Languages of Trauma

History, Memory, and Media

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Dedicated to our inspiring colleague Thomas Elsaesser

Contents

Part Two: Music, Theatre, and Visual Arts

Part Three: Normalizations of Trauma

Part Four: Representations in Film

Illustrations

14 Aesthetic Displays of Perpetrators in *The Act of Killing* (2012): Post-atrocity Perpetrator Symptoms and Re-enactments of Violence

JULIA BARBARA KÖHNE

The essay film *The Act of Killing*[1] has made waves since its release in late summer 2012, within Indonesia and in its international reception.[2] US-American director Joshua Oppenheimer, in association with filmmaker Christine Cynn, collaborated on the film together with an Indonesian co-director and team, both kept anonymous for safety reasons. The film crew also included political activists and academic scholars. *The Act of Killing* straddles genres because, with some justification, the film could also be described as a reality-based horror movie that confronts the status quo of an "open secret."[3] The film, with more than seventy nominations, including an Academy Award nomination for Best Documentary Film in 2014, provides insight into the cultural imaginary of today's island nation of Indonesia regarding the official suppression of critical memory of the 1965–66 state-orchestrated mass killing of civilians.[4] In its experimental and challenging, open and free, regime-critical and self-reflexive form, the essay film[5] not only presents excerpts from an until now unwritten perpetrator story of mass murderers from northern Sumatra. It also provides an allegorical analysis of the violent past that lies outside the traditional and dominant historical discourse. Figuratively speaking, it creates a bridge on which past and present collide, and art, imagination, and interpretation of reality are mutually illuminated. Through this dynamic, a counter-history evolves to challenge the official Indonesian, biased historiography, which has long manipulated the historical perception of this period for purposes of suppression.

This chapter focuses on *The Act of Killing* as a catalyst for sociopolitical attention to a 'genocide' that had fallen into oblivion for decades. Its international film reception, as well as numerous insightful interviews with Oppenheimer, have progressively promoted a historiographic awareness of this forgotten 'genocide' in Indonesia, flanked by comparative genocide studies. The film acts as a communicator of knowledge

about mass murderers and their extremely complex psyches. In addition to intrapsychic dynamics, *The Act of Killing* highlights the perpetrators' conceited self-perceptions and their ambivalent levels of agency. The counterpart to the film, Oppenheimer's *The Look of Silence* (2014/15),[6] deals with the victims' rather than the perpetrators' perspective.

At the centre of the documentary narrative found in *The Act of Killing* are a handful of male mass murderers[7] who actively persecuted alleged opponents of the regime during the Indonesian massacre of 1965–66. These men conducted systematic ethnic-political purges, and detained large numbers for years as political prisoners in detention camps. They interrogated and accused the detained; tortured, killed, and raped victims; and expelled and suppressed the persecuted. The men participated in the mass murder and detention of about a million or more suspected 'communists,' extending over large parts of the archipelago.[8] The label 'communist' was applied to members of the Indonesian Communist Party (Partai Komunis Indonesia, PKI) as well as leftist sympathizers, trade unionists, artists, intellectuals, and ethnic Chinese and Abangan Javanese.[9] At that time, the PKI was blamed for having killed six high-ranking military generals on 30 September and 1 October 1965. Today historians consider this claim to be false, put forward to conceal the atrocities' real cause, which was linked to internal military conflicts.[10]

The goal of the military leaders, among them the future dictator General Suharto, and their paramilitary followers, including religious organizations, who gave orders, endorsed, or carried out the 'genocide' and ethnic cleansing, was to decimate the PKI and "annihilate the historical and social existence of this heterogeneous victim group."[11] Even decades later, the perpetrators remember their deeds in detail, proudly, and with pleasure, but at the same time they are haunted by memories of their violent acts. About forty-five years later, *The Act of Killing* portrays the political mass murderer Anwar Congo and some of his (former) companions – at the time the essay film was shot they were in their seventies – by providing a subtle cinematic psychographic profile of these men, who have lived in Medan since the mid-1960s. The psychological profile, which the film presents by means of various perpetrator re-enactments and plentiful close-ups of perpetrators' faces, includes the question of the moral and psycho-mental injury the perpetrators inflicted on themselves during the multiple killing operations. Instead of embarking on the conventional gesture of demonization, pathologization, criminalization, and dehumanization of perpetrators, Oppenheimer developed an innovative iconography of offenders, generated through filmic investigation. To achieve this, the filmmaker initiated an unusual partnership: in the mid-2000s, he provided the perpetrators the cinematic space to conduct

self-representation and self-questioning. The Oppenheimer team supplied them with film technology, film sets, make-up artists, wardrobe, and camera, while the perpetrators contributed the ideas, screenplay, direction, and acting. Without giving the resulting film a fixed direction, Oppenheimer hoped that it could illuminate the depths of human existence and seed insights that would contribute to a non-violent future.

Oppenheimer's cinematic investigation method neither judges its film characters nor explicitly evaluates their actions. Instead, it holds a mirror up to the audience, who belong to the human species just like the perpetrators. By making spectators look at the subjective perspective of perpetrators, who are depicted in an accessible and sometimes even likeable way, *The Act of Killing* creates unpleasant but instructive ways of identifying with individuals who, to the present day, deny their guilt for reasons of self-protection and preservation of power. For example, we can watch Anwar Congo a dozen times doing body care, discussing perfume aromas, combining sunglasses with his extravagant outfit, or using a denture to perfect his front row of teeth: "I know what looks good on me. I'm an artist." It's these intimate physical details that fuel spectator interest in the characters. These shared intimacies counterbalance the long passages where the film tracks the conditions in which violence and its cover-up unfolded. Violence committed by men is addressed here in a way that recognizes complexity, as it is not referred to as being 'natural inborn,' or otherwise essentialized and biologized. Rather, it appears as an (avoidable) result of a complex structure of specific sociopolitical, economic, ideological, and psycho-mental framework conditions. Instead of communicating extensive historical factual knowledge and archival imagery, *The Act of Killing* focuses on an in-depth study of past and potential conditions of brutal mass violence in order to make the mechanisms of this violence recognizable in other contexts.

The argument of this chapter is that *The Act of Killing* acts as a driving force for processes of reflection in which the mass murder of the 1960s is brought out into the open and its long-term legacy of discrimination, intimidation, and victim-stigmatizing can be criticized. This is a legacy that has reigned in Indonesia to this day in the form of extortion of protection money, corruption, and harassment of certain sections of the population with dissonant political opinions. It is a reign that was based for a long time on the silence of the victims, who still must live in the same neighbourhood as their perpetrators. They stay silent out of fear of further state-military repression, social exclusion, and hostility – Anwar sums up the perpetrators' way of seeing such people, who already were marginalized back then: "But if they didn't pay, we killed them. They can't have it both ways."[12] The essay film has an influence on the political

Image 14.1. One of Anwar's post-atrocity perpetrator symptoms is insomnia, *The Act of Killing* (2012). Image courtesy of Joshua Oppenheimer.

imaginary insofar as it uses cinematic narrative to rewrite mental images of violence and guilt, which actively shape the perception of genocidal history and post-genocidal presence that is still characterized by repression. It reveals that 'historical facts' are rarely purposeless, but rather a system of statements that are constantly reconfigured and often close to centres of power.

Besides the continuity of power, the film extensively refers to the psychosomatic manifestations that Anwar recounts to spectators, such as insomnia (Image 14.1), restlessness, repeated nightmares, and distanced affects, that seem to have disturbed his killer ego since the end of the massacres:

> I know that my nightmares were about what I did, killing people who did not want to die. I forced them to die. […] I'm disturbed in my sleep. Maybe because when I strangled people with wire I watched them die. […] If I fall asleep, that's exactly what catches up with me.

Through self-medication, drug abuse, alcoholism, and hedonistic dancing, Anwar attempted in the late 1960s to mask the symptoms and suppress the memory of his actions. The point here is to explain why it would not be adequate or effective to call the psychological symptoms that Anwar shows in the film 'perpetrator trauma.' I suggest instead the term 'post-atrocity perpetrator symptoms' in order to clearly

differentiate, both conceptually and linguistically, between post-deed psychological phenomena in a perpetrator and the trauma of victims.

Theoretical Background on Perpetrator-Victim Inversion

It is important to discuss in detail the practice of re-enactments of violence, including perpetrator-victim inversions, demonstrated in *The Act of Killing*. It is beneficial for perpetrators to deal with suppressed guilt and shame regarding their exceptionally violent and inhumane acts by oscillating between reliving the perpetrator role and performative imitation. By remembering past deeds via the 're-enactment time channels' for years, Anwar playfully empathizes with the victims, temporarily taking over parts of the victim position by means of 'cross-identification.' First, it becomes clear that the temporary cross-identifications open up new ways for Anwar to think about his past motivations for his killing actions and his torn self. Second, he can actively put himself in the situation of victims whom he has terrorized, in a gesture of catching up with the feelings of empathy and emotions he had suppressed in the acts of killing (Anwar: "Only now that I see it, I understand how horrible it was. I didn't expect that."). Third, as is suggested by psychoanalyst Mathias Hirsch in regard to another context, it can be argued that in the course of the lengthy filming and repeated re-enactments, Anwar makes contact with the parts of himself that feel victimized, which may have led him to become a perpetrator (this is to be seen against the background of state anti-communist infiltration that cast 'communists' as future aggressors). By cross-identifying and acknowledging the victim in himself, the perpetrator role cannot be further suppressed. Hirsch explains that a perpetrator-part arises in an individual "on the basis of an imitative identification […], as a remedy against the feelings of helplessness of another, a victim-part of the self."[13]

Calling on the theories of psychoanalyst and child psychologist Anna Freud, we can label Anwar's former feelings of powerlessness deriving from his irrational fear of 'murderous communists' as anticipatory fears. Imagining him/herself as a potential victim, the fearful person adapts to this image of fear and the anticipated aggression and strength – "identifying with the dreaded external object."[14] By this defence mechanism, the painful and unwanted feeling-states are made more bearable via a "game of impersonation which children love to play."[15] Freud adds, "there are many children's games in which through the metamorphosis of the subject into a dreaded object ["pretend that you're the ghost who might meet you"] anxiety is converted into pleasurable security."[16] Parts of the anxiety object would be introjected "by impersonating the

aggressor, assuming his attributes or imitating his aggression."[17] The passively threatened person transforms himself or herself from the person threatened into the one who actively makes the threat. In "Identification with the Aggressor," Anna Freud addresses "defence mechanisms" (unconscious psychological dynamics reducing anxiety), such as repression, denial, regression, identification, introjection, projection of guilt, undoing, sublimation, and reversal into the opposite, as psychic processes that served to cope with "external objects which arouse anxiety" and to overcome mental weaknesses in as conflict-free a fashion as possible.[18]

Several of these mechanisms are relevant for an analysis of the perpetrator display in *The Act of Killing*. For example, projection, in which inner parts of the self such as social envy, feelings of hatred, and fears of death focused on 'communists' are assumed to be motivations for the perpetrators' killing intentions. After an act of violence, blame often needs to be repressed. Unfulfilled desires, such as the desire to be reconciled with the victims, can be sublimated and satisfied on an artistic level, as is made visible in *The Act of Killing*, for example in the Bollywoodesque musical episodes.

In order for perpetrators to face their irrational fear of posthumous revenge by the murdered victims, the film's re-enactments of violence are accompanied by Bollywood-like phantasmagories in which the perpetrators envision an otherworldly moment of pacification and forgiveness. Their fear of counter-violence and empowerment, carried out by the few surviving victims, their relatives, or descendants of those murdered, is transcended here by imagining a different ending of the 'story.' This comes in the shape of a miraculous reconciliation in which the victim bows to his former tormenter and expresses his thanks for being eliminated by him. Below, I argue that this can be interpreted as a bandaging[19] of the mental wounds the perpetrators have inflicted on themselves in a sort of moral self-traumatization.

