



Lesson
The Banality of Evil and Modern Atrocities

OVERVIEW

Political philosopher Hannah Arendt coined the phrase “the banality of evil” to explain the psychology of Nazis who killed Jews during the Holocaust. In the ensuing years the world has witnessed many other instances of political atrocities, including genocide. This lesson examines one such atrocity: the mass killings of communists and other political opponents, as well as civilians, in 1965-66 Indonesia. It introduces the events in Indonesia through an unprecedented film, *The Act of Killing*, in which leaders of the death squads recount their own stories. This provides an excellent opportunity for students to consider whether or not Arendt’s concept still applies.

Video clips provided with this lesson are from the highly acclaimed and controversial Academy Award®-nominated film, *The Act of Killing*.

POV offers a lending library of DVDs that you can borrow anytime during the school year—FOR FREE! Get started by joining our [Community Network](#).

OBJECTIVES

By the end of this lesson, students will:

- Understand the meaning of Arendt’s phrase, “the banality of evil,” well enough to apply it to a current situation
- Become familiar with the circumstances through which the current leadership in Indonesia came to power
- Write persuasive essays
- Use listening, observation, speaking (discussion) and reasoning skills

GRADE LEVELS: 11 – college/university

SUBJECT AREAS

Global Studies
History

Philosophy
Political Science

MATERIALS

- Internet access for research and video streaming; equipment to show online video to the class

ESTIMATED TIME NEEDED

One class period (45 min.) split over two sessions, plus preparation (see “Pre-Requisite,” below)

FILM CLIPS

A Note to Teachers

The film clips show the leader of a death squad talking about his “work.” The subject matter is not graphic, but it is powerful and disturbing. Be prepared for the possibility that the activity could upset some students and consider whether or not the activity is appropriate, especially for students who have themselves experienced violence or atrocities.

Clip 1: “The History” (1:19 min.)

The clip begins at 2:25 with text on screen over a city scene and ends at the end of the text (3:44). This text provides historical background for the film, recounting the 1965 military coup in Indonesia and explaining how the military used local “gangsters” to kill communists and other opponents. It also explains the format of the film, which asks one of the gangsters, Anwar Congo, to tell the gangsters’ story in any way he and the others want; what they want is to do scenes based on the genres of American films that they most love.

Context

*It may be helpful to explain the filmmaking process to students. The director worked one scene at a time and talked with participants about what they wanted to do, then shot both the scene and the making of the scene. The footage was then screened back to the participants and discussed, and both the reactions to the screening and discussion that followed were filmed. There was thus never one film outside of **The Act of Killing**. **The Act of Killing** is the film for which they are making the scenes.*

Clip 2: “How to Kill with Less Blood” (2:20 min.)

The clip begins at 7:20 with Anwar leading the film crew through a storefront to a place where he killed people. It ends at 9:40 after Anwar demonstrates his killing technique and describes how he forgets by getting drunk and dancing. His companion says, “He’s a happy man.”

Clip 3: “Self Reflection ” (2:23 min.)

The clip opens at 22:41 with Anwar watching the video of the previous clip. It ends at 25:04 with Congo saying, “It’s my mistake.”

ACTIVITY

1. Pre-Requisite

The main activity is designed as a follow-up to reading the work of Hannah Arendt and exploring the meaning of her famous phrase, “the banality of evil.” There are several options for this, depending on the level of your students and the time available. For example,

- Assign all students to read Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* in its entirety. To check for understanding, have them summarize in a single paragraph what Arendt meant by the phrase “the banality of evil.”
or
- Provide your own description of the context of Arendt’s work and read together as a class one or more of the explanations of “the banality of evil” in the [resources section](#) of this plan.
or

- Assign students to read a summary of Arendt's work in the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: www.iep.utm.edu/arendt/. (Scroll down to section 6 titled "Eichmann and the 'Banality of Evil.'")

2. Introducing the Lesson

Do a check-in to be certain that students understand the meaning of "the banality of evil." Then tell them they are going to be applying the phrase to a historical event that occurred two decades after the end of World War II. Their assignment is to decide whether or not the phrase aptly describes the perpetrators in that event.

