present' (2013, pp. 32; 35). In doing so, the documentary performs 'the difficult work of opening doors to the past that were previously locked shut' (King, 2013, p. 35). Oppenheimer's interest in the affective dimensions of the perpetrators' film-making and film-viewing processes was vital to the success of his investigation. Traditional investigative strategies would not have worked in this situation, as the 'official' (fabricated) history of the Indonesian genocide has been closely-guarded for more than fifty years. Memories that contradict the official narrative have long been buried within the social unconscious. Oppenheimer therefore needed to employ strategies that engaged his subjects in non-cognitive ways: creating an informative resource out of the perpetrators' unconscious, their self-consciousness, and the disjunctions between the two. The success of this investigative practice seems specific to *The Act of Killing* and the Indonesian context. However, an examination of affect can be harnessed to investigate and address a myriad of repressed (or wilfully ignored) social and political problems in the 21st century.

The slipping mask: Political documentary and journalism in the 21st century

On the one hand, the mask is speaking in glorious terms about what he did. But when it slips you also start to see how the mask is functioning in the person's life and maybe therefore you [the journalist] should pursue that crack. It's an opportunity to see how the mask is functioning in society. (Oppenheimer cited in Roosa, 2014, p. 420)

The above observation resonates with Žižek's work on the cynical subject and the 'end of ideology'. Recall that Žižek defined the cynical subject as one who 'takes into account the distance between the ideological mask and the reality [...] but still does not

renounce it' (1989, p. 28). Žižek linked the cynical subject to the 'end of ideology' where cynicism takes on its own end-state ideological status as a 'perverted negation of the negation of the official ideology' (1989, p. 29). In the age of post-political and non-ideological cynicism, it is not possible to negate political ideology in the same way those living in the overtly ideological age of modernity could. Many of us know (or at least suspect) that the economic and political structures underlying our social reality are unjust, unsustainable and, indeed, ideologically-driven, yet we choose not to confront the official narrative. In this atmosphere of cynicism, documentaries like *An Inconvenient Truth* (Bender & Guggenheim, 2006) are released: A documentary that, in its title, admits to providing its audiences with information they already know to be true but would rather not hear. Anwar is the embodied proof of Žižek's cynical subject. This is a man who fails to face the disjunction between mask and reality, between Indonesia's official narrative and his own nightmares. Anwar tries to avoid confronting this disjunction with each of his embellishments ('I never would have worn white pants'), but this active avoidance is precisely what Oppenheimer disallows by provoking the doubts buried within Anwar's unconscious. Given this parallel, the affective strategies in *The Act of Killing* could be employed in other political documentaries to wriggle under the slipping mask, thereby mobilising audiences' unconscious doubts in the process. This is, unfortunately, exactly what journalism and the political documentary is failing to do in the ('non')-ideological stasis of the 21st century.

The Act of Killing's challenge to journalistic investigation in the 21st century has been discussed by Michael Meyer in his article for the *Columbia Journalism Review* (2013). Meyer argues that Oppenheimer's documentary exposes 'not only the storytelling structures through which Anwar Congo and his peers process reality, but also those through which journalism processes reality'. 'Journalistic efforts to get around a façade,' he continues, 'often end up trapped within the same parameters of debate established by that artifice'. This is exactly what Oppenheimer resists and how *The Act of Killing* challenges 21st century journalism. The mounting criticism of false balance in climate change reportage could indicate an increasing awareness of journalism's capacity to get trapped within artifice (Vidal, 2014). Climate change journalism is, however, presently the only journalism subject to popular criticism and, worryingly, it was not until 2014 before it was raised with widespread attention. Oppenheimer echoes Meyer's assessment of journalism's current failings, stating that a 'real exposé' requires 'showing us things we already know [...] and forcing us to say, "I knew that. What does it say about me that I knew that?"' (cited in Meyer, 2013). Journalists and documentary-makers in our post-political era are certainly telling audiences things they already know (or at least suspect), but are often failing to then provoke them into the self-reflection Oppenheimer describes. In Curtis's terms, journalism is not 'connecting with those uncertainties at the back of [our] minds' (cited in Pollard, 2014). Fraser, in his scathing review of *The Act of Killing*, has mischaracterised Meyer's argument, suggesting that he admires the film

for its 'anti-journalism' (2013, p. 22). To the contrary, Meyer contends that *The Act of Killing*'s investigative techniques are not 'anti-journalism' but 'highly compatible with more traditional notions of journalism's mission' (2013), more so than contemporary journalism and its commitment to the pretend 'exposé'. If anything, Oppenheimer's five year affective process and lack of contextualising voice is more honest and socially responsible than most of today's journalism.

