

Documentaries season

The Act of Killing

“An utterly fascinating, chilling, but important film.”

Notes compiled by Ann MacInnes



In 1965, in the aftermath of a failed military coup, Indonesian death squads killed an estimated 500,000 "suspected communists".

This jaw-dropping documentary is about a collective state of denial that now exists within Indonesian society, and more specifically, about the rationalisations by which some of the men who did the actual killing have been able, not just to live with themselves but to prosper in positions of government and authority.

Its most extraordinary character is Anwar Congo, a gangster-turned-paramilitary leader thought to have personally garrotted around 1,000 people. He begins the film as a movie- and Elvis-obsessed old man cheerfully reminiscing about old times.

But as the result of an extraordinary act of psychological manipulation on the part of the film-makers, who encouraged the killers to make movies re-enacting their crimes, Congo's self-justifications begin to crumble.

The re-enactments become acts of remembrance, and the past is brought back to life as a surreal waking nightmare. An utterly fascinating, chilling, but important film.

Laurence Phelan, The Independent, 28 June 2013

The Act of Killing is not in the least bit graphic but I found it unendurable, and I only managed an hour and 20 minutes of the director's cut before a sequence

in which two elderly gentlemen were re-enacting for the camera the moment they told a man they had just been torturing that they were going to kill him. The amateur playing the victim was in real life the son of a man who had almost certainly been tortured like that before being killed. It is possible that he was acting with his father's killers. In any case, when he started to beg for the chance to send a last message to his family, I had to leave.

It is a film that everyone interested in humanity should watch, at least as much as is bearable. In 1965, at the height of the cold war, at least half a million Indonesian "communists" were killed in a deliberately directed purge. Most were ethnic Chinese, and no more communist than I am. But in Indonesia, as in Malaysia, the Communist parties recruited almost entirely among Chinese people. So I suppose an analogy would be if a fascist dictatorship in this country killed a million ethnic Pakistanis because some had been accused of being jihadi sympathisers.

The killing was decentralised, lo-tech and largely carried out by paramilitary gangsters, known as "premans." Several of them said with pride that this word derived from the English "free man." A preman is free to do what he wants and take what he wants, subject only to the sanction of death.

Eden Court Cinema

Tuesday 1 April 2014 at 7.15pm

2012, Denmark/Norway/UK, Colour

Running time: 159 mins.

Genre: Documentary

Language: Indonesian/English

Cast: Anwar Congo, Yapto Soerjosoemarno, Jusuf Kalla, Hajif Anif, Syamsul Arifun

Director: Christine Cynn, Joshua Oppenheimer

Executive producers: Joram ten Brink, Errol Morris, Andre Singer, Werner Herzog, Torstein Grude, Bjarte Mørner Tveit



The star of the film, more or less, is a preman named Anwar Congo, a dapper, dancing, delightful old man who demonstrates how to strangle a blindfolded victim with wire, when to offer water and a cigarette to a man whom you are torturing and when to resume the treatment after pouring the water on his head.

He developed the garotting technique after it turned out that beating people to death left too much blood, and the smell, even after it had been cleaned away, was terrible. But one way or another, he killed well over 1,000 people with his hands to attain his present eminence in society.

Congo was relatively unknown when the killing started. He worked in a cinema, hustling tickets for popular films and chasing women. Now he is hugely respected and rich. And, of course, he helped to make the film and is an enthusiastic participant in the re-enactments. He is hard to hate, or to despise. The joy he takes in life is unmistakable, and he is more honest than most of his associates.

The only wholly despicable character in the film is a journalist who worked for a paper that deliberately stirred up hatred against the communists. His job, he says, was to make people understand that the measures against them were necessary. Yet his journalistic skills were so well developed that he was able not to notice that hundreds of people were done to death in his offices while he was writing about the noble inevitability of the struggle. It happened on the floor above. How could he have known? You know what office life is like.

Towards the end of the film, I'm told, some signs of remorse do appear in Congo. At the beginning he talks about nightmares, but a crime that returns to haunt you in nightmares is not one you have acknowledged, only one that demands acknowledgement. But even if he were to develop a living conscience, his friends and associates show no signs of doing so. And this is the truly frightening part of the film.

It's a phenomenon you can also see in Claud Lanssman's documentary, *Shoah*: only the victims are haunted by what they have survived. The perpetrators have stolid faces, their consciences salvaged by victory. And it seems to me to be irrefutable and factual evidence against liberal optimism. The answer to "Why can't we all get along?" is that when we don't get along, and my side wins, I feel pretty good.

The theistic version of the problem of evil is well known: why, if God is good, living and omnipotent, can he allow or cause such hideous suffering as fills the world? There is no answer. God cannot be as described. But *The Act of Killing* lays out the humanist version of the problem of evil: if we are good, loving and equipped with consciences, why do we cause and allow such hideous suffering? Again, there is no answer. This does not make the question go away.

Andrew Brown, *the Guardian*, 25 July 2013 14.00 BST

Our next screening...



Cutie and the Boxer

Continuing our season of

Documentaries

on Tuesday 15 April 2014 at 7.15pm

"Ultimately, my goal is to absorb the audience in the raw spirit and beauty that emanates from my subjects, to open a door onto the creative and very private world where the rhythms of the Shinoharas' lives play out."

Zachary Heinzerling, director

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