3. Introducing the Film

Tell students that they are going to watch clips from a controversial Academy Award-nominated film, *The Act of Killing*. The first clip explains the film's subject matter and its approach. Show **Clip 1**. Before moving on, be sure that students know some basics about Indonesia and about the current ties between the United States and Indonesia. If they need information and if time allows, you might want them to read the entry on Indonesia on the U.S. Department of State website (www.state.gov/p/eap/ci/id/) or the entry in the CIA World Factbook (<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/id.html>).

4. Showing the Film

Tell students that the man featured in the film clips they are about to see is named Anwar Congo. Remind them that their assignment after viewing is to answer the following question: Does Anwar exemplify Arendt's concept of "the banality of evil" or not? Show **Clip 2** and **Clip 3**, taking a few minutes after each for students to comment on what he or she noticed. For example, some might notice that Anwar's grandson is in the room during the second clip, while others might comment on Anwar's demeanor or what he chooses to discuss.

If time allows, you might ask advanced-level students the following: How does *The Act of Killing* build on Arendt's concept? Beyond lessons about the nature of humanity, how does the film deepen your understanding of the idea of the performance (i.e., re-enactment) of evil? The pleasures of evil? The trauma of evil? Do you think that acts considered evil that are left unpunished draw society into a kind of moral vacuum?

5. Applying the Concept/Assessment

As homework, assign students to write persuasive essays that answer the following question: Does Anwar Congo exemplify Arendt's concept of "the banality of evil" or not?

6. Discussion, Debate and Dialogue

On the day you collect the essays, allow students to share what they wrote with one another (either in class or online in a class wiki) and comment on the arguments they made and the evidence they used to back up their opinions. Ask for their evaluation of which arguments were the strongest and why.

EXTENSIONS

1. Assume for the sake of argument that in 1965, the prospect of communists governing Indonesia posed a grave threat both to Indonesians and to the United States. Write a persuasive essay that answers the following question: Did the ends justify the means?

2. Investigate other autocratic leaders and situations involving death squads, either in current events or in recent history (e.g., Charles Taylor, Augusto Pinochet, Boko Haram, the genocide in Rwanda). Discuss whether “the banality of evil” applies to those events. Examine the role of national truth and reconciliation committees and/or the International Court of Justice in exacting justice for those atrocities. Debate whether or not students think that the International Court of Justice ought to bring Indonesian leaders or men like Anwar to trial for crimes against humanity.
3. Study U.S.-Indonesian relations further. Has (or should) the United States 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 relevant documents relating to the events of 1965. Consider other possible actions the U.S. government could take to help bring clarity and healing.
4. View the full film and ask students to read director Joshua Oppenheimer’s article in *The Guardian* (<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/feb/25/the-act-of-killing-indonesia-past-present-1965-genocide>). The article discusses the present-day legacy of atrocity in Indonesia, impunity and the impact of the film. Invite students to compare and contrast ***The Act of Killing*** with films they have seen that depict other atrocities in history (e.g., *Schindler’s List*, *Night and Fog*, *Missing*). How does ***The Act of Killing*** differ from these films in form, subject matter and impact?

RESOURCES

The Banality of Evil

Banality of evil is a philosophical term meaning that evil occurs when ordinary individuals are put into corrupt situations that encourage their conformity.

Source: www.ask.com/question/what-is-meant-by-the-banality-of-evil

The phrase, the banality of evil, is a difficult one because it seems to imply that evil itself is banal. What she meant was that this man [Eichmann] and many, many like him was banal. And banal meant for her—and she talked about this at length—banal meant thoughtless. It meant that the man showed no capacity to engage in any interior dialogue with himself about what he was doing. No capacity, as we would say, for reflection. No sense of self, no moral sense as she understood it.

Source: Interview with Arendt biographer Elisabeth Young-Bruehl
www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6268489

I was struck by a manifest shallowness in the doer which made it impossible to trace the incontestable evil of his deeds to any deeper level of roots or motives. The deeds were monstrous, but the doer—at least, the very effective one now on trial—was quite ordinary, commonplace, and neither monstrous nor demonic.

Source: Hannah Arendt quoted in an article in *The New Yorker*, which published the reporting in which she originally used the phrase www.newyorker.com/books/double-take/eighty-five-from-the-archive-hannah-arendt

The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that there were so many like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal.