In general, I will show that the portrayal of the male mass murderers of 1965–66 in the experimental film *The Act of Killing* was not only novel but also necessary in order to explore the position of perpetrators from a deeper epistemological point of view. I will demonstrate how the film on the one hand resonates with certain psychoanalytic, psycho-traumatological, and therapeutic concepts, and on the other hand corresponds with recent research on perpetrators' actions in genocidal conflicts, and thus challenges the limits of conventional forms of collective consciousness and historical reflection. In my reading, *The Act of Killing* translates critical psychography and interdisciplinary perpetrator research into film language (at times even anticipating current research outcomes). These are research approaches that argue poly-contextually,

structural-institutionally, and situational-concretely, incorporating sociopolitical, habitual, ideological, and economic motives of perpetration. On view are psychological experiments with perpetrators who confront their pasts as mass murderers and undergo a self-therapy in largely self-designed re-enactments. They turn from 'happy killers' who suffer from 'post-atrocity perpetrator symptoms' into individuals who are haunted and subtly troubled, or 'knocked-at,' by feelings of guilt. There is shame, self-loathing, self-knowledge, and the possibility of letting guilt from the perpetrated acts of injustice shine through. At the same time, we can see further successful repression and escape into grotesque fantasy formations.

Finally, I will summarize how *The Act of Killing* offers the possibility of considering perpetrator figures as neither "monsters" nor psychopaths. The film shows that it makes no sense to stylize perpetrators into a delinquent enigma that we should perceive with incomprehension, disrespect, contempt, hatred, or social exclusion. Nor would it be constructive to see them as incarnations of 'evil,' and thus to locate them imaginatively outside of society, in order to apotropaically ward off their potential for destruction. Rather, the knowledge the film communicates about them should be used as a starting point to reflect on the different ways in which we all, in other contexts and to some extent, consciously or unconsciously, are involved or implicated in positions of perpetration: "They are us and we are them." In a transgressive model of perpetration, both concepts, 'victims' and 'perpetrators,' are de-essentialized and deconstructed, without abolishing their contextual definability and pragmatic-political necessity in legal, sociopolitical, and moral contexts.

The perception of the Indonesian mass killings of 1965–66 as 'crimes against humanity' was suppressed until recently not only by the individual perpetrators and perpetrator groups, but also on a collective level. Certainly this was done by the Indonesian side, including efforts by the military dictatorship under General Suharto, as well as by US-American, British, and other anti-communist Western forces, which supported the mass murders in the context of the Cold War and the 'fight against communism' monetarily, technically, and logistically. The United States delivered arms and the CIA compiled death lists, and together with other supporters they then celebrated the murderers on a symbolic level.[20] In fact, in official narratives the perpetrators are still glorified across northern Sumatra as cult figures. Today, they still hold paramilitary positions of power (Image 14.2), although it is foreseeable that their power will slowly vanish because of their advancing age. The mass murderers "have never been held to account for the genocide and are celebrated as victors,"[21] and a winners' narrative dominated until the worldwide reception

Image 14.2. Happy Medan killer trio in the car, with director Oppenheimer, *The Act of Killing* (2012). Image courtesy of Joshua Oppenheimer.

of both of Oppenheimer's documentaries. *The Act of Killing* shows that even though "war crimes are defined by the winners"[22] (in the words of Anwar's friend Adi Zulkadry), the winning tale always has fissures.

At the end of the film, which depicts a ten-year journey into the convoluted rationalizations that structure the minds of mass murderers, Anwar, whose self-glorification is visibly distorted, asks Oppenheimer: "Or have I sinned? I did this to so many people, Josh. Is it all coming back to me?" (Image 14.3). The following sections explore how Anwar's question can be evaluated, and if it might be interpreted as a sign of critical self-reflection, insight, and moral transformation, even if only temporary.

Anwar Congo: From Happy Killer to Becoming a Medium of Transition

When spectators of *The Act of Killing* meet former killer Anwar Congo, a founding member of the Indonesian far-right paramilitary organization Pancasila Youth (*Pemuda Pancasila*), his statements are full of irrational stories, which degrade the 1965–66 victims ("We have thrown corpses [into the river Deli] [….] It looked pretty, like parachutes, Bam!") and tend to superstition ("Here are many ghosts!") and magical wishful

Image 14.3. Anwar asks Oppenheimer: "Or have I sinned?" in *The Act of Killing* (2012). Image courtesy of Joshua Oppenheimer.

thinking. He seems to be caught in the twilight zone between exact knowledge of his acts of violence and lack of knowledge of what exactly his wrongdoing was. It becomes clear that Anwar has constructed his ego, his subjectivity, and his persona on the basis of his murderous deeds and the sense of triumph associated with them, as well as at the expense of his independent moral integrity – denying guilt and blaming others just as thousands of other perpetrators did. His friend Adi Zulkadry, who served as the head of a death squad in 1965–66, sums up the dilemma: "Killing is the worst crime one can commit. So, you have to find a way to not feel guilty. You have to find the right argument. And one has to believe in this view." In another scene Oppenheimer, off camera, outlines Adi's arguments: "By telling yourself it was 'war,' you're not haunted like Anwar."

In the course of shooting the film, Anwar is so provoked and animated by the presence of the camera that he becomes more and more absorbed in his past as a mass murderer commissioned by the government and military. The camera becomes an instrument that helps to break up internal resistance and stimulate the perpetrator's memory (does the camera also become a personal promise for him to be able to recapture humaneness through his filmed confession?). On a fenced rooftop terrace above the former Pancasila Youth bureau, the historic killing ground where he carried out numerous executions, Anwar, now an elderly man in a green-patterned shirt, zealously demonstrates to the film crew and spectators how he accomplished the killing of a thousand people within a few months.

Image 14.4. Anwar impersonates his former self as a killer using a wire, *The Act of Killing* (2012). Image courtesy of Joshua Oppenheimer.

He tells his story vividly but from an emotional distance, explaining how he invented the most effective and creative killing techniques, ranging from beating people to death, inflicting copious bloodshed, to 'cleaner' wire strangulation. The location inspires Anwar's journey through memory, as it has physically stored this history of violence, with the concrete joints between the tiles still containing remnants of the blood of the slain, which could not be wiped away. All this happens with a smile on his face (embodying 'killing happily'), and it is followed by a light-footed cha-cha-cha dance and more bragging. Anwar casually wears the wire loop around his neck that he used in a previous camera setting to demonstrate how precisely he performed the strangling. He is assisted by a friend who tentatively acts the part of a former victim, grinning insecurely. In order to show his victim-actor-friend where to sit, while trying to reconstruct the past with accuracy, Anwar carefully placed a fresh tile next to the post where he attaches one end of the wire. After placing the noose around the victim's head at a precisely calculated angle, he steps aside and indicates how he used to tighten it in 1965–66 (Image 14.4). In the moment of the re-enacted tightening, the victim-actor looks stressed, but he tries to charmingly smile it away. The spectators can guess that he knows and now even feels that in the past Anwar did not spare anyone who found themselves in this predicament. Shortly thereafter, on the terrace, Anwar for the first time reports the serious mental symptoms that he suffered from at the time and suffers from to this day.

The legal scholar Saira Mohamed, in her 2015 study *Of Monsters and Men: Perpetrator Trauma and Mass Atrocity*, describes this as a happy killer's mentality and Anwar as a "perpetrator who embraces the murders he commits but still suffers trauma on account of those crimes."[23] Mohamed calls the investigation of such killers, whom she labels "traumatized perpetrators," a blind spot in the judicial system and international criminal law. She considers the model of a perpetrator "who performed his acts of violence willingly, and who nevertheless experiences that violence as trauma,"[24] a model that has remained largely unexplored.[25] In her comprehensive study, she supports "the idea that […] commission of the crime itself causes a psychological injury to the perpetrator, which can result in particular adverse physical, social, or emotional consequences": "his psyche is haunted by the demons of his past."[26] Mohamed argues that the happiness and exhilaration built up during the acts of killing and in the aftermath helped the murderers, who called themselves "heroes who saved the country from a leftist coup, not murderers,"[27] to uphold the internal and external system of violence. In contrast to Mohamed, who wants to extend the trauma category to perpetrators, I would not say that *The Act of Killing* demonstrates that perpetrators can also experience their actions as psychological traumatization. Instead, in my eyes, the film exposes how violent action can lead to another form of psychological strain and moral dissolution, which must be in any case framed and identified as distinct from the concept of victim trauma, as I will argue below.

The question of where this proud and joyous display, and the bold statements of the murderer Anwar, come from leads us once again to Anna Freud's explanations in her 1936 monograph *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence*. The exaggerated and compulsive image that Anwar paints of himself while bragging and dancing on the roof terrace can be interpreted as an unconscious psychological defence mechanism to manipulate the cruel reality, or to deny guilt, shame, and embarrassment in the face of his actions. Demonstrating his own validity and importance obviously helps Anwar to reduce fears deriving from negative stimuli that he expects and that potentially hurt him, such as the idea of an unlikely case of arrest and punishment. To maintain his self-image of a "cool gangster," "free man" (*preman*) with a licence to kill, and "redeemer of the world from evil," who successfully killed regime-opposing 'communists,' Anwar suppresses the fear of guilt.

Framework for Violence: Signs of Moral Perversion

Anwar's attempts to fend off hidden guilt are supported by a sociopolitical and mental framework, which I will define below, that helps him preserve an idealized version of himself, a person of integrity and power. In this

upside-down world, the 1965–66 past seems to have been deeply buried by most of Indonesian society until the release of Oppenheimer's documentaries. For the perpetrators, the heroic past and its specific characteristics are highly present and relevant, while the position of the survivors and descendants of the murdered has been systematically silenced until today.

The Act of Killing shows that the anti-communist hysteria and killing activities were based on a multitude of interdependent conditions – economic, political, religious, ideological, and racist/Sinophobic – as well as a long chain of command. After the killing of the six generals in 1965, a new set of anxieties was nourished by press organs, including fear of the civilian population close to the regime of 'communists' who might overwhelm key parts of society. In the film, Ibrahim Sinik, a journalist who at that time was orchestrating mass killings and was gathering incriminating information about 'communists' during interrogations, explains: "No matter what we asked, we changed their answers to make them look bad. As a newspaper man, my job was to make sure that the public hated them ['communists']. […] Why should I do the dirty work? Why should I kill people? I did not need that. A head movement and they were dead!" Fear of 'communists' had existed in Indonesia since the rise of the PKI in the course of the country's gaining independence from the Dutch colonial power in 1945–49. In 1965, a common image of the enemy was deployed and propagated by the army and the media to channel transpersonal anxieties resulting from collective experiences of insecurity, contingency, and upheaval, such as the fear of hyperinflation, of loss of economic status, and of even greater political influence of the PKI, before and during the regime change from Sukarno to Suharto and the latter's seizure of power. In order to be able to kill as extensively as possible, local criminals and professional gangsters, as well as other civilians, were ordered by the army to carry out the killings "in defence" (the 'us or them' myth). Indonesian government officials and foreign powers like the United States consigned responsibility to the Indonesian army, and from there to the paramilitary, the Pancasila Youth, police units and death squads, and civilian militias recruited from religious and nationalist groups. The latter were supplied with weapons by the army and acted under its command.

Local civilian perpetrators, among them Anwar and other "movie theater gangsters," had the freedom as "free men" to kill whomever they considered a 'communist' or wanted to get rid of for personal reasons. Anwar and his gang made their living out of selling movie theatre tickets for films from the West on the black market. He explains, "as the communists grew stronger – they demanded a ban on American films. […] So, we gangsters made less money. Because there was no audience anymore." Herman Koto adds, "Or, as we say: 'the belly has missed its supper.'" Freedom of movement and a self-glorifying perspective went hand

Image 14.5. Relax and Rolex!, *The Act of Killing* (2012). Image courtesy of Joshua Oppenheimer.

in hand with financial and selfish interests, for which the "gangsters" enthusiastically killed their political enemies, professional rivals, or other competitors. Today's Pancasila Youth leader Yapto Soerjosoemarno relates their former and recent motto, "Relax and Rolex!" (Image 14.5).

In 1972, the religious philosopher René Girard described the social mechanism of an act of sacrifice that redirects tensions and aggression in a society. Violence against a "'sacrificeable' victim," in this context 'communist' intellectuals and ethnic Chinese among others, would prevent society from engaging in violence "that would otherwise be vented on its own members, the people it most desires to protect."[28] "The sacrifice serves to protect the entire community," Girard writes, "from *its own* violence; it prompts the entire community to choose victims outside itself."[29] He continues: "[T]he violence directed against the surrogate victim might well be radically generative in that, by putting an end to the vicious and destructive cycle of violence, it simultaneously initiates another and constructive cycle, that of the sacrificial rite – which protects the community from that same violence and allows culture to flourish."[30] Sacrificing, Girard argued, strengthens social cohesion, and also functions as a means to constitute a community. In exactly this way, the massacres in Indonesia were instrumentalized as the founding myth of a system of sacrifice in the shape of the New Suharto regime, the so-called New Order (1966–98), whose community spirit was also based on the violence of a military dictatorship.

