POV
Community Engagement & Education
DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Act of Killing
A Film by Joshua Oppenheimer

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Beginnings

In February 2004, I filmed a former death squad leader demonstrating how, in less than three months, he and his fellow killers slaughtered 10,500 alleged communists in a single clearing by a river in North Sumatra. When he was finished with his explanation, he asked my sound recordist to take some snapshots of us together by the riverbank. He smiled broadly, gave a thumbs up in one photo, a victory sign in the next.

Two months later, other photos, this time of American soldiers smiling and giving the thumbs up while torturing and humiliating Iraqi prisoners, appeared in the news. (Errol Morris later revealed these photographs to be more complex than they at first appeared.) The most unsettling thing about these images is not the violence they document, but rather what they suggest to us about how their participants wanted, in that moment, to be seen. And how they thought, in that moment, they would want to remember themselves. Moreover, performing, acting and posing appear to be part of the procedures of humiliation. These photographs betray not so much the physical situation of abuse, but rather forensic evidence of the imagination involved in persecution. And they were very much in my mind when, one year later, I met Anwar Congo and the other leaders of Indonesia’s Pancasila Youth paramilitary movement.

Far Away or Close to Home?

The differences between the situations I was filming in Indonesia and other situations of mass persecution may at first seem obvious. In Indonesia there have been no truth and reconciliation commissions, no trials, no memorials for victims as there have been in Rwanda, South Africa and Germany. Instead, ever since committing their atrocities, the perpetrators in Indonesia and their protégés have run the country, insisting they be honored as national heroes by a docile (and often terrified) public. But is this situation really so exceptional? At home (in the United States), the champions of torture, disappearance and indefinite detention were in the highest positions of political power and, at the same time, busily tending to their legacy as the heroic saviors of Western civilization. That such narratives would be believed (despite all evidence to the contrary) suggests a failure of our collective imagination, while simultaneously revealing the power of storytelling to shape how we see.

And that Anwar Congo and his friends so admired American movies, American music, American clothing—all of this made the echoes more difficult to ignore, transforming what I was filming into a nightmarish allegory.

Filming with Survivors

When I began developing The Act of Killing in 2005, I had already been filming for three years with survivors of the 1965-66 massacres. I had lived for a year in a village of survivors in the plantation belt outside Medan. I had become very close to several of the families there. During that time, Christine Cynn and I collaborated with a fledgling plantation workers’ union to make The Globalization Tapes and began production on a forthcoming film about a family of survivors who begin to confront (with tremendous dignity and patience) the killers who murdered their son. Our efforts to record the survivors’ experiences—never before expressed publicly—took place in the shadow of their torturers, as well as the executioners who murdered their relatives—men who, like Anwar, would boast about what they did.

Ironically, we faced the greatest danger when filming survivors. We’d encounter obstacle after obstacle. For instance, when we tried to film a scene in which former political prisoners rehearsed a Javanese ballad about their time in the concentration camps (describing how they provided forced labor for a British-owned plantation, and how every night some of their friends would be handed over to the death squads to be killed), we were interrupted by police seeking to arrest us. At other times, the management of London-Sumatra plantations interrupted the film’s shooting, “honoring” us by “inviting” us to a meeting at plantation headquarters. On one occasion the village mayor arrived with a military escort to tell us we didn’t have permission to film. On another, an “NGO” focused on “rehabilitation for the victims of the 1965-66 killings” turned up and declared, “This is our turf. The villagers here have paid us to protect them.” (When we later visited the so-called NGO’s office, we discovered that the head of the NGO was none other than the area’s leading killer—a friend of Anwar Congo’s—and the NGO’s staff seemed to be military intelligence officers.)

Not only did we feel unsafe filming the survivors, but we worried for their safety. And the survivors couldn’t answer the question of how the killings were perpetrated.
Boastful Killers
But the killers were more than willing to help, and when we filmed them boastfully describing their crimes against humanity we met no resistance whatsoever. All doors were open. Local police offered to escort us to sites of mass killing, where they either saluted the killers or engaged in jocular banter with them, depending on their relationships and the killers’ ranks. Military officers even tasked soldiers with keeping curious onlookers at a distance so that our sound recording wouldn’t be disturbed.

This bizarre situation was my second starting point for making The Act of Killing. And the question in mind was this: What does it mean to live in, and be governed by, a regime whose power rests on the performance of mass murder and boastful public recounting of it, even as it intimidates survivors into silence? Again, there seemed to be a profound failure of the imagination at work.

Within Indonesia more generally, such openness about the killings might be exceptional. But in North Sumatra, it is standard operating procedure. There, the army recruited its death squads from the ranks of gangsters. Gangsters’ power derives from being feared, and so the thugs ruling North Sumatra have trumpeted their role in the genocide ever since, framing it as heroic struggle, while all the time taking care to include grisly details that inspire a constant and undiminished disquiet, unease, even terror of possible recurrence. In the gangsters’ role as the political bosses of North Sumatra (a province of 14 million people) they have continued to celebrate themselves as heroes, reminding the public of their role in the massacres, while continuing to threaten the survivors—and they have done so even as governors, senators, members of parliament and, in the case of one prominent veteran of the 1965-66 genocide, as the perversely named “deputy minister of law and human rights.”