Source: Hannah Arendt, the epilogue of *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963)

Arendt reported on the disturbing fact that struck her—and many others, including the Israeli judges—that Eichmann was decidedly average. The evil of Eichmann’s deeds was indisputable, and Arendt is fully convinced he should be hung for his crimes. Yet, notwithstanding what he had done, Eichmann's motivations seemed grounded in typical bourgeois drives. He was ambitious. He sought the recognition that came from success and the affirmation that flowed from belonging to a movement. He was, she concluded, not stupid, but thoughtless. And it was this “absence of thinking—which is so ordinary an experience in our everyday life, where we have hardly the time, let alone the inclination, to stop and think”—that Arendt came to see as the dangerous wellspring of evil in modern times.

Source: The Hannah Arendt Center for Politics and Humanities at Bard College
www.bard.edu/hannaharendtcenter/about/

Articles/Books/Websites

The Act of Killing

www.theactofkilling.com – In addition to information about the film and filmmakers, the film’s site includes historical background, production notes and selected reactions to the film.

POV: *The Act of Killing*

www.pbs.org/pov/theactofkilling – The site includes a general discussion guide with additional activity ideas.

POV: Media Literacy Questions for Analyzing POV Films

<http://www.pbs.org/pov/educators/media-literacy.php> – This list of questions provides a useful starting point for leading rich discussions that challenge students to think critically about documentaries.

BRITDOC Puma Impact Report: *The Act of Killing*

http://britdoc.org/uploads/media_items/theactofkilling-web.original.pdf – This is a detailed report on the outreach campaign and impact of the film in Indonesia and around the world.

***The Guardian*: “The Act of Killing Has Helped Indonesia Reassess its Past and Present”**

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/feb/25/the-act-of-killing-indonesia-past-present-1965-genocide> – This 2014 article, written by filmmaker Joshua Oppenheimer, discusses the filmmaking process, the present-day legacy of atrocity in Indonesia and the impact of the film.

Library of Congress: The Hannah Arendt Papers

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/arendhtml/mharendtFolderP05.html> – The original manuscript of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, which first appeared in serial form in the magazine *The New Yorker*, can be viewed on the Library of Congress website.

***Pretext for Mass Murder: The September 30th Movement and Suharto's Coup d'État in Indonesia* by John Roosa** – This book provides a detailed account of the genocide and the events leading up to it.

Tempo: “Requiem for a Massacre”

<http://theactofkilling.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/TEMPO-UK-Edition-HiRes.pdf> – In 2012 the leading Indonesian news magazine *Tempo* published an unprecedented 75-page special on the 1965-66 killings, with testimonies from the perpetrators.

STANDARDS

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects

(http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI_ELA%20Standards.pdf)

[W.11-12.1](#) Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

[W.11-12.2d](#) Use precise language, domain-specific vocabulary and techniques such as metaphor, simile and analogy to manage the complexity of the topic.

[W.11-12.4](#) Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience.

[SL.11-12.1](#) Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11–12 topics, texts and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

[SL.11-12.3](#) Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning and use of evidence and rhetoric, assessing the stance, premises, links among ideas, word choice, points of emphasis and tone used.

[SL.11-12.4](#) Present information, findings and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed and the organization, development, substance and style are appropriate to purpose, audience and a range of formal and informal tasks.

[SL.11-12.6](#) Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating a command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.

Content Knowledge: (www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/) a compilation of content standards and benchmarks for K-12 curriculum by McREL (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning).

Language Arts, Standard 1: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process.
Language Arts, Standard 2: Uses the stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing.
Language Arts, Standard 8: Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes.

Language Arts, Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.

National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies:

(www.socialstudies.org/standards/strands) as adopted by the National Council for the Social Studies in 2010.

Strand 2: Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of the past and its legacy.

Strand 6: Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of how people create, interact with and change structures of power, authority and governance.

Strand 9: Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of global connections and interdependence.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Faith Rogow, Ph.D., is the co-author of *The Teacher's Guide to Media Literacy: Critical Thinking in a Multimedia World* (Corwin, 2012) and past president of the National Association for Media Literacy Education. She has written discussion guides and lesson plans for more than 200 independent films.