To hide their mainly selfish motives, Indonesian mass murderers claimed to follow ideological, *weltanschaulichen*, and ethnic motivations. Influenced by Stefan Kühl's *Ganz normale Organisationen: Zur Soziologie des Holocaust* (2014), we can speak of an anti-communist "consensus fiction,"[31] although no perpetrator really believed in the inferiority of the alleged communists, which included the marginalized Chinese minority, as *The Act of Killing* clearly states. Adi admits: "I believe it [anti-communist propaganda] is a lie. […] Of course, that is lying. […] So, the communists were no more cruel than we were. We were the cruel ones! What is cruel is relative." What was the driving force, then? Just like the Milgram experiment (1961) or the Stanford Prison experiment (1971)[32] concluded, Harald Welzer's investigations, in his 2002 book *Täter: Wie aus ganz normalen Menschen Massenmörder werden* (Perpetrators: How perfectly normal people become mass murderers), have shown that "most of us would probably be willing to kill – it just needs the situational, social, and dynamic conditions in order to translate potentiality into action."[33]

As discussed above, according to Anna Freud's theory of "identification with the aggressor," fear of attack by a potential aggressor is enough to provoke a vehement defensive reaction, in which the fearful person becomes the aggressor – "a reversal of the roles of attacker and the attacked."[34] In Indonesia, anticipated repressions by 'communists' were tied to the fantasy of annihilating an entire ethnic group – according to the precept "We must kill you before you kill us." Killing was an imagined antidote for the diffuse *angst* of a domestic seizure of power by the 'communists.' Killing was a protective measure against the dreaded loss of control, against the expected traumatization by the 'communist' enemy. Killing was a means of overcoming the dreaded danger and of ensuring one's own continued existence – despite the knowledge that all these were just sham arguments delivered by propaganda.

The enemy was supposedly ready to attack at any time, and this idea helped perpetrators to imagine themselves as potential victims of hyperviolent 'communist' aggression. The anxiety that resulted from this imagined threat was fueled by Suharto's later New Order, which lasted until his resignation in 1998, and that anxiety was presented in a four-hour, graphically violent propaganda film titled *The Treachery of the September 30th Movement of the Indonesian Communist Party* (1984). The film portrayed the communist-Chinese opponent as an ongoing, massively bloodthirsty, profound threat, generating and consolidating fears that reactivated an image of an enemy that had already provided a smokescreen for the killings in 1965–66. Fear of lack of differentiation, a 'mixing of peoples,' jealousy of the achievements of others, and the alleged cruelty of the 'communists' are aspects of this indoctrination narrative.

The many thousands of screenings of the propaganda film, which took place in school class after school class, functioned as a *perpetuum mobile* that legitimized the Indonesian 'genocide' again and again, depicting it retroactively as a historical necessity. Anwar said of the film: "For me, this movie is the only thing that relieves my anxiety [over apprehension and punishment for his wrongdoing]. I see the movie and feel reassured."

Profiling of the Genocide-Perpetrators

Mass killings and the attendant collapse of any universal ethical value system are preconditioned by various initiating, reinforcing, and supportive factors that can be described as concentrically shaped. In the 1965–66 Indonesian massacres, the network of supporters consisted of the United States (covert support), the domestic army, paramilitary groups, death squads, and local units of contract killers. And yet it required a transformation on an individual level to enable concrete killings. How did the mass murderer Anwar Congo in the mid-1960s suppress his ability to empathize with suffering fellow human beings?

Interpersonal compassion and a basic ability to empathize are underlined in *The Act of Killing* when Anwar very carefully teaches his two grandchildren to take care of a baby duck whose leg apparently had deliberately been injured by one of them. Not for his acts of violence in the 1960s, but in this family incident, Anwar suddenly finds words of apology that he wants the little boy to say to the hurt duck in order to unburden himself. Anwar urges him: "Say, I'm sorry, duck. […] Now say, 'it was an accident' … 'I was afraid of you, that's why I hit you.'" Bashfully grinning, the little one passes on to the baby duck: "I'm sorry, duck." Anwar goes on: "And pet her a little" (Image 14.6). The grandchildren's faces clearly reveal that they find their grandfather's demanded gesture of apology asks too much of them. The children do not understand that Anwar is negotiating here with his own guilt, and that they should apologize to the duck as he should apologize to those he murdered. Below, we will see how he completely inverts his dream of begging his victims for forgiveness and erects an artificial setting in which his victims absurdly ask him for forgiveness. What appears in the duck episode as a 'moral compass,' commonly constructed in childhood in the form of the superego – education-mediated social values and norms such as the prohibition of killing, corrective action, and self-criticism – became suppressed in the case of Anwar and replaced by double moral standards.

The Act of Killing reveals that receiving orders from members of the army, or from paramilitary groups such as Pancasila Youth, provided the justification for perpetrator action in the death squads, which

Image 14.6. Anwar as charming grandfather with baby ducks, *The Act of Killing* (2012). Image courtesy of Joshua Oppenheimer.

included members of Anwar's peer group. As a group member, the killer experienced support and backing; the members shared the same attitude, or exercised peer pressure on one another, which allowed their interests to temporarily converge. There were several larger circles of people who applauded the killings of the perpetrators, creating social recognition. In *The Act of Killing*, this social cohesion is still noticeable in different scenes: the warm greetings and mutual embracing between former group members, some of whom are still working together in politics or business. In the mid-1960s, the extreme situation of killing was experienced communally, which had an identity-building effect. This generated euphoria experienced through the elimination of opponents after their arrest, questioning, and torture. It was a precisely followed 'trinity of violence,' which served to 'prove' the victims' guilt and to prevent later doubts. In the re-enactment scenes in the 2000s, the perpetrators still tend to dissolve into irrational-propagandistic and destructive thinking, which was promoted by the group in the historical setting, as is shown in the studio/victim scene with collective perpetration, discussed below.

With Kühl's *Soziologie des Holocaust* one can ask about the specific motivations of members of the killing organizations who were ready to exterminate neighbours. Forced recruitment is not a factor here because the men were already criminals and had been collaborating with the military for a long time. Instead, other conditions that Kühl lists – obedience to authority, camaraderie, peer pressure, incentives for reward, careerism,

overcoming inhibitions to killing and brutalization through dehumanization of the victims, and legalization of state violence – can also be found in the Indonesian case.[35] In addition, in the context of eliminationist anti-communism, the responsibility for the killings seems to have been taken over by military authorities, who did not want to get their hands dirty with or risk revenge for the killings. Overwhelmed in terms of capacity, they therefore delegated the killings downwards. This allowed the latent anti-communist and anti-Chinese sentiments, which were supposed to mask the simultaneous remilitarization of the Indonesian state, to be followed by active participation in mass executions, which were packaged as patriotic acts that the army rewarded with gratitude and money. According to Kühl, in the National Socialist Third Reich the logistical trick was to let everything happen in "parcels of killing" ("*Parzellen des Tötens*"), step by step (comparable to "incremental radicalization," as described by Saul Friedländer and Ian Kershaw), which was kept as invisible as possible. Adi observes of the Indonesian case: "Killing is something you do quickly. Throw away corpses and go home"; and Anwar adds, "Because we did not want spectators." It must be said that, in 1965–66, most of the Indonesian population agreed to what they saw or heard anyway (Adi notes, "Even the neighbours knew it"). Thus, it is a matter of a relative invisibility – acting at night, packing the corpses in sacks, throwing them into the river, and so on – but the killings were visible enough to have a deterrent effect. Many knew what happened to their neighbours and remained silent, as they could easily be accused of being 'communists' themselves if they rebelled.

Another component in profiling Anwar and his friends in the historical setting is their affinity for the media. They can be considered cinephile "gangsters" who worked as ticket attendants and on the cinema ticket black market near the most famous cinema in Medan. As longtime members of organized crime, some of them or their predecessors had already terrorized the population during the colonial period under Dutch occupation. For the "movie theater gangsters," cinema not only provided concrete media models and blueprints for their killings, but also suggestions for extremely creative interrogation and killing methods. Anwar explains, "[…] cinema showed so many cool ways to kill. […] And I imitated their [the film characters'] way of killing." And in the vein of Hollywood movies, such as Elvis Presley films, they walked enthusiastically and in a prancing manner to the killings in the paramilitary bureau, which faced the cinema and was called by Anwar "office of the blood." Anwar lets the audience know, "When girls came by, we whistled. It was wonderful. We did not care what people thought. […] It was as if we killed in a good mood." It is an interesting question, one I won't

address here, to what extent the search for imaginary reinforcement by film characters – as imagined bon-vivants and accomplices of the real killing acts – may have played a role in suppressing aversion to killing.

Post-atrocity Perpetrator Symptoms

As the dramaturgical architecture of the film unfolds, it becomes apparent that Anwar is being attacked by neglected feelings of shame, which he reveals on the rooftop or when going fishing with his friend Adi Zulkadry (Image 14.7). In addition to the psychological symptoms that he describes, he is also currently suffering from paranoia and has a superstitious fear of vengeful spirits in the guise of the murdered. He fantasizes that the latter would speak with threatening voices, hate him, and laugh. How can this psychic formation be interpreted?

In contrast to Bernhard Giesen and Christoph Schneider in their book *Tätertrauma* (2004),[36] Raya Morag in *Waltzing with Bashir* (2013)[37] (see also her chapter in this anthology), or Saira Mohamed, I do not view the much-debated concept of perpetrator trauma as confirmable in principle. This is because the existential experience of shock, fear of death, and mortality of the victim in the initial traumatizing situation, that is, in the moment of being hurt, is not congruent or interchangeable with the experience of the culprit, but rather in numerous cases is diametrically opposed to it. While the victim is injured by an external power in the violent situation – the Greek word *trauma* is translated as "piercing through, penetrating, wounding" – the perpetrator may experience feelings of superiority, omnipotence and godlikeness, blood lust, and satisfaction (if not killing in a state of overwhelming panic and fear of imminent death). Certainly, he (or she or they) may have injured himself morally by the act itself, or in the aftermath experience symptoms similar to those of a surviving victim (such as nightmares, insomnia, restlessness, depression), or be haunted by feelings of remorse, shame, and guilt. However, none of this alters the asymmetry of power in place during the original scene of violence, not even if in retrospect the perpetrator perceives the violent act as wrong and recognizes his guilt due to a change of attitude.[38]

Instead of talking about 'perpetrator trauma,' borrowing the concept of traumatization ~~from~~ for perpetrator research, and thus victimizing the perpetrator side, we can refer to the cultural anthropologist Aleida Assmann, who speaks of a future shock caused by the distressing confrontation with individual responsibility and guilt that is anticipated by perpetrators (comparable to the end of the Nazi regime). In such a case the 'genocidal' past necessarily would have to be confronted (this point

Image 14.7. Fishing in the dark killer past, *The Act of Killing* (2012). Image courtesy of Joshua Oppenheimer.

is obviously feared by Anwar and the other Indonesian mass murderers). While fishing in an artificial lake stocked with fish, Adi anticipates with great worry: "[The film] will disprove the propaganda about the communists being cruel and show that we were cruel" (see Image 14.7). Referring to Bernhard Giesen, Assmann states that the "turning point in consciousness" occurs only at the moment when a "triumphalist omnipotence fantasy abruptly reaches its limits," and could only become reality if the period that supports the killings was over.[39] Giesen explains: if Nazi perpetrators long thought themselves capable of deciding life and death, and behaved like a "self-enthroned absolute subjectivity" – similar to Anwar – they would only experience "perpetrator traumatization" when the illusion was harshly confronted with reality and exposed as a crime.[40] Only a collision with the sense of reality and a radical change in overall social values would generate a perpetrator consciousness, fueled not so much by an awakened conscience as a "dramatic shame by a total loss of face."[41] For a long time Indonesia has been far from reaching this point, but after the 2014 Oscar nomination of *The Act of Killing* and the Indonesian government's temporary acknowledgment in the same year of "human rights violations," hopefully they are getting closer to it.