Seizing the Moment
I understood that gangsters don’t hold quite the same monopoly on power in many other regions of Indonesia—including Jakarta. So in one sense the circumstances in North Sumatra differ from those elsewhere. Perpetrators in other regions haven’t been so open, not because they fear prosecution (they don’t), but because they don’t need to use stories about the genocide as a tool of criminal and political intimidation. And yet, just as the situations I encountered in Sumatra had parallels in the United States, so, too, did they embody a logic of total impunity that defines Indonesia as a whole, and probably any other regime built on terror.

In this, I saw an opportunity: If the perpetrators in North Sumatra were given the means to dramatize their memories of genocide in whatever ways they wished, they would probably seek to glorify it further, to transform it into a “beautiful family movie” (as Anwar puts it) whose kaleidoscopic use of genres would reflect their multiple, conflicting emotions about their “glorious past.” I anticipated that the outcomes of this process would serve as an exposé, even to Indonesians themselves, of just how deep the impunity and lack of resolution in their country remains.

Moreover, Anwar and his friends had helped build a regime that terrorized their victims into treating them as heroes, and I realized that the filmmaking process would answer many questions about the nature of such a regime—questions that may seem secondary to what they did, but, in fact, are inseparable from it. For instance, how do Anwar and his friends think people see them? How do they want to be seen? How do they see themselves? How do they see their victims? How does the way they think they will be seen by others reveal what they imagine about the world they live in, the culture they have built? The filmmaking method we used in The Act of Killing was developed to answer these questions. It is best seen as an investigative technique, refined to help us understand not only what we see, but also how we see, and how we imagine. These are questions of critical importance to understanding the imaginative procedures by which human beings persecute each other, and how we then go on to build (and live in) societies founded on systemic and enduring violence.
Anwar’s Reactions

If my goal in initiating the project was to find answers to these questions, and if Anwar’s declared intent was to glorify his past actions, there is no way that he could not, in part, be disappointed by the final film. And yet, a crucial component of the filmmaking process involved screening the footage back to Anwar and his friends along the way. Inevitably, we screened the most painful scenes. They know what is in the film; indeed, they openly debate the consequences of the film, inside the film. And seeing these scenes only made Anwar more interested in the work, which is how I gradually realized that he was on a parallel, more personal journey through the filmmaking process, one in which he sought to come to terms with the meaning of what he had done. In that sense, too, Anwar is the bravest and most honest character in The Act of Killing. He may or may not like the result, but I have tried to honor his courage and his openness by presenting him as honestly, and with as much compassion, as I could, while still depicting the unspeakable acts that he committed.

There is no easy resolution to The Act of Killing. The murder of one million people is inevitably fraught with complexity and contradiction. In short, it leaves behind a terrible mess. All the more so when the killers have remained in power, when there has been no attempt at justice and when the story has hitherto only been used to intimidate the survivors. Seeking to understand such a situation, intervening in it, documenting it—this, too, can only be equally tangled, unkempt.

The Struggle Continues

I have developed a filmmaking method through which I have tried to understand why extreme violence, that we hope would be unimaginable, is not only the exact opposite, but also routinely performed. I have tried to understand the moral vacuum that makes it possible for perpetrators of genocide to be celebrated on public television with cheers and smiles. Some viewers may desire a formal closure by the end of the film, a successful struggle for justice that results in changes in the balance of power, human rights tribunals, reparations and official apologies. One film alone cannot create these changes, but this desire has, of course, been our inspiration as well, as we attempt to shed light on one of the darkest chapters in both the local and global human story, and to express the real costs of blindness, expediency and an inability to control greed and the hunger for power in an increasingly unified world society. This is not, finally, a story only about Indonesia. It is a story about us all.

Joshua Oppenheimer
Director, The Act of Killing
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The Act of Killing (120 min.) is an unsettling journey into the minds of mass murderers. When the Indonesian government was overthrown by the military in 1965, small-time gangster Anwar Congo and his friends helped the army kill more than one million alleged communists, ethnic Chinese and intellectuals. Some nations with histories of similar crimes against humanity have created truth and reconciliation initiatives and even jailed perpetrators. In Indonesia, the perpetrators are still in power, and death squad members are honored for their patriotism.

In a mind-bending twist, filmmaker Joshua Oppenheimer offers Anwar and his “crew” a chance to tell their story in any way they choose. Their choice: to dramatize their brutal deeds in the style of the American westerns, musicals and gangster movies they love—with themselves as the stars. The result is a nightmarish vision of a banal culture of impunity in which killers joke about crimes against humanity on television chat shows.

As a springboard for community dialogue, The Act of Killing raises a myriad of important issues. It provides a window into modern Indonesia, asking audiences to examine what sort of society is created by leaders who boast about their atrocities and hold up mass murderers as role models. What are the links between impunity for the past and current government corruption? And what is the culpability of the Western governments that provided direct aid to the perpetrators?

