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# BORN FREE? REPETITION AND FANTASY IN *THE ACT OF KILLING*

Homay King

Kodwo Eshun noted that the art world has recently become “totally fascinated with reenactment.”<sup>1</sup> He offered this statement in the context of an interview with Harun Farocki about *Immersion* (2009), a video on VRET, a desensitization therapy used by the US military to treat traumatized soldiers in which they reexperience combat in a computer-simulated environment. Along with Omer Fast and Jeremy Deller, Farocki is among a group of contemporary artists and filmmakers who have turned to reenactment as both topic and technique.<sup>2</sup> The technique provides a way to approach the past, in particular the traumatic past. Wars, state-sanctioned violence, and events that formerly were taboo to present in anything other than soberly authoritative documentary form are now fair game for fictionalized restaging.

The shift that Eshun noticed has been driven in part by necessity: in the absence of survivors who are willing to testify, and when archival documents, photographs, and films have been destroyed or never existed, how does one make an image? There is also an ethical component: when the past has been written by history’s winners, and when a linear narrative cannot do justice to the complexity of events, what options exist for telling the story? Certain kinds of truths—these artists seem to say—are better sought out through a framework that not only owns up to its contamination by fiction, but goes a step further: revealing, embracing, and working with the fictions that are already operative.

Joshua Oppenheimer’s *The Act of Killing* (2012), more than any recent documentary film, doubles down on this strategy and pursues its full range of possibilities. Prior to making the film, Oppenheimer spent several years in Indonesia in a community outside Medan, North Sumatra, where he worked with survivors and descendants of the

state-sanctioned massacres that began there in 1965. Oppenheimer attempted to document their struggles as plantation workers and bear witness to their pasts, but found that they were unable to speak on camera due to fear of reprisal.<sup>3</sup> They suggested that the victors of the military coup might be more willing to speak; in this way, their stories might be told indirectly. Oppenheimer proceeded to interview dozens of perpetrators who openly boasted of their crimes. The forty-first of these, Anwar Congo, became the central subject of *The Act of Killing*.<sup>4</sup>

Oppenheimer chose to approach his story by having the killers themselves script, stage, and reenact scenes of their choice related to their experiences and memories of the events. They chose to do so in ways largely modeled on Hollywood narrative cinema. *The Act of Killing* presents several of these scenes as short films within the film, utilizing the documentary of their making as its framing structure. The staged scenes fall into categories along two different axes. The first axis pertains to genre or scene type. The film’s subjects select a bizarre and eclectic variety of these, including scenes that loosely mimic the classical gangster film genre. There are also lavish musical numbers filmed in wide views with high-key lighting and brightly colored costumes, often referencing the Hollywood western through such choices as cowboy hats and sheriff’s paraphernalia. There is a dream sequence filmed like a supernatural horror film, with surrealist and B-movie touches. There is a scene that replicates the look and feel of a big-budget Vietnam War movie with a burning village, handheld camerawork, and an abundance of extras.

Along a second axis, the reenactment scenes cover a wide range of performance styles, from extreme Method acting, as if the subjects were completely in the thrall of past emotion and memory, to extreme Brechtian distancing, as if the subjects were utilizing alienation effects.<sup>5</sup> In the former cases, the actors appear so fully immersed in their roles that they seem to forget that they are acting in a movie and instead relive the events viscerally. This mode is related to one symptom of what the *Diagnostic and*

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The killers stage history in the guise of Hollywood genres in *The Act of Killing*.

*Statistical Manual on Mental Disorders (DSM)* calls post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD): “dissociative reactions (e.g., flashbacks) in which the individual feels or acts as if the traumatic events were recurring.”<sup>6</sup> Sigmund Freud first identified this behavior in his patients who suffered from traumatic neuroses, many of whom were war veterans.<sup>7</sup> Freud referred to this as repetition compulsion—in its narrowest psychoanalytic sense, a condition in which a survivor of trauma reexperiences the disturbing event in a mechanical, involuntary fashion. A scene in *Little Dieter Needs to Fly* (Werner Herzog, 1997), in which Dieter Dengler revisits Vietnam where he had been held as a prisoner of war, has this distinct quality of reliving and repeating as opposed to “working through” from a safe distance. Dieter reenacts being escorted by his captors through the jungle, marching with hands bound behind his back; his voice tight with anxiety, he says, “Uh oh, this feels a little too close to home.”