Can it be said that the filming of *The Act of Killing* evokes a full awakening of Anwar's perpetrator consciousness? Since the conditions of impunity have not changed, this is hardly the case. However, Anwar and his cohort obviously are dealing with a belated identity crisis, triggered by

the constant re-enactment work while filming. With Giesen, one could say they are driven by a "post-heroic ambivalence." This does not necessarily imply a change of attitude, nor a detachment from the "triumphal-narcissistic identity"[42] or "trauma of shame." [43] Nonetheless, the filming of *The Act of Killing* has 'tugged' at their consciousness, and the warm domestic and foreign reception of the film may exert some pressure on the perpetrators, which might in turn reinforce their underlying despair or boost their repressive energies, or both.

The term 'post-atrocity perpetrator symptoms' introduced in this chapter makes it possible to see the denial of guilt in relation to acts of violence, as portrayed in *The Act of Killing*, which is connected with defence mechanisms by which the perpetrator's spirit protects itself from self-criticism or possible social sanctions. After 1965–66, the responsibility for the violence had been projected upon the victims by illegitimately stylizing them as enemies of the regime who needed to be destroyed. These mechanisms may have become chronic and pathological, adversely affecting the mental health of perpetrators. When people become perpetrators, they often violate their own moral convictions. They irreversibly cross a boundary that is ethically, socially, or religiously defined, disregarding the prohibition on killing and, in some cases, on revenge. They deliberately place themselves outside the framework of the social contract. This is also the case when the killing was ordered by rulers or allegedly serves as self-defence. If the notion of being wounded, injured, or traumatized was to be included (rhetorically mimicking the passive opposite part that actually receives the infliction), we would need to speak of a self-injury or 'self-traumatization' of the perpetrators. This is to be clearly distinguished from the passive experience of mortal agony of the victims, their feelings of powerlessness and humiliation, as well as their overpowering of perception due to fear and panic-inducing stimuli, potentially causing victim traumatization. Of course, the perpetrator's consciousness can also be impaired, as in the case of bloodlust, but this cannot be compared with the victims' experience at all. The experience of the perpetrator is fundamentally different from that of the victim, since it – as *The Act of Killing* emphasizes in various ways – is often associated with calculated killing, longing for potency, and lust for murder. Here hurting others provides relief, relaxation, satisfaction, gratification, pleasure, thrill, and ecstasy.[44]

After experiencing violence, victims often must deal with inappropriate feelings of shame, embarrassment and guilt, concealment, repression, compulsion towards repetition, and signs of a "post-traumatic stress reaction." In the case of the perpetrator, in contrast, irretrievably lost self-images of purity, shock about the violation of moral strictures,

and 'bad conscience' are dominant, which can lead to expressive 'post-atrocity perpetrator symptoms.' At the same time, as in the present case, guilt and shame are displaced. Responsibility for the deeds is denied, but simultaneously the atrocities' negative aura is repeated through bragging or re-enacting. Although some signs may resemble the trauma of victims on a performative level (insomnia, depression, heightened fright and arousal, flashbacks, nightmares, drug abuse, etc.), they have a different origin, reference point, and content. The one case involves managing the consequences of an experience of mortal fear, the other includes staving off recognition of guilt, identity crises, and a feared loss of face and reputation. *The Act of Killing* shows that the two forms of reaction – on a superficial bodily, aesthetic, symptomatological level – are parallel to each other, and both need to be taken seriously even though they belong to opposite ethical registers, political camps, and judicial norms.

Re-enactments of Violence: The Knocked-At Consciousness

How can the re-enactment scenes in *The Act of Killing*, in which the perpetrators point the camera on themselves, be described in more detail? In this essay film, planned and highly artificial re-enactment scenes in indoor and outdoor spaces are presented, which directly or indirectly refer to actual killing scenes in 1965–66. In addition, the film contains hyper-illusionary re-enactments that move beyond the realm of reality: overflowing, hyperbolic, grotesque, aesthetically exaggerated. It thus incorporates various film genres such as the Western, melodrama, thriller, and musical. According to the philosopher Robin George Collingwood in *The Idea of History* (posthumously from 1946), from a historiographical perspective a re-enactment includes "historical imagination," and it functions on various levels. Transferred to the present context, it would mean, first, the reconstruction and rebuilding of a historical event; second, acting and playing a role that creates distance from itself, while sometimes reversing past political positions (perpetrator-victim inversion); third, repeating and acting out the acts of killing; and fourth, restaging, mimicking, transforming, and merging with new elements.[45] The main difference between Collingwood's re-enactment theses and *The Act of Killing* is that, in the case of the Indonesian perpetrators, no historian retrospectively envisions and interprets the past. Instead, eyewitnesses and agents of the violent historical situation place themselves back in it (accompanied by the film team, who has another, secret agenda). In the first case it is about fidelity to the original and attention to detail but also including fantasy. In the second it is about constantly repeating the past

led by the (hidden) wish to repress it again, or to overcome it by further spinning it into elaborate cinematic fantasy settings.

The dramatic re-enactments in front of the camera and the replaying of the 'genocide' in *The Act of Killing* form a complex structure that can be described as a box model or 'télescopage of re-enactments.'[46] It consists of several elements. In the historical situation, killers like Anwar mimicked and re-enacted types of killers and killings they had seen and admired in Hollywood movies, such as strangulation with wire in mafia films. In the re-enactments in *The Act of Killing*, the historical acts of killing are, on the one hand, 'authentically' restaged, and on the other hand are enriched with today's fantasies of the perpetrators; they are thus transformed in a conceptual-aesthetic distortion. Here, the feedback element plays an essential role, consisting of film screenings on VCRs and laptops, and repeated loops that enable the correction of scenes; Oppenheimer used this technique mainly for Anwar (partly in the presence of his grandchildren or another paramilitary leader, Herman Koto). The perpetrators' long-term objective was to create an extraordinary "history film" that would consolidate their story and solidify it as a hero story. The planned film about "winners" was intended to receive recognition at the national level; at least that is the vision of Anwar and friends. They imagined being celebrated not only as local but as national heroes, which is what the mass murderers of Medan are still waiting for, as historian Benedict Anderson notes.[47] The documentary *The Act of Killing* explores these introspective journeys of the perpetrators on a meta-level by focusing on the resulting processes of critical self-questioning and, at the same time, of confirmation of their perpetrator role. In the director's cut, the elements of re-enactment are intertwined in a narrow space of time, allowing the spectator to immerse himself/herself within perpetrators' psyches and study them.

In the re-enactments, the perpetrators can pursue the urge to repeat and re-enact their deeds in an externalized form, which in the current situation is conscious, controlled, and performed under supervision (Image 14.8). In the course of this operationalized "repetition compulsion,"[48] the violent situations, whose moral impact had been repressed for decades, are played out over years and are 'digested' in the audio-visualization process (recollecting/repeating, re-enacting/restaging, acting/acting out, documenting/filming, screening/correction). The perpetrators mutually reinforce each other's potential to recollect and imagine/fantasize. It is important to point out that Oppenheimer and team did not have to ask the perpetrators to make these partly 'sincere confessions without a legal framework.' Rather, they used the perpetrators' tendency to repeat their history of violence again and again through the

Image 14.8. Film set with perpetrators, film crew including activists, and a descendant of a former victim, *The Act of Killing* (2012). Image courtesy of Joshua Oppenheimer.

oral history tradition, which already was customary in the Indonesian perpetrator community, permanently re-enacting their killing drama. To give an example, Adi says to Anwar: "Do you still remember the 'Destroy the Chinese!' campaign in 1966? You gave me a list of Chinese communists. All along Sudirman street I killed every Chinese I met. Stabbed! I do not remember how many, but there were dozens." Enlarging and reinforcing this living tradition, Oppenheimer compresses the already existing re-enactment culture into a 'recapitulation film' (which from his side was never meant to be serious), in which the perpetrators can supposedly celebrate and, once again, justify their former acts of violence. While the greying ex-mass murderers imagine themselves in complete solidarity with the American director, Oppenheimer deceives them, and plays another game. In the various re-enactments, he sees the possibility of sending the perpetrators on a journey of self-examination. He lets them believe the common goal is a cross-genre feature film that portrays the glorious injustices of the perpetrators as 'authentic,' bloody, and as frightening as possible. He makes them think that he wants to stage them as national heroes and liberators from 'seditious elements,' as well as to consolidate their current oppressive power. In the diegesis of *The Act of Killing*, the feature film production, the announced "family film" (Anwar's words) or "glamorous heroic strip,"[49] turns out to be a film-in-the-film, whose parts are repeatedly screened in front of the

perpetrator-directors so they can think about corrections of the presentation to be realized in the next round of shooting. The result is a feature film that shows the full power and cruelty the perpetrators were capable of then and are still capable of today. The newspaper publisher Ibrahim Sinik, from whom the "gangsters" still extort protection money, jokes in Anwar's direction: "So, you are now a star! Incredible. The guy is a star!"

In Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing*, the télescopage/re-enactments have coexisting and competing functions, which should be differentiated because remembrance takes place here amidst tensions between the repeated bragging about the killings, the perpetrators' objectification/rationalization/detaching, their self-doubts, and their processes of emotionalizing and empathizing with the victims. The documentary shows, as the filmmaker has repeatedly pointed out in audiovisual interviews, that repeated and exaggerated bragging can be the inverse of guilt, shame, and regret (for example, Anwar boasts of having knocked off heads). But before we come to this point, we need to reflect on another mechanism. Boasting is stimulated by the feeling of gratification that one has survived a dangerous situation. The writer Elias Canetti notes in his 1960 book *Crowds and Power* (*Masse und Macht*) about people at war who kill: "The lowest form of survival is killing";[50] "[w]hat they really need and what they can no longer do without [is] the continually repeated pleasure of survival."[51] In Canetti's eyes, the illusion of invulnerability, connected with a passionate search for a sense of grandeur and strength, derives for those in power from the God-like assumption of being able to decide life and death. Canetti argued in 1960, just a few years before the Indonesian massacres, that "confronting the man he has killed fills the survivor with a special kind of strength. There is nothing that can be compared with it, and there is no moment which more demands repetition." Canetti calls it the "sense of uniqueness."[52] The death of others here serves one's own survival and is therefore not mourned: "The moment of *survival* is the moment of power. Horror at the sight of death turns into satisfaction that it is someone else who is dead."[53] The constant 'theater of bragging' performed by the perpetrators in *The Act of Killing*, in front of and without a camera, can thus be interpreted as an attempt to mirror their own maintenance of power, to protect their systems of repression, and to maintain positive feelings and self-image.

By repeating and reliving the infliction of violence in multiple re-enactments, and by revisiting the scenes of killing, the former mass murderers create a constantly renewed bulwark against the intrusion of feelings of guilt and unpleasant self-criticism (against feelings of reluctance – or *Unlust* – to express it in Sigmund Freud's words), which can be provoked by external stimuli or inner drives. Anna Freud's

observation is important here, that the self-perception of one's own guilt is all the more directed against the outside world in the form of aggressions (here, projected in the re-enactment game) the less the crime one has committed is recognized as such.[54] On a superficial level, the perpetrators try to create and conserve through the chain of re-enactments a complete archive of the atrocities and suffering of their victims. Like the victims, they cannot or do not want to forget the acts of injustice, but rather seek to keep them in 'living memory' in an oral-history-like chain of repetition. By repeating, they can keep the horrors they caused in check by constantly, in a loop, reviving and repressing them for stability and self-preservation.

In Welzer's sense, this is a playful mixture of retroactive objectification, rationalization, and emotionalization. The stories circle around technical details of killing, the exact copying of killings, and depictions of everyday routine, in order to suppress emotions. The obsession with killing mechanics, automatisms, and weapons serves as self-protection and gives renewed justification, just as the 1965–66 interrogations, demoralizing, intimidation, and terrorizing of the alleged communists, as well as the meticulous recording of their self-accusations, served as first steps to justify dehumanizing the victims and to finally feel compelled to kill them.

This aspect of the re-enactment tactic may trigger an unpleasant, disorienting, or uncanny effect on the spectator. As more or less inquisitive voyeurs of the perpetrator-actors friskily reliving the joy, power, and strength of the killings, they become temporary accomplices to the crimes. Spectators witness the ex-killers' positive but also negative excitement, stimulated by the recall of the lust for killing. By retroactively becoming involved in the death game, spectators become, against their will, confidantes of a time that unfolds before their eyes and successively becomes tangible, and "takes on flesh." "Narrative models in film are not simply reflective microcosms of historical processes; they are also experiential grids or templates through which history can be written and national identity created. — [In film] time thickens, takes on flesh,"[55] Ella Shohat and Robert Stam write in a different context. Together with the perpetrators and the victims played by them, the spectators really *are* in the past – it is a time machine effect. The shared point of view might be experienced as hurtful because, until this point, spectators have already gradually come closer to the perpetrator figures. Even if a perpetrator, who is generally defined as the 'Other,' initially appears entirely alien, completely different from how one wishes to see oneself, these simple assumptions break up one by one during careful viewing of *The Act of Killing*.