The film also looks deep into the human psyche, as if on a quest to find the killers’ moral compass, only to find it hidden behind walls of disassociation, delusion and denial. By merging the trivial with the brutal, the film suggests that popular media contribute to those walls, leaving viewers to ponder what our own media choices say about ourselves and our culture. In the end, the power of this disturbing journey is stunning and inescapable.
The Act of Killing is well suited for use in a variety of settings and is especially recommended for use with:

- Your local PBS station
- Groups that have discussed previous PBS and POV films relating to political upheaval and the use of death squads, including Nostalgia for the Light, Granito: How to Nail a Dictator, Enemies of the People, The Reckoning and The Fall of Fujimori
- Groups that have discussed other films about the massacres in Indonesia, including 40 Years of Silence: An Indonesian Tragedy, The Globalization Tapes and The Look of Silence
- Groups focused on any of the issues listed in the Key Issues section, including human rights organizations
- High school students, youth groups and clubs
- Faith-based organizations and institutions
- Cultural, art and historical organizations, institutions and museums
- Civic, fraternal and community groups
- Academic departments and student groups at colleges, universities and high schools
- Community organizations with a mission to promote education and learning, such as local libraries

The Act of Killing is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of special interest to people looking to explore the following topics:

- Cold War
- communism
- death squads
- film/cinema studies
- genocide
- historical documentary
- human rights
- indoctrination
- Indonesia
- International Criminal Court
- media effects
- media literacy
- media studies
- military coups
- movie genres: gangsters, Westerns, musicals, film noir
- paramilitaries
- political science
- pop culture
- psychology
- U.S. foreign policy
- violence
This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection, designed for people who want to use *The Act of Killing* to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues and communities. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening actively.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. And be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit [www.pov.org/engage](http://www.pov.org/engage)

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**NOTE TO FACILITATORS**

If time allows, we encourage you to screen the POV filmmaker interview with director Joshua Oppenheimer before, during or after your discussion. The interview provides helpful context on the subject matter and filmmaking style. You can access the interview at [www.pbs.org/pov/theactofkilling/](http://www.pbs.org/pov/theactofkilling/)
Indonesia and the United States in the 1960s

In the mid-1960s, Indonesia was in the midst of social and political turmoil. Despite an abundance of natural resources, the nation was bankrupt and suffering from widespread inflation, poverty and hunger. Dutch colonial rule had ended just 20 years prior, and tensions were high amongst those of differing political ideologies—especially the right-wing military and the left-wing communist party. President Sukarno—Indonesia’s first president and a key player in ousting Dutch rule in 1945—shunned Western powers and supported communism. With an estimated three million members, the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) was the largest such party outside of a communist nation. The United States, meanwhile, was engaged in the Cold War and the Vietnam War in an effort to end communism worldwide. As such, the U.S. government had poor relations with President Sukarno and viewed his regime as a threat to Southeast Asian security.

Sources


1965-66 Military Dictatorship and Genocide

The genocide in Indonesia began with a single event. In the early morning of October 1, 1965, a group who referred to themselves as the September 30th Movement, organized by a small group of dissident military officers and high-ranking PKI members, abducted and killed six military generals, took control of the nation’s radio station and announced its aim to protect President Sukarno from an expected take-over by right-wing military generals. The September 30th Movement maintained control for less than 48 hours before army leaders under the command of a surviving high-ranking general, General Suharto, brought it to an end. Most of the Indonesian public didn’t even know what had happened. Army leaders fixed sole blame for the murder of the generals on the PKI and in the days that followed encouraged sometimes violent protests against the party, arguing that the PKI posed a mortal threat to the nation. In mid-October 1965, the army launched a wider campaign to wipe out the PKI and its affiliated organizations. Working with local gangsters and anti-communist Muslim and student organizations, the army targeted for arrest or execution anyone suspected of having communist ties, from ethnic Chinese, to leftists, academics, labor union members and artists.

Over the next six months, the army orchestrated the murder of an estimated 500,000 (and perhaps as many as one million) people, before finally drawing its campaign to a close in March 1966. Most of the victims were unarmed and were neither engaged in revolt nor charged with crimes. They were often abducted from their homes in secret, held as political prisoners and then executed. President Sukarno proved helpless to stop the killings, and on March 11, 1966, under strong pressure from the military, transferred emergency power to General Suharto. Suharto immediately banned the PKI and began consolidating army control over the country, officially appointing himself as Indonesia’s new president a year later. He would rule the country as military dictator for the next 32 years.

The perpetrators of the 1965-66 killings kept few records, and much of the physical evidence has been lost, making it difficult to reconstruct the events of the period with certainty. Though many locals knew the locations of mass graves, acknowledging them was taboo and dangerous. In an effort to protect Indonesia’s tourist industry, some developers have also been instructed to ignore human remains unearthed during construction or excavation.