While not a feature of PTSD or the repetition compulsion, the performance of a protocol or standardized set of motions that one has carried out routinely in the past is likewise prompted by involuntary, bodily memory, as conveyed by the phrase “like riding a bicycle.” Oppenheimer gets at this mode when he describes how, for his subjects, killing became almost “routine” or “somewhat generic.”<sup>8</sup>

Rithy Panh captures a performance of this kind in his documentary *S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (2003), which revisits events of the Cambodian genocide in the late 1970s. In Panh’s film, two survivors of the notorious S21 execution center confront their former captors at the prison site. In the course of filming, one of the guards reenacts his daily routine, entering a cell with keys, shouting orders at imaginary prisoners, and beating them. Panh describes how he “directed” this scene: “I simply said ‘so show me your work, show me how you worked.’ And that’s what opened up the bodily memory, if you like, in a chronological way.”<sup>9</sup> The action unfolds in the imperfect tense, as a repeated or continuous assignment (“We would walk the prisoners down the hall . . .”). Such testimony is useless as evidence for any specific crime, but the visual record of the perpetrator’s gestures starkly reveals how violence may be routinized as a day-to-day procedure, recorded in what Panh terms “bodily memory” even when banished from consciousness.

In this example, reenactment fully absorbs the subject. In other situations, though, a theatrical distance is inserted that may be mental, psychical, emotional, temporal, or spatial. This distanced mode corresponds to what psychologists call dissociation: “experiences of unreality, detachment, or being an outside observer with respect to one’s

thoughts, feelings, sensations, body, or actions.”<sup>10</sup> Dissociation can involve depersonalization, a reaction to trauma in which the survivor may reexperience the disturbing event as though seeing it from a great distance, such as floating above the scene with a bird’s-eye view. Little Dieter’s “need to fly” is an extension of this mode, an effect of the desire for distance from traumatic experience. As Herzog narrates in voice-over, “From the air, Vietnam didn’t seem real at all. For Dengler it was like a grid on a map . . . it all looked strange, like a distant barbaric dream.” Some of the scenes in *The Act of Killing* reveal a similar desire for disconnection between past and present, and between the self as actor in the midst of a drama and the self as observer. As Oppenheimer relates in an interview, his subjects at times seem to be building up “cinematic-psychic scar tissue” over their wounds, piling on layers of distance between themselves and the events they are restaging.<sup>11</sup>

In none of these modes are the subjects fully occupying the present moment. Those in the thrall of the repetition compulsion are in a sense time-traveling to the past: like broken records, they cannot move forward. Those who contemplate their histories with utter detachment, on the other hand, fail to see the past’s continuity with the present: it is as if the events have occurred in a dreamworld without ramification or consequence in the now. In one sense, traumatic reliving and depersonalized dissociation are opposites. The former, like Method acting, involves a high degree of affect; the latter, like Brechtian acting, a stoic detachment. In another sense, though, both modes entail what the *DSM* calls “a loss of awareness of present surroundings.”<sup>12</sup> As a result, subjects in both states are disconnected from other beings around them, and therefore incapable of interacting in a way that involves a sense of responsibility.

I would like to suggest that in *The Act of Killing*, it is, strangely, *fantasy* that provides a path out of the repetition compulsion and dissociation, and that reconnects the film’s subjects to the reality of their present predicament, to one another, and to their victims and fellow survivors. *The Act of Killing* does not attempt to furnish new evidentiary proof, usable testimony or official confessions about what occurred in the past. But it does furnish a striking record of the past’s psychological reality and force, the violence that it continues to engender in the present moment, and the elaborate images conjured up in response. Oppenheimer calls the film “a documentary of the imagination,” and indeed, many of its staged scenes are more properly fantasies than reenactments. The subjects being documented

are not the events that occurred during the 1965–1966 Indonesian exterminations, but rather the perpetrator’s fantasies, nightmares, and rewritten memories about these events as they become visualized in staged scenes of their own making. These scenes in turn become a vehicle for reconnection to the social realm through role-play and address to future audiences.

In *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis define fantasies as “scripts of organized scenes which are capable of dramatization, usually in a visual form. . . . It is not an *object* that the subject imagines and aims at, so to speak, but rather a *sequence* in which the subject has his own part to play and in which permutations of roles and attributions are possible.”<sup>13</sup> Their definition draws heavily on Freud’s 1919 case history “A Child Is Being Beaten,” an analysis of a male patient’s sadomasochistic fantasy.<sup>14</sup> In this fantasy, the child successively occupies the positions of aider and abettor, victim, and onlooker. The second, traumatic phase, Freud notes, is repressed and emerges consciously only under analysis. Freud does not indicate whether the child was a survivor of abuse, but it seems logical to surmise that the fantasy may have arisen as a defense against a traumatic memory-image of one kind or another.