The false security of repeated survival is torpedoed by the perpetrators' attempt to mimic the dormant (or passive) state of the dead, which

is realized in the re-enactments by playing the victim. So, at a deeper level, for the perpetrators the re-enactments also bring about an identification with the other side, that is, the victim being killed, by facilitating empathy and by the fact that more and more of the perpetrators' own internal characteristics of victimhood come to the surface. This is about filling the emotional vacuum, recharging emotionality, which had to be excluded or suppressed in the original situation in order to kill efficiently and mercilessly. The re-enactments revolve around wallowing in the suffering of others, combined with a gusto to kill, both of which can be turned off easily, because in the end the re-enactment situation is only a temporary game and can be abandoned at any time. As soon as victims' emotions, such as being disparaged, overpowered, or scared to death, have been adequately reconstructed, the game can be ended, and they can be ignored again. The victory of the perpetrators is thus placed on a permanent loop. But in some scenes, Anwar is mentally immersed in the past and absorbed by it to an extent that makes it hard for him to find the way back (meeting the past takes its toll), and in his old age the physically exhausting process of imitating killing seems to be more difficult for him (Image 14.9).

The cinematic dramatization of what the perpetrators did sets into motion a gradual recognition of the negative kernel of their actions. Communication studies scholar Camilla Møhring Reestorff says the killers are "troubled indexes of themselves," due to the affects the re-enactments fueled in them.[56] The spectators witness moments of self-discovery as the shell begins to crumble and the hard-boiled killer-self breaks down more and more. The perpetrators even agree with each other that they should get therapy for their mental symptoms, as is revealed by a conversation between Anwar and Adi at the fishpond:

> ADI: But if you feel guilty, your defences collapse. Have you ever been to a neurologist?
>
> ANWAR: If I went to a neurologist, it would mean, I'm crazy.
>
> ADI: No! Psychiatrists are not for crazy people. […] See, your nightmares are just a disturbance of the nervous system. […] Then [the psychiatrist] gives you vitamins for the nerves.

At one point, Oppenheimer suddenly seems to abandon his maxim to not show any victims or their descendants in front of the camera (at least, this is the result, in the edited version of the film),[57] which structurally repeats their cultural silencing but at the same time makes it visible. During a studio recording, Suryono, stepson of a Chinese genocidal victim and Anwar's neighbour, who meanwhile became a member

Image 14.9. Anwar is exhausted by the re-enacted strangling, *The Act of Killing* (2012). Image courtesy of Joshua Oppenheimer.

of the Pancasila Youth theatre group,[58] plays a victim who is interrogated and threatened with a saber (Image 14.10). The spectators and perpetrator-actors have previously learned that he was present when his beloved stepfather's corpse was found under "an oil drum" after having been kidnapped. Suryono and his grandfather carried the dead body away and dug the grave: "That same morning, nobody dared to help us … We buried him like a goat next to the main road. […] No one helped us. I was so small. Then, all the communist families were exiled. We were dumped in a shanty town at the edge of the jungle. […] Why should I hide this from you? […] It's only input for the film." The perpetrators, listening to this story by a descendant of a 1965–66 victim, are surprised to hear from Suryono what he had until this time deliberately concealed from his Pancasila colleagues for his own protection. While re-enacting the interrogation of another victim, Suryono, who was an eleven-year-old child in the mid-1960s, shows evidence that he is haunted by "traumatic memories"[59] of the cruelly murdered stepfather, which threaten to overwhelm him. He grimaces painfully, crying, slobbering, nasal mucus running down his face. He turns into a creature who could easily be perceived as triggering a tense state of abject disgust in the audience (Image 14.11).[60]

In this scene, the perpetrator-actors, who enjoy orchestrating the re-enacted violence even more 'realistically' and in a manner true to the original, are getting into a sadistic repetition loop. They repeat verbal, psychological, and physical forms of violence, including holding the

saber directly to Suryono's neck, which visibly alarms and overburdens him. He becomes genuinely terrified and his acting skills seem to fail him, as he simultaneously attempts to suppress his memories of the execution of his stepfather, which flood his imagination. After painfully long minutes in the director's cut, in which dozens of sentences are heard, like Adi's comment: "I wanted them to accept that they were going to die," Anwar is told, "Show us how to torture" and, while the victim-actor is being gagged and blindfolded, someone throws in: "Doesn't matter if he really dies [in the re-enactment]." Suryono collapses. His mental injury and the traumatizing violence of the historical setting are present in this intrusion. The past extends into the here and now; the absent dead victim is suddenly very present. Replacing his stepfather, Suryono begs during the re-enactment game: "Have mercy on me. […] Can you do something for my family? Or may I talk to them one last time?" As they would have probably answered his stepfather in the historical case, the perpetrator-actors reply: "By no means." The spectators can sense that Suryono now understands: having revealed his identity as a descendant of a victim, he is no longer safe among these killers. This impression is reinforced by the fact that Suryono refuses to drink a glass of water that is served to him, for fear it might be poisoned (Image 14.12). The fake modus of the re-enactment has completely vanished and provides space for the arrival of the cruel past – at least for a cinematic minute.

Temporarily Becoming the 'Other' by Cross-Identification: Anwar as Victim

As the re-enactments increase in quantity, Anwar more and more often changes sides and takes on the role of his former victims. The perpetrator-victim inversion, which retrospectively allows an imagined change of symbolic and historical positions in the re-enactment scenario, causes a change in the perpetrators' self-perception. For Anwar, the re-enactments create a connection to the 'universe of the feelings of the victims,' including his own experience of having been or felt like a victim in the past. In some game scenes, in particular the strangulation scene, he enforces the inversion until he really feels a gagging sensation and is close to unconsciousness. Suddenly, he appears apathetic, pale, exhausted, and helpless, because by impersonating the victim he has obviously come too close to their experience in the historical situation. The contact with the victim role, which causes him to fully identify, unsettles him so much that the other perpetrator-actors must care for him by touching and comforting him (Image 14.13). In another scene, Herman Koto, who as a cross-dresser[61] is playing a 'cruel female communist,' is holding a bloody animal liver to his mouth: "Look at that! Your liver! Look here! I

Image 14.10. Suryono is threatened by a saber, *The Act of Killing* (2012). Image courtesy of Joshua Oppenheimer.

Image 14.11. Suryono in abjection-disgust mode, *The Act of Killing* (2012). Image courtesy of Joshua Oppenheimer.

eat it!" (Image 14.14). Here Herman projects his own aggression towards the 'communists' on the latter, imagining them as cruel. In the planned feature film from the pen of the perpetrators, this scene is intended to prove their potential for becoming victims and to serve as a justification for atrocities against 'communists' later in the film.

Image 14.12. Suryono's fear of poison and of the watching perpetrators, *The Act of Killing* (2012). Image courtesy of Joshua Oppenheimer.

Whether in the role of 'a potential victim of communist violence' or 'the victim of his own deeds,' Anwar develops embarrassment and admits hidden guilt feelings, or at least starts to acknowledge his real guilt. This could be a prerequisite for longer-lasting remorse or for mourning. But whether his playing-the-victim means a turning point in his 'self-re-education' and is an expression of a permanently changed perpetrator identity, or it only means a temporary masochistic enjoyment, remains unclear.

The Act of Killing offers its spectators a voyeuristic keyhole: the opportunity to watch the perpetrators' self-exploration from a position with little responsibility (namely the cinema seat). The film creates unwanted complicity with the perpetrators by a process of identification, repeating parts of the process the film director and his crew must have gone through (cf. Image 14.2). Metaphorically speaking, Oppenheimer takes on the role of obstetrician: he acts as a documentary maieutic of these tentative steps towards self-knowledge. The fact that the perpetrators are controlling the film set (Image 14.15) guarantees that they will engage in a psycho-dramatic 'self-therapy' within the logic of their planned 'glorious' feature film. The open-ended introspection of the culprits is shown as such in the documentary.

The significant difference between *The Act of Killing* and off-film psycho-dramatic therapeutic approaches, as Oppenheimer and Cynn point out in interviews,[62] is that they were not loyal to the perpetrators but 100 per cent loyal to the victims. This means that, while creating the

Image 14.13. Anwar goes pale playing a victim, *The Act of Killing* (2012). Image courtesy of Joshua Oppenheimer.

Image 14.14. Herman Koto offering the victim's liver, *The Act of Killing* (2012). Image courtesy of Joshua Oppenheimer.

gaming arena, they were relieved of the responsibility of advocacy, evaluation, and mental support of the perpetrators, because their solidarity belonged to the victims – at least as far as the film lets us know. (Oppenheimer merely accompanies the perpetrators in the role of a documentary filmmaker who protects and does not abandon them on a technical

Image 14.15. Anwar behind the re-enactment film camera, *The Act of Killing* (2012). Image courtesy of Joshua Oppenheimer.

and basic human level.) In principle, Oppenheimer sends the perpetrators on a mission without prejudging the outcome, in which they are exposed to the ghosts of their past and reveal this painful process in the film as under a glass lens, or in a cooperative laboratory experiment with unforeseeable long-term consequences.[63] Whether the perpetrators emotionally judge and savage themselves, or imagine salvation and the chance to exculpate themselves, by re-intoning the triumphalist narrative adopted by the Suharto regime, is up to them. Only once does the documentary show a judgmental intervention by Oppenheimer and the 'breaking of the fourth wall.' Here, the director's plan to film the perpetrators during their self-exposure, while they apparently believe the director is sympathetic to their political camp, is revealed. In the "Or have I sinned?" scene, in which Anwar seems temporarily close to a catharsis, it becomes clear that the filmmaker has 'duped' the perpetrators and in fact has never handed over control of the final script of the documentary. While watching a violent re-enactment in which he plays a victim on the home television screen, Anwar asks, "Did the people I tortured feel the way I do here? I can feel what those I tortured felt. Because here my dignity has been destroyed … and then fear comes right there and then … All the terror suddenly possessed my body." Oppenheimer's consequent unwillingness to enlighten his characters is partially broken when he answers frankly, betraying his undercover status:[64] "Actually, the people you tortured felt far worse – because you know, it's only a film. They knew they were being killed."

The role reversal between 'perpetrators' and 'victims' culminates in the scene where Anwar and Adi sit in the make-up studio having artificial wounds painted on their faces in order to play the part of the victims. The expressions on their faces, distorted by the make-up, not only provide an index of the multiple facial and head injuries that resulted from the historical mass killings,[65] they also announce how both are internally related to the process of accumulation of wounds and being-connected-with-the-abject, with blood, physical decay, and the like, which is in stark contrast to intact male subjectivity. The historical violence is recreated here by being facially transformed: now the perpetrators carry wounds that they have inflicted on others. Their faces do not display identity, uniqueness, and intimacy anymore, but rather the cumulative wound trophies are worn here like necrophiliac jewelry (Image 14.16). Extensive make-up becomes a medium to retrospectively identify with the victim's position, and to literally slip into the injured skin of the victims. But just as the re-enactment scenes can be interrupted at any time, when it becomes too serious or exhausting for the perpetrator-actors, the make-up can be washed off.

Although Anwar still daydreams of being officially recognized as a 'savior of the nation' who freed the Indonesian community from menacing 'communists' and heroically provided public safety, the method of re-enactment brings uncertainties, doubts, and guilt to the surface. Obviously, the documentary filming provided a (learning) environment in which Anwar was able to release blockages and open his crypt of guilt, both of which are the underside of his heroic self-image. Mathias Hirsch writes:

> [E]ven the perpetrator will have to wonder if he can stay with his self-image of power, 'borrowed' by imitating and identifying with the sadistic actions of the aggressor. By identifying with the victim, more precisely, the attempted takeover of the other, masochistic identification, he would get the chance to go through an otherwise never experienced victim identity, in order to then free himself from it. Because the mere repetition of the role of the perpetrator delegates the affects guilt, shame, fear, and pain necessary for the mourning to the new victims.[66]

In Hirsch's eyes, to admit fear, shame, and remorse is "a prerequisite for mourning work, for the detachment from the inner traumatic object, the 'frozen introject' …, which must be thawed and experienced in the affect so to speak in order to leave behind both victim and perpetrator identity."[67] Transferring Hirsch's thoughts to the given context means that the re-enactments, together with the affects they initiate, serve as a bridge between the perpetrators and their perpetrator introjects that result from

Image 14.16. Cumulative wounds as necrophiliac jewelry, *The Act of Killing* (2012). Image courtesy of Joshua Oppenheimer.

their own frozen victim parts. A precondition for healing would be that they find access to both parts of their (subconscious) persona.