A number of Western governments, including the U.S.’s Lyn-
The Lyndon Johnson administration, did have evidence of the killings, and in fact supported them. For more than a year, the Lyndon Johnson administration had been conducting covert operations in Indonesia aimed at provoking a clash between the army and the PKI. Declassified U.S. documents show that the U.S. government was aware of the Indonesian army’s actions and provided economic, military and technical assistance to the armed forces. U.S. officials saw events in Indonesia in the context of the nation’s broader global interests, especially the war in Vietnam. The United States, moreover, supported Sukarno’s ouster and the transition to a military-led regime. The U.S. government and other Western governments supported Suharto’s regime because of its anti-communist stance, its program of Western-oriented economic development and its welcome of foreign investment. A 1966 memorandum prepared for the U.S. National Security Council summarized the stance of the Johnson administration as follows:

Until late March, our major policy on developments in Indonesia was silence. The anti-Communist leaders wanted no cheers from us. This policy remains generally sound, particularly in the light of the wholesale killings that have accompanied the transition (even though it is perfectly clear that a Communist takeover would have been at least as bloody). Nonetheless, we have recently been quietly pointing out that we take a favorable view of the new regime and have also been noting that its succession would have been less likely without our continued firmness in Viet-Nam and in the area. We should continue to applaud and claim credit only to this extremely limited extent.

Sources


“Suharto’s Indonesia.” Time. http://content.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1702682_1516311,0,00.html


Human Rights Trials and Reparations

Following the genocide, many of the perpetrators remained in power, and a number went on to hold high political positions. President Suharto established the New Order regime and maintained his position as military dictator before stepping down in the face of popular protest in 1998. The government covered the 1965-66 massacres with a quick and complete propaganda campaign that vilified the PKI, glorified the army’s suppression of the September 30th Movement as a heroic response to an attempted communist take-over and remained silent on the killings. The genocide became Indonesia’s open secret, and the government and media almost never publicly mentioned the massacres. Many foreign countries lauded the events as a victory over communism, and Time magazine called Suharto’s new regime and policies, “the West’s best news for years in Asia.”

None of the perpetrators of the events have been convicted of crimes in either national or international courts. The International Criminal Court, which was founded by the international community to “prosecute crimes of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes,” does not have jurisdiction over crimes that took place prior to ratification of its statute in 2002, unless the nation where the crimes took place has since ratified the court’s statute (which Indonesia has not). After Suharto left power, Indonesia added a new human rights section to its constitution and established a human rights court, but all those tried under that system were acquitted or had their convictions overturned, largely on the grounds of lack of sufficient evidence.

In 2012, Indonesia’s independent human rights commission, Komnas HAM, submitted a report to the attorney general’s office stating that the 1965-66 massacres were a gross human rights violation. Though Suharto and many other high-level officials from the time are no longer living, the group called for the remaining participating military officials to be tried and asked the government to issue an apology and provide rehabilitation and reparations to survivors. The requests were rejected. According to Djoko Suyanto, coordinating minister for legal, political and security affairs, “The killings were justified because Indonesia would not be what it is today if the killings hadn’t taken place.” Neither the Indonesian government nor international governments have made an official apology for the events, though some local governments have sought pardon by building monuments to honor victims and providing victims’ families with health care and educational scholarships. According to Frans H. Winata, a human rights expert, the Indonesian government’s first step toward reparations for the genocide must be to form a truth and reconciliation committee. The military blocked an attempt to do so by former president Abdurrahman “Gus Dur” Wahid, but there remains optimism that the next president will take action.

Sources


After *The Act of Killing*

*The Act of Killing* has played a major role in opening up dialogue about the 1965-66 genocide, both in Indonesia and internationally. Though the film has not been released theatrically in Indonesia (due to censorship and security concerns) it has been made available for free for Indonesians to download and, according to BRITDOC’s PUMA Impact report for *The Act of Killing*, on International Human Rights Day in 2012, 50 public screenings of the film were held in 30 cities across the nation. At a later date, members of the Pancasila Youth, one of the main paramilitary groups involved in the genocide, even attended a peaceful screening and discussion of the film.

In October of 2012, *Tempo*, one of Indonesia’s leading news magazines, published an unprecedented 75-page special on the 1965-66 killings, with testimony from the perpetrators. The issue sold out and was reprinted three times, and competing magazines quickly responded with their own specials on the killings. As of February 2013 more than 600 new press articles related to the genocide had been published in Indonesia. The film has also had impact globally: In China, *The Act of Killing* was screened at the Beijing International Film Festival, as well as for a village populated by Chinese-Indonesian refugees of the 1965 massacres and their descendants; the film was screened for the U.S. Senate in Washington, D.C.; and screenings in Kurdistan, Armenia, Jenin, Ramallah and the West Bank opened up dialogue around the genocide in Armenia that began in 1915.

Though the perpetrators have been neither convicted nor removed from power and a climate of intimidation still exists, Indonesia has seen an irreversible shift in public awareness and discussion of the genocide. According to Yosep Stanley Adi Prasetyo, an Indonesian national human rights commissioner, “Because of *The Act of Killing*, killers in Indonesia no longer boast about what they did, because they know the society will no longer accept it as heroic. This is a significant step in the fight against impunity and means perpetrators themselves can no longer lie to themselves about what they’ve done in the same way. It also means survivors no longer must listen to the intimidating boasting of the perpetrators who live around them.”