Intriguingly, the scenes that are staged and documented in *The Act of Killing* follow a logic that mirrors that of Freud’s beating fantasy. Oppenheimer’s perpetrators undergo a similar series of permutations of position and affect that result in a complex scenarist’s algebra, with the possibilities cross-multiplied by the assignment of roles and style of performance. Fantasy, these scenes suggest, is an incredibly malleable instrument, one that allows its subjects to imagine themselves occupying a range of mutually exclusive positions. Moreover, its aim may not be solely to master the original trauma, as simplified accounts of the repetition compulsion suggest, but to experiment with approaching it from various angles and distances: oblique or head-on, naked or heavily disguised, coldly removed or hot with fright.

In the first of the “gangster film” scenes, Anwar Congo plays himself as a perpetrator, acting the part of a brutal interrogator of a suspected Communist. At one point, filming is interrupted by a call to prayer. During the break, Anwar launches abruptly into a critique of international human rights. After the interruption and diatribe, his acting style becomes more distanced and defensive, as if he has broken character. The shift is significant, but less dramatic than the one Anwar undergoes in a second gangster scene, “Interrogation of a Communist, Take 2.” Suryono,



Suryono is undone by a reenactment that is too realistic in *The Act of Killing*.

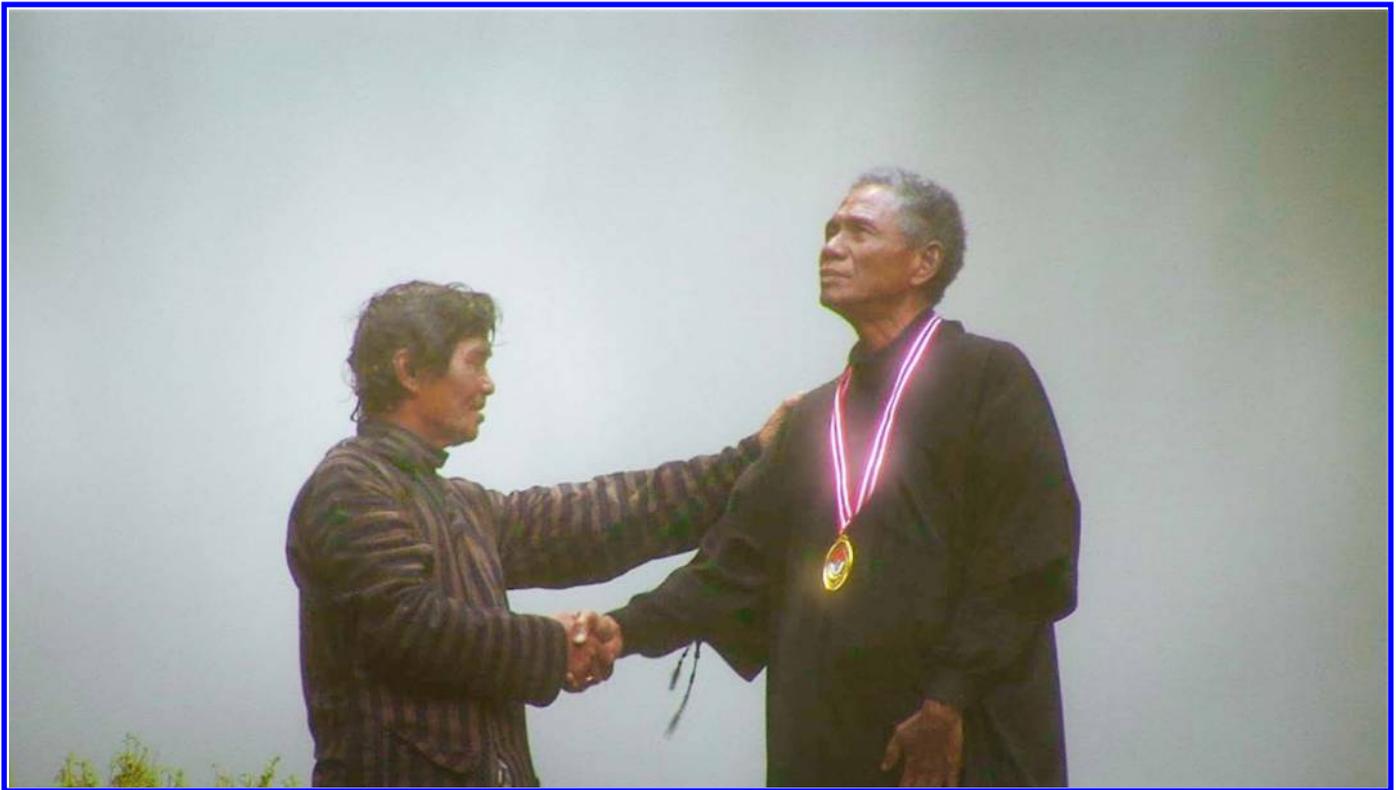
a former neighbor of Anwar's who plays the victim in this scene, tells the story of his stepfather's cruel killing by death squads, a killing that he witnessed as a child, and whose perpetrators may well be among those in the room. Suryono's delivery is inappropriately breezy; he chuckles, attempting to minimize the story's severity. He asks if they can stage it as one of the scenes for the film, but Anwar and the crew dismiss him on aesthetic grounds. Immediately after, they resume filming the interrogation scene with Anwar in the role of the guard.