Eyes Wide Open: Fear of Posthumous Revenge of Murdered Victims

In a re-enactment scene in the nocturnal forest, Anwar selects one of his recurrent nightmares and relives it in a staged manner. The nightmare revolves around a victim whom he has brutally kicked in the stomach and then decapitated with a machete, and who is staring at him posthumously. When he plays the dying victim, it seems for a moment that Anwar wants to die with him, to metamorphose into the dead, to bring all to a complete halt (cf. Image 14.1). The motif of the dead but staring eyes tells of the missed ritual of closing a dead man's eyes. Not the killing itself, but the fact he had omitted this ritual in the historical moment, persecutes Anwar and makes him feel guilty. It is an absurd diversion from the fact that about forty years ago he abducted and beheaded this person. At the same time, in retrospect, Anwar puts the blame on the victim and exculpates himself, because in his imagination those eyes stare at him to this day. They do not let him rest, and they scream for revenge, which potentially victimizes him. Irrationally, he fears a counterattack by the victim, a restoration of justice, even though, or perhaps because, he personally eradicated that person. By projection, the victim killed here is

imagined as an avenger, who returns the gaze – a gaze reversal of which the dead are not capable. This gaze follows the true perpetrator. It does not let him out of its sight. The (communication) channel between them seems to remain open. This matches Anwar's supposition that surviving 'communists' would quietly whisper their curses in the direction of the perpetrators so as not to be arrested by the men in power. Both illusions can be identified as a reaction to repeated hauntings of the perpetrator, and thus as 'post-atrocity perpetrator symptoms.'

Presumably, Anwar has the idea that the dead yet staring eyes preserved his image as the killer, the last thing the victim saw before he died, the last image on the murdered person's retina. In cultural history this is a familiar idea: as early as the nineteenth century lawyers and criminologists believed that the last image seen by a victim, the face of their murderer, could be recovered and help solve a murder.[68] For the cinematic medium as well, the human eye is a master player that has been imbued in film history with ever-varying epistemological significance. The eye is the venue of the sense most strongly stimulated in the cinema and at the same time the basic condition of everything cinematic. On a metaphorical level, film itself often functions as an eye looking into the world; the retina is analogized with the silver screen. The motif of dead but gazing eyes, which follows nineteenth-century retinal theory, is used in films such as Hitchcock's 1972 *Frenzy*.[69]

The fear of the powerful continuity of the dead victim is related to the fear that the perpetrator felt towards the victim before his death, for example in the context of the fiction of an anti-communist enemy. As a form of 'unfinished business,' Anwar cannot integrate this special victim *object*, who posthumously does not take his eyes off him and stands for hundreds of Anwar's other victims, into his intrapsychic structures. Psychoanalysts Mária Török and Nicolas Abraham have described a similar mechanism for individuals who respond to the loss of a love object by "incorporating" its intrapsychic correlate rather than mourning it.[70] The death of the loved one is denied instead of being accepted: there is an attempt to heal a real wound imaginarily.[71] The outer, actually dead object is instead relocated inside in an "endocryptic identification" and preserved in this incorporated version – a sign of failed or pathological mourning. A comparable process occurs with the *Act of Killing* perpetrator because the eliminated victim is also swallowed up as a whole and then intrapsychically does not allow any rest. Like a separate person it lives in an enclave, in the "artificial unconscious, in the middle of the ego."[72] From this position of the crypt it happens, "around the witching hour […], that the ghost from the crypt haunts the graveyard guard [meaning the ego]" and makes strange demands – one could say, by adapting concepts by Török and Abraham to this context.

In the historic killing situation, fear of revenge from the hereafter, of those killed now coming back as revenge spirits, culminated in the widespread practice of murderers posthumously incorporating the victims' blood, which is a substitute substance of their victims. In *The Look of Silence*, we learn that some perpetrators drank the still-warm blood of their enemies immediately after killing, so as not to become "crazy." This is a custom that has a long tradition in North Sumatra and many other places, as Oppenheimer made clear in a presentation in Copenhagen in 2017.[73] Benedict Anderson refers to stories circulating in 1965–66 that said "'amateur killers' had mental breakdowns, went mad, or were […] haunted by terrifying dreams and fears of karmic retribution."[74] Likewise, Anwar, when sitting at the fishpond, expresses fear of being "crazy." On the raft, he talks about his fear that his wrongdoings could turn against him as bad karma, as a "direct punishment from God." The appropriated power of the enemy's blood was supposed to be able to prevent revenge and to immunize against attacks from the realm of the dead.

The drinking of blood was also supposed to transfer strength, which had been assigned to the victim constructed as an enemy image, to the perpetrator himself. (When Herman plays the female 'communist' and beheads a puppet representing Anwar, who imagines himself becoming the victim here, the surrounding perpetrator-actors shout out: "Drink his blood!") In addition, the phenomenon can be read as a mechanism of overkilling, in which the already lifeless body of the victim must be deprived of his last life force in order to further diminish him and to increase perpetrators' own sense of triumph.

According to *The Look of Silence*, several perpetrators left the mass-killing business because they could no longer stand the daily routine. In the view of perpetrators who continued killing, they had become "crazy," which probably meant that the psychic repression mechanism – the shutting down of empathy, the attempts at artificial justification, the whitewashing – that underpinned the killings no longer worked for them. The practice of drinking blood therefore could also stand for an attempt to make oneself spiritually invulnerable in a phantasmagoric way – precisely because of the self-perceived vulnerability and the fear of not being able to or wanting to kill any more.

Transformation Process: The Subtle Appearance of Shame and Guilt

The multitude of camera shots taken, following the perpetrators' killing scripts, over the years in which *The Act of Killing* was filmed, testify to a change in perpetrators' feelings and self-perceptions – most notably in Anwar, whose pain, according to Oppenheimer, was from the beginning

"close to the surface." Oppenheimer chose Anwar as the protagonist because he had somehow signalled that he was ready to take off the mask of a 'happy killer' and confront his pain, guilt, and shame. In *The Act of Killing*, his thoughts appear disorganized, contradictions arise, doubts knock at his conscience, and the repression-based balance seems to be in danger. In Anwar's case, the process of active repetition of the past, of being filmed, of the reassuring screenings of the recorded scenes, of the repeated revisions of the scenes in an endless loop of self-aggrandizement and self-degradation, continued for seven years. His goal was a perfect reconstruction of his glorious killer past in the planned feature film to preserve it for posterity through its fictionalizing film adaptation. But in the end, the filmic memoirs, the "film about death" in front of breath-takingly beautiful scenery, prove to be highly inglorious. On another level, however, the film-in-the-film shows that "revealing, embracing, and working with the fictions that are already operative," be they fictions about cinematic killing, political opponents, or escape fantasies of perpetrators, is extremely instructive to others and insightful for the sake of remembrance.[75]

The final scene of *The Act of Killing* proves once again how not only traumatized individuals, but in some cases also perpetrators, can be involved in senso-somatic re-experience loops and flooding mental sensations. Anwar here throws out his suppressed guilt, his self-criticism, and self-doubt in the literal sense. When he revisits a former crime scene, the above-mentioned roof terrace, and again wants to re-enact killing and disposal operations, he throws up several times. At this moment, he has no way to distance himself from his actions. Intrapsychic stimuli activate his emotionality and body memory. He feels shaken and helpless. What the ongoing acts of violence in the historical scenery could have provoked, but what Anwar systematically suppressed, is suddenly made visible. "The body keeps the score" could be said, in a modification of Bessel van der Kolk's formula.[76] It seems that Anwar's body, through the convulsive reaction, realizes faster than his mind can permanently admit what his crimes were. Anwar finally opens up: "I know it was wrong – but I had to do it. Why did I have to kill them? I had to kill … My conscience told me they had to be killed." Although this statement acknowledges a mistake, it justifies and defends it at the same time with internalized false values that might be identified as obedience to male commands, a sense of duty, and pure patriotism – according to (his) standard notions of honour. This must be interpreted as an indication that Anwar's self-critical political consciousness has not matured by the end of the filming, as he is still affirming the dogmas and hate propaganda of 1965–66.

Bollywood Escape Fantasies – De-realization

At first glance, the phantasmatic-hypertrophic illusion of the perpetrators, in which their former victims forgive them, appears grotesque. It is not without reason that it plays in a seemingly out-of-this-world dimension. The unreal environment makes sense in relation to the intrapsychic constellation of the perpetrators, their narcissism, and their unconscious fear of political transformation. A closer look at the surreal episodes reveals that the dreamscapes, filled with psychedelic-hyperbolic images, contain clues to perpetrators' feelings of guilt and testify to the fantasy of escaping through regression into a safer world. The priestly and flamboyantly dressed perpetrators fantasize here about the unlikely event of receiving forgiveness from their victims in an act of transcendental reconciliation. In front of a fairy-tale setting with dancers and a rushing waterfall, which has a visually purifying effect, a victim killed by Anwar (played by a victim-actor) apologizes to the killer (Image 14.17). The victim gives him a gold medal to thank him for killing him and sending him off to heaven, while the title song of *Born Free* (1966, dir. Tom McGowan and James Hill), in the new adaptation of John Barry and Don Black, is playing. Through this absurd, dreamt perpetrator-victim inversion, the "gangsters" create a picture of themselves as capable even of manipulating the dead victims posthumously by forcing them to forgive their killers. Can this be read as a surreal control fantasy, or rather the yearning to rewind and reset to one's innocence? Or is this plain wishful thinking that can only be addressed in this unreal landscape?

Either way, the Bollywood fantasy suggests that it is not the perpetrators who have to change, but the world around them. It is therefore an indication of their internal resistance to admitting guilt and activating the moral system, or to understanding – a filmed derealization und undoing. At the same time, it shows an attempt to approach the victims, to erase the distance between them, even if the victim position can only be missed. Thus, the excuse scene tells of an inadmissible perpetrator-victim levelling or a fantasized 'over-forgiveness' between victims and perpetrators.[77] Imagination and illusion are used here to form a substitute for the unamenable, the painful dispute is circumnavigated, and the guilt is imaginarily removed.

Melting Ice? – On the Individual and Collective Level

The Act of Killing vehemently intervenes in the 'theater of forgetting and remembering' of the anti-communist massacres in Indonesia in the mid-1960s, challenging dominant historical narratives and activating

Image 14.17. Purifying waterfall of forgiveness, *The Act of Killing* (2012). Image courtesy of Joshua Oppenheimer.

processes of rewriting historiography. It portrays individual perpetrators, who have since lived unmolested, more or less 'happy,' enlightened, or almost remorseful in today's Indonesia, and who participate in criminal affairs of the state to this day. The film does not condemn them; perpetrators are not stigmatized as "evil," "devilish," "monstrous," "barbaric," or "bestial," nor does the film seek to rehabilitate them socially, for they are socially integrated based on the continuity of their power, albeit feared or shunned by descendants of victims. Rather, *The Act of Killing* focuses on their ordinariness and their humanity, their suffering, their self-doubts and weaknesses, challenging strict categorizations such as "perpetrators" and "victims."[78] It does not address the mass murderers as the only individuals responsible for the escalation in the massacres. Instead, it refers to the sociopolitical framework that promoted violence, and explores how this is related to today's repression strategies of perpetrator groups in North Sumatra.