Sources


Selected People Featured in The Act of Killing

**Anwar Congo** - executioner in 1965, a school dropout at grade four; a movie gangster and a founding father of the Pancasila Youth paramilitary group; at the time of filming, Congo was 72.

**Yapto Soerjosoemarno** - leader of the Pancasila Youth

**Safit Pardede** - local paramilitary leader who also acts in Anwar’s film.

**Herman Koto** - gangster and paramilitary leader; Anwar’s partner in filmmaking.
Selected People Featured in *The Act of Killing*

**Sunardi** – death squad leader in 1965

**Suryono** – Anwar’s neighbor, who portrays a communist in Anwar’s film

**Adi Zulkadry** – executioner in 1965
The Act of Killing is unsettling and may be challenging to watch. Immediately after the film, we recommend that you give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen or pose a general question (examples below) and give people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion:

• What was your gut reaction to the film? How did it make you feel?

• If a friend asked you what this film was about, what would you say?

• Describe a moment or scene in the film that you found particularly disturbing or moving. What was it about that scene that was especially compelling for you?

• What did you learn from this film? What insights did it provide?

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

The Psyche of a Killer

What did you learn from this film about how death squad killers think, cope and survive?

If you could ask Anwar Congo a single question, what would it be?

Would you describe Anwar as an evil man? An average man caught up in evil circumstances? Some other alternative? Do you see any of yourself in him? What traits, if any, do you share?

In Anwar’s internal dialogue about the communist purge, he is the “good guy.” In the waterfall sequence, his victim even thanks him and places a medal around his neck. Yet at certain moments in the film, he expresses doubt. How does the process of making this film disrupt Anwar’s internal narrative of heroism? What specific moments make Anwar question the story he has been telling himself?

Anwar chooses the song “Born Free” as the sound track of the waterfall scene. How do you think Anwar would define “free”? How do you define “free”? What are some ideals of freedom that Anwar uses to justify his way of life?

Anwar is a fan American movies, especially those that are hyper-masculine. How do these fictional portrayals influence his thinking?

Unquestionably Anwar’s violence has had consequences for his victims, their loved ones and their society, but what toll has Anwar himself paid for his own brutality?

Anwar acknowledges that his “bad dreams come from what I did.” In contrast, his compatriot Adi Zulkadry says that he feels no guilt and does not have nightmares. How do their perspectives on their past actions differ and how do those perspectives relate to the ways that they cope?

Creating a Culture of Corruption

Anwar talks about drinking and taking drugs. What role does substance abuse play? Does it contribute to culture of dehumanization? If so, how? How does that culture foster violence?

Based on the comments the gangsters and paramilitary members make, how would you describe their views of women? What are the links between the role that women seem to play in their lives and their capacity to torture and kill?
As Anwar watches himself on screen, he recalls that he felt “more free” when he was a young man and that “older men are gentle.” In fact, most genocides have been carried out by young men. What does that say about coming-of-age and the way that modern societies define masculinity?

Anwar explains, “We were gangsters. We didn't have real jobs. So we'd do anything for money... just to buy nice clothes.” What is the role of poverty, money and greed in the success of the gangsters and the private paramilitary? What are the likely sources of the money, and should the financiers be held accountable along with those who actually carried out the killings?

What are the differences between Anwar’s killing of communists and an army killing opponents on the battlefield?

What are the differences between the patriotism expressed by leaders of the Pancasila Youth and, for example, patriotism expressed by some American youth groups?

We see Herman Koto and Safit Pardede extorting money from local shopkeepers. How does impunity for such actions serve the government’s interests? How does it undermine democracy?

The term “gangster” seems to be commonly—yet erroneously—understood to mean “free men.” Why would this misunderstanding be so widely accepted? What is it about being a gangster that is linked to being free?

Anwar says, “I'm a gangster...Not much education. A human drop out...There are people like me everywhere in the world.” If he is correct that there are people like him everywhere, why aren't death squads a permanent feature of every culture? What circumstances have to be in place for racial, ethnic or political hatred (which is common in many cultures) to morph into the extreme expression that is mass murder?

Newspaper publisher Ibrahim Sinik denies ever killing anyone because, “I didn't have to! One wink from me and they're dead!” If murdering communists was righteous and heroic, why wouldn't Sinik have participated in the actual killing? How did/do men like Sinik inspire or offer incentives to others to kill on their behalf?

What is the relationship between Indonesia’s failure to hold killers accountable for their actions in 1965-66 and current political corruption?

Telling the Truth

Anwar says, “Whether this ends up on the big screen or only on TV, it doesn’t matter. But we have to show...that this is the history! This is who we are! So in the future people will remember!” What, exactly, is it that Anwar and his associates want future generations to remember? Given that their supporters have remained in power, why might they think that their story is in danger of being lost?

When Adi urges Anwar and Herman to think through the possible response to their film, they ask, “But why should we always hide our history if that’s the truth?” Adi answers, “But not everything true should be made public.” Do you agree? What sorts of things do more damage than good when they are revealed? In your view, do the murders that Anwar and his associates committed fall into that category?