Suryono breaks into sobs, a performance marked by wracking grief prompted by the memory of his stepfather. When they have finished the take, Anwar is still in his makeup, military costume and helmet, sitting in the camera operator's chair and catatonically observing the set from above. Like the child in Freud's case study or Dieter Dengler in his airplane, Anwar retreats to the position of onlooker after coming too close to the kernel of trauma—in this case, both his own and Suryono's.

In a third interrogation scene, Anwar plays the role of victim. Here, in a complete role reversal, his character is a Communist who tried to ban American films in Indonesia. The *mise-en-scène*—an office setting with dark, moody lighting—marks this version as *film noir* in contrast to the gangster and prisoner-of-war genres

evoked by the previous ones. Anwar is beaten with a stick, and a "medal" is placed around his neck: a version of the wire garrote that was Anwar's murder weapon of choice during the mass exterminations. At this point, Anwar freezes, falls mute, and finds himself unable to complete another take. He has come to occupy all three of the classic positions in Freud's beating fantasy: aggressor, onlooker, and finally victim. Like Brecht's Arturo Ui, only in reverse, he descends from the posture of a towering, barking gangster boss to that of a slumped-over, silent victim.<sup>15</sup> His performance style in turn shifts from an aloof reenactment of his crimes to one in which his physical and emotional reactions are no longer under his control.

The brightly colored musical numbers interspersed among the scenes of gangster beatings, burning villages, and beheading nightmares strike an unsettlingly jolly tone. These scenes belong to Herman Koto, Anwar's younger sidekick and a top member of Pancasila Youth, the Indonesian paramilitary group that ran the death squads for Suharto's military coup. Herman appears, stunningly, in hot pink ballroom drag: "eye candy," as he puts it, noting, "This is healthy for a guy like me." In the first of the musical numbers, Herman reclines, Mae West-like, in a prairie landscape, singing a song in which he waxes nostalgic about buying scalped movie tickets. He reminisces about being



Anwar's phantasmagoria in *The Act of Killing*.

a “big fish” among “free men,” the Indonesian term for an American-style gangster. In several of the musical scenes, Herman appears with a chorus of women who emerge from the mouth of the film’s iconic giant fish sculpture. The baroquely stylized touches almost evoke Baz Luhrmann or Bollywood.

By far the most fantastical of the musical numbers in *The Act of Killing*, in both the stylistic and psychoanalytic senses, is the “Born Free” number that forms both the opening and penultimate scenes of the film. Here, Anwar appears in black robes in front of a scenic waterfall, surrounded by elaborately costumed backup singers. Herman appears in a turquoise mermaid-style gown and hat. The setting is the afterlife. The soundtrack features the title song of *Born Free* (James Hill and Tom McGowan, 1966), a film about a lion raised in captivity and later released into the wild, while a medal ceremony is conducted and Anwar’s victims thank him for killing them. This wholly revisionist fantasy, a scene of pure wish-fulfillment, reveals the extreme distortions that the troubled psyche is capable of making in order to protect itself from the fuller understanding that might be facilitated by either more critical distance or more empathetic closeness.

Unlike Anwar, Herman seems to embrace the film-making opportunity with fewer pesky moral qualms, and

without the contorted mental gymnastics by which Anwar attempts to justify his actions. This is in part because Herman, as we can assume from his age, did not play as active a role in the 1965 massacres as did his older colleagues. But his approach to Oppenheimer’s exercise is also different in kind. In one of the film’s more conventionally documentary-style scenes, we see him preparing to run for political office and practicing public speaking in front of a mirror. He watches a speech by President Barack Obama on a television screen and attempts to copy his intonation and posture as Obama speaks the line, “To those who would tear the world down, we will defeat you!” Herman relishes performing, and in his world, power is already about the performance of power. His position in the Pancasila Youth is one that he has assumed in part via a kind of exercise in gesture. To an extent, he has been “playing” rather than “being” the thug all along; he thereby protects himself from the floods of involuntary emotional memory that Anwar, Suryono, and others experience. Herman seems to exist on the far end of the continuum between traumatic repetition and performative mimicry. He has been acting stock characters all along, so his reenactments are already copies of copies.