This is not to suggest that conventional investigative strategies and/or expository argument no longer have a place in journalism and documentary. There are of course social and political issues that audiences genuinely lack prior knowledge of and require educative mediums to convey this missing information. However, there are also a large number of political problems (climate change, global poverty, government and corporate corruption, surveillance, and the on-going 'War on Terror', for example) of which audiences are already aware but feel paralysed to respond. In these instances, we require journalism that 'interrupts and re-interprets the stories already playing on an endless loop in our heads' (Meyer, 2013). The educative documentary therefore needs to be used sparingly, and with good reason, rather than maintaining its long-lived default position within the genre. As Winston argues, 'for sixty years documentaries have gained nothing from being a "discourse of sobriety" except marginalisation' (2008, p. 254). M. Gaines similarly argues that there are very few examples of educative documentaries that 'have been viewed widely let alone have sparked anything resembling a chain of social reactions' (1999, p. 86). Evidently there is good reason for political documentary-makers and committed journalists to reflect upon their investigative practices and modes of communication and ask: 'Is my journalistic approach indulging the very artifice it pretends to expose?' The journalist in *The Act of Killing*, who is revealed to be self-fabricating fifty years on, acts as a warning to journalists about distancing oneself from confrontation. Moreover, he reminds us all about the importance of a journalism that 'holds truth to power' rather than remaining idle in the face of injustice and corruption.

Given *The Act of Killing*'s political success in our post-political environment, political documentary's relationship to media affect needs to be further examined by documentary-makers and academics. Gaines's (1999) article 'Political Mimesis' is an important contribution to the study of the political documentary and its affective dimensions. Gaines draws heavily on Williams' 1991 work linking the sensuous on-screen body with audience mimesis in Clover's body genres. Gaines draws upon this work to understand how 'radical documentaries' can similarly 'produce an "almost involuntary" imitation in sympathetic audiences' (1999, p. 90). Gaines argues for a concept of 'political mimesis', positing that the sensational body on-screen (depicted in images of 'rioting, bodies clashing, [and] bodies moving on mass') produces a mobilised body in the spectator (1999, p. 90). This mobilisation-through-mimesis goes 'beyond the abstractly intellectual to produce a bodily swelling', which then provokes 'audiences to carry on the same struggle as depicted on screen' (Gaines, 1999, p. 91). Gaines makes a convincing

case for the study of documentary cinema as an affective genre. However, her theory of documentary affect relies on mimesis (which requires cinematic realism) and images of bodies in protest. These are both increasingly rare in our postmodern, post-documentary and post-political culture. Gaines's theory therefore needs to be revised in order to meet shifting structures of affect as our political and media environments change. This includes addressing the kind of fantasmatic affect used in *The Act of Killing*. Moreover, Gaines's work looks at how political documentaries can provoke 'sympathetic audiences' to action (1999, p. 90), whereas our 21st century concern is with mobilising cynical subjects to confront the artifice concealing their realities. In her 2010 book *The Documentary: Politics, Emotions, Culture*, Smaill argues that, 'in order to revive the genre as a tool for social transformation,' documentarists need to shift 'away from the restrictions posed by the precepts of realist documentary' (p. 14). Re-valuing political documentary requires 'rethink[ing] and reformulat[ing] particular modes of documentary [...] or emphasis[ing] the aspects that are most successful with audiences' (Smaill, 2010, p. 14). As we move into a ubiquitous media environment, documentary 'aspects' most likely to be successful with audiences will be those marked by a self-reflexive awareness of media affect. Given our current condition of political stasis, political documentarists and journalists must experiment with new investigative strategies and modes of communication.

Conclusions

The Act of Killing has garnered critical acclaim for its innovative use of re-enactment and media affect as investigative strategies. In order to judge *The Act of Killing's* innovation, it is important to consider the social and political climate in which it was made and released. Similar strategies have been employed in previous documentaries, particularly those by Rouch—a director who also displayed a self-reflexive understanding of subjects' performance and media's affective dimensions. I have shown that, while Oppenheimer is certainly influenced by his predecessors, he uses these strategies in innovative ways within the 'postmodern', 'post-documentary' and 'post-political' context of the 21st century. On the surface, the postmodern strategies he employs seem anti-politics or, even, anti-journalism. Oppenheimer avoids using traditional techniques of political documentary and journalism despite the overtly political subject matter of his film. However, these techniques would have been insufficient to unearth long-repressed memories of the Indonesian genocide. Unconventional strategies were required in order to dig into Indonesia's social unconscious and expose the artifice that powerful social and political elites have carefully constructed around their national history. His use of re-enactment and examination of media affect as investigative techniques allowed him to draw upon his subjects' moments of self-consciousness and their unconscious thoughts as informative resources. To achieve this, media's psychological and physiological affects were harnessed to circumvent the cognitive responses of the subjects. This process was continued by the perpetrators' themselves, who began to

design their re-enactments in the style of fantasy and horror films as a way to communicate their memories.

The Act of Killing's political success using these unconventional strategies makes a convincing case for the need to approach political documentary as an affective genre. This is a particularly pertinent project in the 'non-ideological' and 'post-political' environment of the 21st century, in which many of us know the urgency with which global issues need to be addressed, yet feel paralysed to act. To defy this ideological stasis and provoke the political imagination, socially-driven documentary-makers and journalists must experiment with new investigative strategies and modes of communication. Traditional techniques are failing to carry out this important work and often end up indulging the very artifices they are claiming to expose. The conventional educative documentary therefore needs to be used with good reason rather than retaining its place as the genre's default position. I have argued that the political documentary, in order to mobilise unconscious doubts in the back of audiences' minds, should harness a self-reflexive understanding of media affect. This is all the more important in an increasingly ubiquitous media environment where our interactions with media are both constant and immersive. The survival of the political documentary in the 21st century may be uncertain; however, as *The Act of Killing* shows us, a little creativity can go a long way.

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