Declaring that what they just filmed made him feel awful, Sakhyan Asmara interrupts the filming of a scene in which the Pancasila Youth destroy a village: “What we’ve just shown is not characteristic of our organization. We shouldn’t look brutal, like we want to drink people’s blood. That’s dangerous for our organization's image.” While acknowledging this public relations problem, he also says, “But we must exterminate the communists. We must totally wipe them out but in a more humane way. This is the true story...Don't erase it! Use it to show how ferocious we can be! In fact, we can even be worse! So, think of it as a simulation of our rage if anyone disturbs our country.” How does being seen as brutal both serve and undermine the interests of the paramilitary group? How does it serve or threaten the government?

In the scene of the village being burned, several actors who play victims appear to be overcome with emotion, even after the director yells, “Cut.” What is it about participating in a re-enactment that elicits such a profound response?

Newspaperman Soaduon Siregar denies knowing about the torture and murders happening just above his office. Even his peers don’t seem to find his assertion credible. As a bystander, why would he deny knowing, especially when the perpetrators freely acknowledge their deeds?

Soaduon argues with Adi over semantics, claiming that they were “sadistic” but not “cruel.” Why would Soaduon insist on a difference? What would make “sadistic” okay, but “cruel” not okay?

Accountability

Adi says, “Killing is the worst crime you can do. So the key is to find a way not to feel guilty. It’s all about finding the right excuse.” What’s your assessment of the validity of each of the excuses that he gives?
- I did it for money (the "right compensation")
- We were acting as part of a revolution
- Other people have done similar acts and have not been held accountable (e.g., Americans killed Indians)
- What is considered “right” changes over time (e.g., during the Bush administration, Guantánamo was right and now it is not); we were considered right at the time
- “We were allowed to do it. And the proof is, we murdered people and were never punished.”

Adi dismisses the notion that they violated human rights or committed war crimes: “The Geneva Conventions may be today’s morality, but tomorrow we’ll have the Jakarta Conventions and dump the Geneva Conventions. ‘War crimes’ are defined by the winners. I’m a winner. So I can make my own definition.” Do you agree that the definition of “war crime” is mutable? Can you think of other examples where the “winners” have defined what is and isn’t criminal? Would you classify what Adi and the others did as “war crimes” or “crimes against humanity”? Why or why not?

Anwar fears that if the children of his victims learn the truth, “They will curse us for the rest of their lives.” Yet he says he is certain that they will not take revenge. A Pancasila leader explains that those who might want revenge won’t act, “Because we’d exterminate them all!” How does the need to hide past acts or avoid society’s judgment perpetuate the need for continued brutality?

Adi thinks the government should apologize for the purge: “There’s been no official apology but what’s so hard about apologizing? The government would apologize, not us. It would be like medicine. It would reduce the pain.” In your view, what is the value of an apology in this circumstance?

Political Systems

The Act of Killing opens with this line from Voltaire: “It is forbidden to kill. Therefore all murderers are punished, unless they kill in large numbers, and to the sound of trumpets.” How do the events that the film examines relate to this quote?

One objection to the murders was that the targets weren’t just communists, but also included ethnic Chinese, intellectuals, anyone who dared oppose the government in any way and innocent bystanders. Given that nearly all governments sanction the killing of declared enemies (through war, assassination or formal state-sanctioned executions), would the killings have been justified if the death squads had only murdered communists? Is the method of using “gangsters” (and other civilians) to kill people who sought to overthrow the government a legitimate tactic of war?

In the context of the Cold War, the United States and other Western nations supported the Indonesian purge of communists, and they have considered the leaders of Indonesia to be allies ever since. Does this make the United States culpable in any way for crimes against humanity committed by Indonesian gangsters?

Addressing the Pancasila Youth, Jusuf Kalla, former vice president of Indonesia, says, “Gangsters are people who work outside the system, not for the government. If everyone worked for the government we’d be a nation of bureaucrats. We’d get nothing done. We need gangsters to get things done. Free, private men who get things done.” The leader of the Pancasila Youth declares that fighting communists and leftists “isn’t only the duty of the army and police. We, Pancasila Youth, must take a stand. These are threats to the nation, and we must take action.” What types of governments “need gangsters to get things done”? Why would a government not only tolerate, but nurture a private paramilitary? What are the advantages and disadvantages of doing so?

Why does the government tolerate the Pancasila Youth’s illegal, non-political activities (e.g., gambling)? How do such activities skew the economy and alter who has access to wealth?

Yapto Soerjosoemarno, leader of the Pancasila Youth, says, “We have too much democracy. It’s chaos. What is this democracy? Things were better under the military dictatorship. Better economy. More security.” When it comes to democracy, what would you define as “too much”? What’s the appeal of dictatorship?

Ibrahim Sinik remembers interrogations in his newsroom: “Whatever we asked, we’d change their answers to make them look bad. As a newspaperman, my job was to make the public hate them.” Contrast this with the role of journalists in a democracy.

Anwar says, “Actually, parliament should be the most noble place in society. But if we see what they do there…They’re really just robbers with ties.” How does Herman’s run for parliament confirm Anwar’s view?