If *The Act of Killing* cannot be reduced to a dubious exercise in psychotherapy for perpetrators of crimes against



Herman models his political campaign on a famous American in *The Act of Killing*.

humanity, nor can it simply be accepted as a virtuous plea for restorative justice or reparations on behalf of the invisible, silenced victims. Both elements are in play, though. As one reviewer mildly put it, “It seems clear that Anwar is suffering from some form of PTSD.”<sup>16</sup> His dissociated affect, his avoidance of the scenes of his crimes prior to making the film, and his recurrent, distressing dreams, restaged in the film and also made evident in footage of him tossing and turning at night in his cluttered, tiny sleeping chamber, all qualify as symptoms thereof, and the most recent edition of the *DSM* includes “being a perpetrator, witnessing atrocities, or killing the enemy” as factors conducive to that disorder.<sup>17</sup> As far as the victims are concerned, Suryono is one of the sole representatives in *The Act of Killing*. His story does make it into the film after all, not as a fully staged scene, but in spoken form, bundled with the very conversation in which it was censored. These glimpses of psychological working-through and political justice are small, however, and neither one is even remotely apparent by film’s end, when Anwar completes the circuit from cavalier detachment to involuntary reliving (via a dramatically protracted fit of dry heaving).

Oppenheimer offers the following reading of this image: “Nothing will come up, there’s nothing to come up; he’ll never escape himself . . . [it is an] acknowledgment that he

will never leave this place.”<sup>18</sup> Anwar may be incurable; reparation, whether psychical or political, is not possible for crimes so monstrous. But if for some *The Act of Killing* has been deemed an exercise in futility, and for others has served only to thicken the smoke screen of denial, the film also reveals that something else *is* possible: that fantasy can paradoxically be the route back to reality, performing the difficult work of opening doors to the past that were previously locked shut.

### Author’s Note

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### Notes

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2. For more on this topic, see Robert Blackson, “Once More . . . With Feeling: Reenactment in Contemporary Art and Culture,” *Art Journal* 66, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 28–40.
3. See Adam Nayman, “Find Me Guilty: Joshua Oppenheimer’s *The Act of Killing*,” *Cinema Scope* 53 (Winter 2013): 24–30.

4. Katie Kitamura, "Joshua Oppenheimer on *The Act of Killing*," *Al Jazeera America* (September 22, 2013). <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2013/9/22/joshua-oppenheimer-on-filming-the-act-of-killing.html>. See also Nick Bradshaw, "Build My Gallows High: Joshua Oppenheimer on *The Act of Killing*," *Sight and Sound* (July 2, 2013). <http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/interviews/build-my-gallows-high-joshua-oppenheimer-act-killing>.
5. See Bertolt Brecht, "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting," in *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).
6. American Psychiatric Association, "Posttraumatic Stress Disorder," *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition* (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association, 2013), 309.81 (F43.10).
7. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton, 1961), 19.
8. Joshua Oppenheimer and Michael Uwemedimo, "A Cinema-Séance of Power and Violence in Sumatra's Plantation Belt," in Brink and Oppenheimer, *Killer Images*, 293.
9. Rithy Panh, quoted in Joshua Oppenheimer, "Perpetrators' Testimony and the Restoration of Humanity: S21, Rithy Panh," in Brink and Oppenheimer, *Killer Images*, 245.
10. American Psychiatric Association, "Dissociative Disorders," *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, 300.6 (F48.1).
11. Bradshaw, "Build My Gallows High."
12. American Psychiatric Association, "Posttraumatic Stress Disorder."
13. Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, "Phantasy," in *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973), 318.
14. Sigmund Freud, "A Child Is Being Beaten: A Contribution to the Study of the Origin of Sexual Perversions," in *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, trans. Alix and James Strachey, ed. Philip Rieff (New York: Collier Books, 1963): 107–32.
15. Bertolt Brecht, *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* (New York: Arcade, 2001 [1941]).
16. Kitamura, "Joshua Oppenheimer on *The Act of Killing*."
17. American Psychiatric Association, "Posttraumatic Stress Disorder."
18. Bradshaw, "Build My Gallows High."