By watching the perpetrators and their narcissistic navel-gazing as they relive their 'grand deeds' (in their distorted perception), the film provides previously taboo but instructive insight into the functioning of perpetrator mentalities. By exploring the internal view of the perpetrators, who portray themselves and their actions in a 'splendid' and multifaceted way, from a voyeuristic and scopophiliac point of view, *The Act of Killing* raises substantial questions about the causes, conditions, and

motives for extremely violent actions that affect and implicate all human beings. And this is irrespective of whether the latter perceive themselves as connoisseurs, accomplices, bystanders, or perpetrators of violence and injustice, and whether or not they are willing to acknowledge their involvement. Mid-1960s Medan is here and now; the attitudes of the perpetrators are at the same time terrible and terribly familiar, but they are by no means a distant and remote past. *The Act of Killing*, in a sense, passes on to spectators the question of when and how responsibility for the Indonesian massacres is taken or who is held accountable. This unpleasant question is addressed to all of us: how are we involved in building or indirectly nourishing conditions that allow violence on a larger or smaller scale in other contexts?

The literary scholar Michael Rothberg, in his recent book *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*, reflects on the implication of subjects in international scenes of violence in the past and the present, as well as from geographical and biographical distance.[79] Rothberg highlights the idea that the political responsibility of people who imagine themselves as innocent ranges from direct complicity and indirect profiteering to complex interconnections, like financial or political facilitation of acts of violence, or tolerance or approval of these acts. How are we involved in violent stories and current affairs and economies that are beyond our direct sphere of influence and personal participation? To what extent does the public participate in discursive, aesthetic, and performative creations of hierarchies and power asymmetries, in which the transition to violent and legally relevant perpetration can be fluid? How far does the focus on perpetrator characters generally serve to portray them as the 'Other,' outside a non-violent and pure society? On a metatheoretical level, one can ask with the social philosopher Pierre Bourdieu whether sub-complex models of perpetrators as a social and psychological category, through their seemingly clear demarcation, can also unilaterally assign and sanction violence, and thus render invisible symbolic violence, which, according to Bourdieu, is based on faith and magic and instructs the "perception and evaluation schemes [of social actors]."[80]

The Act of Killing pours these difficult aspects into an audiovisual staging that, like other films such as *A Mots couverts/Shades of True: Female Perpetrators of the Rwandan Genocide* (France 2014),[81] may serve intense study purposes. International spectators, who initially distance themselves from the perpetrator category, in order to secure for themselves the position of innocence, non-involvement, and reduced responsibility associated with the victim side, are awakened to the nuances of their status. And while *The Act of Killing* hits hard at one's own self-serving myths, it also helps to challenge the dominant, repressive narratives that enable

violence in the future. By not dehumanizing or demonizing the perpetrators, but instead exploring in detail the functioning of their psyches and mentalities, the film enables knowledge of perpetrator action (in the tension between perpetrator collectives and individual perpetrators) and its interrelations with victims of violence. This knowledge could be useful and valuable in informing processes of reconciliation, reparation, and compensation of victims. Since even in the (from today's perspective, unpredictable) case of a national working-through in Indonesia and an assumed responsibility by the state, it would not be expected that thousands of culprits would be imprisoned, the film could be a valuable starting point for rapprochement of victims and perpetrators.

In *The Act of Killing*, the perpetrators 'confess' their actions in nuanced and detailed killing reports. The twelve thousand hours of footage filmed by Oppenheimer and team over a decade of filming, in which the perpetrators incriminate themselves by their bragging, could be used as a reference for international criminal investigation, truth-finding, by NGOs or victim associations and, if appropriate, as an aid in prosecution. In such a case, the open-hearted narrative of the perpetrators would have acted as a boomerang that eventually will hit themselves – the material shown in the director's cut contains Adi's statement that "[i]t was not the communists who were cruel. […] I am fully aware that we were cruel." But this is a dream of the future, which probably will not become reality in the lifetime of the perpetrators, because the film demonstrates clearly that government and power alliances are still based on the intimidating actions of paramilitary organizations and the network of "gangsters." At any rate, in the reception process, the filmed perpetrator images were transported back to the social body, the Indonesian and global collective. They enabled a partially renewed self-understanding as well as historiography, identity formation, and culture of remembrance – "challenging the legitimacy of the victor's power."[82]

Whatever the future of domestic or international conflict-processing of the Indonesian massacres of 1965–66 will look like, the film makes a powerful contribution to critical perpetrator and violence research that promotes the de-tabooing of knowledge, and thus could be transferred to other conflict zones in the Global South and elsewhere. The progressive nature of such illumination of perpetration lies in the need to reflect on one's own entanglement in psychic, physical, financial, symbolic, and social scenarios of violence. The critical knowledge communicated in the film, which revealed the humanity and 'normality' of the perpetrators as well as the conditions and choices that led to their cruelty, could help prevent future violence at an early stage. *The Act of Killing* shows that violence is often a prefabricated, albeit not necessarily foreseeable, part

of existing networks of relationships (here political elites in cooperation with the [para]military and local agents). It is involved in power relations and resulting asymmetries and dependencies, which can be deciphered (film-)analytically. The 'intimate' knowledge about single perpetrators and perpetrator alliances extracted by Oppenheimer's film-aesthetic re-enactment methods provide new and important directions for clinical and theoretical perpetrator research.

The Act of Killing and *The Look of Silence* are decolonizing conventional perspectives in trauma studies, memory studies, and perpetrator studies[83] due to their numerous non-Western collaborators (on the level of co-workers, and cooperating/counselling organizations) as well as by providing an opportunity to more intensely perceive traumatic events that transcend European or North American geographic territory and affect the Global South. By integrating in-depth psychological knowledge about the Indonesian massacres into the global historiographic cartography, the film has made a significant contribution to bringing this 'genocide' to international attention. By supplementing knowledge of comparative genocide studies, it challenges the uniqueness, alleged incomparability, and quasi-sacred status of certain forms of genocide, such as the Holocaust/Shoah. In memory studies, the Indonesian massacres of 1965–66 need to be placed alongside the genocide in Rwanda, the Khmer Rouge mass killings in Cambodia, the Armenian genocide, and the apartheid regime in South Africa. Even more so than with some of these other scenarios, in Indonesia to date there has been absolute impunity for the perpetrators; there is no official apology in sight, no request for forgiveness from state authorities[84] for the irreparable harm inflicted on the families of victims. Despite a brief recognition of "human rights violations" by the current Indonesian government in 2014, the perpetrators continue to be powerful, even though deep down some wish to apologize on their own, as Adi points out in an ambivalent way, sitting at the fishpond: "The government should apologize, not us. It would be like medicine. It would relieve the pain. Asking for forgiveness." Anwar anxiously adds, "Would not they [the victims' supporters] curse us silently?" The scene anticipates a change: dialogue about the crimes has been sparked, and Oppenheimer's documentary film influenced the domestic media landscape in such a way that it critically addressed the mass murder shortly after the film's release, allowing perpetrator and victim perspectives to be heard, as well as debates about the difficult consequences of impunity. However, a detailed understanding of all conditions and dynamics that authorized and facilitated the killing acts is still pending – but *The Act of Killing* was an immensely important step in this direction.

The Act of Killing looks at the functioning of the 'viscera of power' linked to a neglected national memory, and it pushes the exploration of the twisted consciousness of the perpetrators to its limits, lending it malleability. The cinematographic experience provokes an epistemic vertigo, which provides insight into the intrapsychic dynamics of perpetrators, and into defence mechanisms that prevent them from recognizing their wrongdoing, facing it, and taking responsibility. Their 'post-atrocity perpetrator symptoms' become readable as a substitute for a lack of empathy and an adequate emotional repertoire. The aim of the film could be identified as a method of film therapy to liberate the perpetrators from their social masks, as well as their self-denial, and to thwart the associated historical misrepresentation (this especially coalesces in the figure of Anwar Congo). The sixty-person film crew, kept anonymous for security reasons, consisting of human rights activists, academics, and the like, enabled the perpetrators to create a filmic language of re-enactment in order to excavate the killers' human faces and gradually evoke critical self-reflection. This was about initiating a process of 'becoming someone else,' and of 'unlearning' violent perpetration. Even if this learning process comes too late for the perpetrators, it might not be too late for us.

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NOTES

1 *The Act of Killing/Jagal* (UK/Denmark/Norway 2012), dir. Joshua Oppenheimer, 159 min. (director's cut). The film reception (press and scientific articles), which at first partly reflected indignation, distancing, and overburdening, has meanwhile discussed the award-winning film in extensive interdisciplinary analyses. Extracts from the secondary literature are quoted in the following text.

2 The waves were visible in Indonesian groups of victims and perpetrators as well as in the world of politicians, historians, psycho-traumatologists, and violence researchers just as in transnational memory and trauma studies.

3 Michael Elm, Kobi Kabalek, and Julia B. Köhne, eds., *The Horrors of Trauma in Cinema: Violence, Void, Visualization* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), esp. 1–29.

4 See Robert Cribb, ed., *The Indonesian Killings 1965–1966: Studies from Java and Bali* (Clayton: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1990), 1–43.

5 The film critic Georg Seeßlen employs these adjectives in characterizing the essayistic documentary; see his "Der Essayfilm als politische Geste," in *Zooming IN and OUT: Produktionen des Politischen im neueren deutschsprachigen Dokumentarfilm*, ed. Klaudija Sabo, Aylin Basaran, and Julia B. Köhne (Vienna: Mandelbaum, 2013), 97: "The essay [film] is directed in its methodical border crossing against an open or covert prohibition of thinking, perception, speaking, depicting. The essay is not only to change the prevailing discourses, but it rather tries to reach places and perspectives outside the discourses" (my translation).

6 *The Look of Silence* (Denmark/Indonesia, Finland, et al. 2014/15), dir. Joshua Oppenheimer, 99 min.

7 *The Act of Killing* focuses on male perpetrators; according to Annie E. Pohlman, there is less research on female perpetrators, profiteers, or informers who, for example, were working in security service or in the camps. An exception to this male dominance is the case of a female police officer who behaved with extreme cruelty towards an interrogated 'communist' woman with a baby; see Komnas Perempuan, *Gender-Based Crimes against Humanity: Listening to the Voices of Women Survivors of 1965* (Jakarta: Komnas Perempuan, 2007), 101. For research on female perpetrators and female victims of sexualized violence during the massacres, see Annie E. Pohlman, *Women, Sexual Violence and the Indonesian Killings of 1965–66* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2015), esp. 15–20.

8 This number is debatable and varies depending on the scientific source; see, for example, Geoffrey B. Robinson's *The Killing Season: A History of the Indonesian Massacres, 1965–66* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 3.

9 Anett Keller, "Suharto-Aufarbeitung in Indonesien: Ein monströses Verbrechen," *die tageszeitung*, 25 July 2012; Benedict Anderson, "How Did the Generals Die?" *Indonesia* 43 (April 1987): 109–134; Benedict Anderson, "Impunity," in *Killer Images: Documentary Film, Memory and the Performance of Violence*, ed. Joram Ten Brink and Joshua Oppenheimer (New York: Wallflower, 2012), 268–86.

10 See Annie E. Pohlman, "Introduction: The Massacres of 1965–1966: New Interpretations and the Current Debate in Indonesia," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 32, no. 3 (2013): 5, https://journals.sub.uni-hamburg.de/giga/jsaa/article/view/705/703.html.

11 Werner Bohleber, "Wege und Inhalte transgenerationeller Weitergabe: Psychoanalytische Perspektiven," in *Kinder des Weltkrieges: Transgenerationale*

Weitergabe kriegsbelasteter Kindheiten. Interdisziplinäre Studien zur Nachhaltigkeit historischer Erfahrungen in vier Generationen, ed. H. Radebold, W. Bohleber, and J.W. Zinnecker (Weinheim: Juventa, 2009), 109, my translation. The quoted words were written by Bohleber, a psychoanalyst, regarding another context: National Socialism.

12 On the problem of silencing of victims and their feelings of shame and guilt, see Christine Cynn, "Die Leute kannten nicht nur die Toten, sondern auch deren Mörder. Psychodrama-Praktiken: Der Täter als Opfer," *artechock film*, Munich, 14 November 2013, https://www.artechock.de/film/text/interview/c/cynn_2013.html.

13 Mathias Hirsch, "Täter und Opfer sexueller Gewalt in einer therapeutischen Gruppe: Über umwandelnde Gegen- und Kreuzidentifikationen," unpublished manuscript for a lecture at the conference "Tätermodelle & Transgression," Humboldt University of Berlin, 19 January 2018.

14 Anna Freud, "Identification with the Aggressor," in Freud, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence* (South Hampstead: Karnac Books, 1992 [1936]), 110.