Herman asserts, “Many of the parties bribe people to vote for them. In fact, they all do. And when you see thousands of
people at a rally all of them were paid to be there. They consider it going to work...Nowadays, nobody believes in what they're campaigning for. We've all become like soap opera actors. Our souls have become like soap opera actors.” Assuming that what Herman says is accurate, is it reasonable to call Indonesia a democracy? How should this situation affect the relationship between Western nations and the elected Indonesian government? How does it influence your perception of political news coverage, especially on television?

Filmmaking and Media Literacy
When asked to tell their story, the perpetrators choose to re-enact scenes in the styles of their favorite Hollywood film genres. In your view, what is the impact of the filmmaker’s decision to accept this choice? In what ways did this choice challenge the perpetrators’ narratives? In what ways does the “Hollywood-ization” of atrocities risk trivializing the crimes? Did the film feel trivial to you?

Though the film focuses on the stories of the killers, it also incorporates the perspective of the victims. Can you describe how it does this?

Do you see ethical issues that arise from the filmmaker footing the bill for the killers to tell their story? In your view, does the filmmaker’s method allow the killers to create their own version of history and the present, or does it reveal and challenge the views held by the perpetrators?

Anwar says, “I watched so many sadistic movies...I was influenced by films starring Marlon Brando, Al Pacino...Those were my favorites. And westerns with John Wayne.” He even claims that the inspiration for using a wire garrote to kill came from “gangster films where they always kill with wire.” What lessons does this offer about the potential effects of media? Given that the Indonesian gangsters were fans of American films, including those featuring traditional heroes played by actors like John Wayne, what lessons might you draw from The Act of Killing about American culture (including cultural messages about masculinity and violence)?

Anwar appears on a television talk show during which the host puts an interesting spin on his actions: “Anwar and his friends developed a new, more efficient system for exterminating communists. It was more humane, less sadistic and avoided excessive violence.” In your view, does this make those who were involved in the show’s production—including the people in the booth who wonder how Anwar can sleep—complicit in Anwar’s crimes? Why or why not?

How were you affected by scenes of mundane activities (e.g., Adi Zulkadry at the mall or Yapto Soerjosomarno playing golf), accompanied by descriptions of torture or intimidation? How did these jarring juxtapositions intensify the film’s messages? What other techniques did the filmmaker use to elicit deep emotional reactions?

Over the filmmaker’s objections, Anwar wants his grandson to watch the scene where his grandfather is being beaten. What do you imagine each person in the room was thinking as the scene played?

Neither Anwar nor Herman hesitates to involve children in the production, even in very violent scenes. What does that indicate about their beliefs about childhood and the role of violence in their lives?

During the filming of a torture scene, Adi comes to a realization: “If we succeed in making this film, it will disprove all the propaganda about the communists being cruel. And show that we were cruel! We’re the cruel ones.” He predicts that if the film is a success, “The whole society will say, ‘We always suspected it. They lied about the communists being cruel.’” He advises the others to think carefully about what they are doing: “We must understand every step we take here.” Do you see evidence that Anwar and Herman understand the tensions between preserving their story and protecting the “spin” version of their story that they have used over the years to justify their actions? How does the process of filmmaking force them and others to make a choice?

What was your reaction to seeing Anwar watch his own performances?

At any point in the film, did you find yourself having empathy for Anwar? If so, which scenes evoked that response? If the filmmaker had edited out those scenes, how do you think you would have reacted to Anwar?

Anwar shares, “What I regret... Honestly, I never expected it would look this awful.” What is it about filmmaking that provides Anwar with enough critical distance that he is able to examine some of his own actions? How does the unique form of this film compare to more conventional techniques in its ability to evoke critical distance?

Additional media literacy questions are available at: www.pbs.org/pov/educators/media-literacy.php
• Take a close look at the United States-Indonesia Comprehensive Partnership agreement (http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/10/215196.htm) signed by President Obama and President Yudhoyono. Examine the role that human rights play in the relationship between the two countries. Share what you learn with your community, including your elected federal representatives. Let them know your views on incorporating protections for human rights in policy going forward.

• Screen *The Act of Killing* as part of a violence prevention, anti-gang and/or post-prison re-entry program for violent offenders. Focus on the ways that committing violence affects the perpetrators.

• Hold a public debate on whether or not the United States should pay reparations in some form to the victims of Indonesia’s 1965-66 purge of communists. Discuss whether the United States has (or should) acknowledge(d) its role in the Indonesian mass killings. Make policy recommendations on what future relations should look like, including whether or not the United States should declassify documents relating to the events of 1965 and other possible actions the U.S. government could take to help bring clarity and healing.

• Investigate the work being done by Indonesian human rights organizations today (see the Resources section). Consider ways to get involved.


• In July 2014, Indonesia elected a new president (Joko Widodo), who promised to improve his nation’s human rights record. Track his progress.

• Convene a study circle to look at Hannah Arendt’s phrase “the banality of evil” and discuss whether or not it describes Anwar and his associates. Analyze the relationship between Arendt’s thesis and calls to bring perpetrators like Anwar and Adi to trial for crimes against humanity and/or for the creation of an Indonesian truth and reconciliation initiative to heal the ongoing effects of the purge.
Indonesia’s Genocide


Drawing on newly declassified archival material, author Simpson examines how Americans and Indonesians imagined the country’s development in the 1950s and why they abandoned their democratic hopes in the 1960s in favor of Suharto’s military regime.


http://www.insideindonesia.org/feature-editions/accomplices-in-atrocity

This article by Brad Simpson documents the United States’ role in the 1965-66 events in Indonesia.

**INSIDE IN D O N E S I A : “T H E K I L L I N G S O F 19 6 5-6 6 ”**


This section of the website aggregates articles by many of the leading scholars of the killings.


This 2012 news story by Margareth S. Aritonang covers the results of the National Commission on Human Rights investigation of human rights violations in the 1965-66 PKI purge. The English language paper also provides current reporting on events in Indonesia.

**PRETEXT F O R M A SS M U RDE R: T H E S E P T E M B E R 3 0 T H M O V E M E N T A N D S U H A R T O ‘ S C O U P D ’ÉTA T IN IN D O N E S I A** BY JOHN ROOSA

This book by John Roosa offers a detailed account of the genocide and the events leading up to it.

**TEMPO : “R E Q U I E M F O R A M A S S A C R E”**


In 2012, Tempo, one of Indonesia’s leading news magazines, published this unprecedented 75-page special on the 1965-66 killings, with testimonies from the perpetrators.


https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v26/d76

This U.S. government website offers online archives of declassified documents detailing the country’s involvement in Indonesia from 1964-66.

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**FILMMAKER WEBSITE**

www.theactofkilling.com

In addition to information about the film and filmmakers, the site includes historical background, production notes, historical context and selected reactions to the film.

**BRITDOC PUMA IMPACT REPORT: THE ACT OF KILLING**


A detailed report on the outreach campaign and impact of the film in Indonesia and around the world.

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**Original Online Content on POV**

To enhance the broadcast, POV has produced an interactive website to enable viewers to explore the film in greater depth. The website for The Act of Killing—www.pbs.org/pov/theactofkilling—offers a streaming video trailer for the film; an interview with filmmaker; a list of related websites, articles and books; a downloadable discussion guide; and special features.

**What’s Your POV?**

Share your thoughts about The Act of Killing by posting a comment at www.pbs.org/pov/theactofkilling

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This 2012 news story by Margareth S. Aritonang covers the results of the National Commission on Human Rights investigation of human rights violations in the 1965-66 PKI purge. The English language paper also provides current reporting on events in Indonesia.

**PRETEXT FOR MASS MURDER: THE SEPTEMBER 30TH MOVEMENT AND SUHARTO’S COUP D’ÉTAT IN INDONESIA** BY JOHN ROOSA

This book by John Roosa offers a detailed account of the genocide and the events leading up to it.

**TEMPO: “REQUIEM FOR A MASSACRE”**


In 2012, Tempo, one of Indonesia’s leading news magazines, published this unprecedented 75-page special on the 1965-66 killings, with testimonies from the perpetrators.


https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v26/d76

This U.S. government website offers online archives of declassified documents detailing the country’s involvement in Indonesia from 1964-66.

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**DISCUSSION GUIDE**

The Act of Killing 20
This U.S. government document covers the country’s involvement and response to the events in Indonesia.

**Human Rights**

**AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL: INDONESIA**

**ASIAN HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION**
www.humanrights.asia
Search “Indonesia” for reports on human rights abuses, including calls to end impunity for those who committed atrocities in 1965-66.

**HUMAN RIGHTS WORKING GROUP INDONESIA**
www.trunity.net/hrwg/topics/view/51cbfc7ff702f2ba812b263/
This group is a coalition of human rights organizations and initiatives. Of special interest is a report on elderly victims of the communist purge seeking justice:
www.trunity.net/hrwg/view/news/51cbfc47896bb431fe69ef2a/?topic=51cbfc7ff702f2ba812b263

**INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE: “DERAILLED: TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE IN INDONESIA SINCE THE FALL OF SOEHARTO (EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS)”**
http://www.ictj.org/publication/derailedtransitional-justice-indonesia-fall-soeharto-executive-summary-and
This joint report was released by the International Center for Transitional Justice and KontraS (the Commission for the Disappeared and Victims of Violence).

**KONTRAS: THE COMMISSION FOR THE DISAPPEARED AND VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE**
www.konas.org/eng/index.php
This Indonesian nonprofit advocates for human rights and justice for victims of more recent violence and human rights abuses.

**THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS**
This seminal United Nations document establishes standards for human rights.

**Indonesia in General**

**CIA WORLD FACTBOOK: INDONESIA**
This page provides general information on Indonesia from a U.S. perspective.

**INDONESIAN GOVERNMENT**
http://indonesia.go.id/en
This is the official portal to Indonesian government websites.

**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE: U.S. RELATIONS WITH INDONESIA**
www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2748.htm
This page offers an overview of current U.S.-Indonesian relations

**Resources in Indonesian**
(English speakers may want to use a program like Google Translate to look at these sites.)

**INDONESIA CORRUPTION WATCH**
www.antikorupsi.org

**NATIONAL COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS OF INDONESIA**
www.komnasham.go.id/