15 Ibid., 111.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid., 113.

18 Ibid., 110.

19 See Nick Bradshaw, "Build My Gallows High: Joshua Oppenheimer on *The Act of Killing*," *Sight and Sound*, 5 June 2017. Oppenheimer explains, "[Anwar's] drawn to the pain, to the most horrifying memories and to re-enacting them, because somehow he's trying to replace the miasmic, shapeless, unspeakable horror that visits him in his nightmares with these contained, concrete scenes. It's like he's trying to build up a cinematic-psychic scar tissue over his wound"; accessed 3 March 2020, https://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/interviews/build-my-gallows-high-joshua-oppenheimer-act-killing.

20 See Brad Simpson, "It's Our Act of Killing, Too," *The Nation*, 28 February 2014.

21 Camilla Møhring Reestorff, "Unruly Artivism and the Participatory Documentary Ecology of *The Act of Killing*," *Studies in Documentary Film* 9, no. 1 (2015): 11.

22 Adi Zulkadry continues: "I'm a winner. So I can make my own definition. I needn't follow the international definitions. And more important, not everything true is good."

23 Saira Mohamed, "Of Monsters and Men: Perpetrator Trauma and Mass Atrocity," Berkeley Law Scholarship Repository, 115 *Colum. L. Rev.* 1157 (2015), 1190 et seq.

24 Ibid., 1194.

25 Ibid., 1167.

26 Ibid., 1162f.
27 Ibid., 1192.
28 René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 4; first published as *Das Heilige und die Gewalt*, 1972.
29 Ibid., 8, emphasis in original.
30 Ibid., 93.
31 Stefan Kühl, *Ganz normale Organisationen: Zur Soziologie des Holocaust* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2014), 97–109.
32 Philip G. Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil* (New York: Random House, 2007). The social psychologist identifies the following characteristics that are needed to turn ordinary people into killers: power, conformity, obedience and loss of personal responsibility, de-individuation, dehumanization of the victim, and apathy of the bystanders ("evil of interaction") (258, 297, 318).
33 Harald Welzer, "Wer waren die Täter? Anmerkungen zur Täterforschung aus sozialpsychologischer Sicht," in *Die Täter der Shoah: Fanatische Nationalsozialisten oder ganz normale Deutsche?*, ed. Gerhard Paul (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2002), 238, my translation.
34 Freud, "Identification with the Aggressor," 114.
35 Kühl, *Ganz normale Organisationen.*
36 Bernhard Giesen and Christoph Schneider, eds., *Tätertrauma: Nationale Erinnerungen im öffentlichen Diskurs* (Konstanz: UVK, 2004).
37 Raya Morag, *Waltzing with Bashir: Perpetrator Trauma and Cinema* (New York: Tauris, 2013).
38 Of course, there is a whole set of different acts of violence and perpetrator types that needed to be differentiated. Violence can also be the result of "traumatic restaging" ("traumatische Reinszenierung," Franziska Lamott), for example, in cases of sexualized violence and victim-perpetrator-inversion, or they happen out of self-defence, homicide, and so on.
39 Aleida Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit: Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2011 [2006]), 97.
40 Bernhard Giesen, "Das Tätertrauma der Deutschen: Eine Einleitung," in *Tätertrauma: Nationale Erinnerungen im öffentlichen Diskurs*, ed. Bernhard Giesen and Christoph Schneider (Konstanz: UVK, 2004), 20–2.
41 Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit*, sec. 97; Andreas Kraft, "Gespenstische Botschaften an die Nachgeborenen: 'Cultural Haunting' in der neueren deutschen Literatur," in *Rendezvous mit dem Realen: Die Spur des Traumas in den Künsten*, ed. Aleida Assmann, Karolina Jeftic, and Friederike Wappler (Bielefeld: transcript, 2014), 154.
42 Kraft, "Gespenstische Botschaften," 154.
43 Giesen, "Das Tätertrauma der Deutschen," 20–2.

44 This can be coupled with feelings of triumph, ultimate power, superiority, and control over others, as well as jubilation and self-exaltation. Statements from the ex-killers that are quoted throughout this chapter attest to these ideas and views.
45 See Julia B. Köhne, "Ästhetisierung des Unbewussten: Camillo Negros neuropathologische Kinematographie des Kriegsreenactments (1918)," in *Psychiatrie im Ersten Weltkrieg*, ed. Thomas Becker, Heiner Fangerau, Peter Fassl, and Hans-Georg Hofer (Konstanz: UVK, 2018), 67–103.
46 See the concept of "télescopage of the unconscious": Sigrid Weigel, "Télescopage im Unbewußten: Zum Verhältnis von Trauma, Geschichtsbegriff und Literatur," in *Trauma: Ein Konzept zwischen Psychoanalyse und kulturellem Deutungsmuster*, ed. Elisabeth Bronfen, Birgit R. Erdle, and Sigrid Weigel (Vienna: Böhlau, 1999), 51–76.
47 Anderson, "Impunity," 282.
48 Although these psychic reactions look similar to the loops of re-experiencing of traumatized victims/survivors and could, at least to a certain extent, be described in an inversion of Sigmund Freud's categories outlined in "Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through" (1914), there is a grave difference between the two political positions.
49 Cynn, "Die Leute kannten nicht nur die Toten."
50 Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. Carol Stewart (New York: Continuum, 1978), 227.
51 Ibid., 230.
52 Ibid., 227.
53 Ibid., emphasis in original.
54 Freud, "Identification with the Aggressor," 118–21.
55 Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, eds., *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality, and Transnational Media* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 10.
56 Møhring Reestorff, "Unruly Artivism," *Studies in Documentary Film* 9, no. 1 (2015): 10.
57 Joshua Oppenheimer clarified in an email (30 March 2020): "We had a rule that survivors should not participate in *The Act of Killing*. We were concerned, above all, for their safety: survivors could become easy targets of the perpetrators' anger after the film's release. We discovered later that one of the paramilitary members, Suryono, was also a survivor, in the sense that his stepfather had been killed. Yet Suryono's participation was inadvertent: a second camera-person not fluent in Indonesian filmed Suryono telling his stepfather's story, and I became aware of the story only months later, while editing."
58 It seems Suryono joined the paramilitary group responsible for the death of his stepfather in order to be close to the 'political opponents' and secretly work through his trauma; or he strove by his 'conversion' to be protected by their power, in case violence against 'communists' returned.

59 For a discussion of the theoretical history of the term "traumatic memory," which addresses senso-motoric elements and sensory (intrusive) imprints that can be triggered, as dominant over 'ordinary,' conscious, cognitive, constructive, linear forms of remembrance, see Bessel A. van der Kolk, "Trauma and Memory," *Psychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences* 52 (1998), https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1440-1819.1998.0520s5S97.x.

60 Winfried Menninghaus, *Ekel: Theorie und Geschichte einer starken Empfindung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999); Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

61 For thoughts on the function of cross-dressing as an outlet for stress relief in war situations, see Julia B. Köhne and Britta Lange, "Mit Geschlechterrollen spielen: Die Illusionsmaschine Damenimitation in Front- und Gefangenentheatern des Ersten Weltkriegs," in *Mein Kamerad – Die Diva: Theaterspielen an der Front und in Gefangenenlagern des Ersten Weltkriegs*, ed. Julia B. Köhne, Britta Lange, and Anke Vetter (Munich: edition kritik, 2014), 25–41.

62 Cynn, "Die Leute kannten nicht nur die Toten."

63 In a speech in "The Lost Lectures," Christine Cynn describes this method as follows: as a filmmaker she would create "spaces or frameworks for people to explore, play with and extent their imaginary selves." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RMIlg91M4eQ.

64 In contrast to Oppenheimer's reticence for safety reasons, the director of the documentary film *S21 – The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (Cambodia/France 2003, dir. Rithy Panh) revealed his political position concerning the Khmer Rouge conflict, according to self-testimony. See Joshua Oppenheimer, "Perpetrators' Testimony and the Restoration of Humanity: *S21*, Rithy Panh," in *Killer Images,* ed. Brink and Oppenheimer, 246.

65 Julia B. Köhne, "Geister und Masken des Kriegs in Kaneto Shindōs ONIBABA (1964)," in *Geschlecht ohne Körper: Gespenster im Kontext von Gender, Kultur und Geschichte*, ed. Thomas Ballhausen, Barbara Hindinger, Esther Saletta, and Christa Tuczay (Vienna: Praesens, 2020).

66 Mathias Hirsch, "Täter und Opfer sexueller Gewalt in einer therapeutischen Gruppe – über umwandelnde Gegen- und Kreuzidentifikationen," *Gruppenpsychotherapeutische Gruppendynamik* 39 (2003): 169–86, my translation.

67 Mathias Hirsch, "Psychoanalytische Therapie mit Opfern inzestuöser Gewalt," *Jahrbuch der Psychoanalyse* 31 (1993): 132–48.

68 Auguste Gabriel Maxime Vernois's (1809–77) retina thesis of 1870 states that "on the retina of corpses one can recognize the last consciously taken picture like a fixed after-image [theory of the 'optogram']." Vernois therefore had the retina of murder victims surgically removed, to read by microscopic magnification the identity of the murderers on them. The dying man, in Vernois's opinion, becomes a mechanical camera, which documents in a

final act the violence with which he is killed. See Angelica Schwab, *Serienkiller in Wirklichkeit und Film: Störenfried oder Stabilisator?* (Münster: LIT, 2001), 281.

69 Julia B. Köhne, "Auge," in *Wörterbuch kinematografischer Objekte*, ed. Marius Böttcher et al. (Berlin: August, 2014), 19–21.

70 Mária Török and Nicolas Abraham, "Trauer *oder* Melancholie: Introjizieren – inkorporieren," *Psyche* 55/6, July 2001 [1972]: 545–59.

71 Ibid., 555.

72 Mária Török and Nicolas Abraham, "Die Topik der Realität: Bemerkungen zu einer Metapsychologie des Geheimnisses," *Psyche* 55, no. 6 (July 2001 [1971]): 541.

73 See Second Annual Conference of the Memory Studies Association, 14–16 December 2017, University of Copenhagen.

74 Anderson, "Impunity," 274. Also see Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 11 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1992), esp. 55–71, dealing with a particular German killing unit sent to Poland and the Soviet Union; some of the policemen broke down in the face of routinized killing and deportation of Jews.

75 Homay King, "Born Free? Repetition and Fantasy in *The Act of Killing*," *Film Quarterly* 67, no. 2 (Winter 2013): 30.

76 On traumatic stress, its effects on victims, and fragmented traumatic memory functions, see Bessel A. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Mind, Brain, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (Suffolk: Penguin, 2015).

77 Ursula Kreutzer-Haustein, "Deutsche und Israelis: Die Vergangenheit in der Gegenwart: Eine psychoanalytische Arbeitstagung in Nazareth im Juni 1994," *Forum der Psychoanalyse* 10 (1994): 364 et seq.

78 Mohamed, "Of Monsters and Men," 1169: "[T]here is value, too, to recognizing the equal humanity of the two categories [victim/perpetrator], and to recognizing the capacity for the project of international criminal law to declare the commonness, the ordinariness, the humanness of the people who commit these horrific crimes."

79 Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2019).

80 Pierre Bourdieu, *Praktische Vernunft: Zur Theorie des Handelns* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998), 174.

81 See the documentary *A Mots couverts,* released in English as *Shades of True: Female Perpetrators of the Rwandan Genocide* (Fr. 2014), dir. Alexandre Westphal and Violaine Baraduc, 88 min., which focuses on female perpetrators of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda who are interned in a Kigali prison and, in group discussions, reflect on the preconditions of their becoming ruthless killers of Tutsi friends, neighbours, and family members.

82 Oppenheimer, cited in Tim Grierson "'The Look of Silence': How a New Doc Revisits Indonesia's Genocide," *Rolling Stone*, 17 July 2015, https://www

.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-news/the-look-of-silence-how-a-new-doc-revisits-indonesias-genocide-113990/.

83 See Michael Rothberg, "Decolonizing Trauma Studies: A Response," *Studies in the Novel* 40, no. 1/2 (2008): 224–34.

84 On apologies after human rights violations in the context of transitional justice, see Ruben Carranza, Cristián Correa, and Elena Naughton, eds., *More Than Words: Apologies as a Form of Reparation* (New York: International Center for Transitional Justice, 2015), esp. 4. See also Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, *National Apologies: Mapping the Complexities of Validity*, accessed 3 March 2020, http://www.centrepeaceconflictstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/National_Apologies.pdf.