

# THE ACT OF KILLING

## PRODUCTION NOTES

### *THE ACT OF KILLING* – CONTEXT, BACKGROUND, PRODUCTION AND METHOD

#### First Encounter with the 1965-66 Massacres – The Globalization Tapes

In 2001-2002, Christine Cynn and I went to Indonesia for the first time to produce *The Globalization Tapes* (2003), a participatory documentary project made in collaboration with the Independent Plantation Workers Union of Sumatra. Using their own forbidden history as a case study, these Indonesian filmmakers worked with us to trace the development of contemporary globalization from its roots in colonialism to the present.

*The Globalization Tapes* exposes the devastating role of militarism and repression in building the global economy, and explores the relationships between trade, third-world debt, and international institutions like the IMF and the World Trade Organization. Made by some of the poorest workers in the world, the film is a lyrical and incisive account of how our global financial institutions shape and enforce the corporate world order. The film uses chilling first-hand accounts, hilarious improvised interventions, collective debate and archival collage.

Several scenes in *The Globalization Tapes* reveal the earliest traces of the methods we refined in the shooting of *The Act of Killing*: plantation workers stage a satirical commercial for the pesticide that poisons them; worker-filmmakers pose as World Bank agents who offer microfinance to 'develop' local businesses – offers that are both brutal and absurd, yet tempting nonetheless.

While shooting and editing *The Globalization Tapes*, we discovered that the 1965-66 Indonesian massacres were the dark secret haunting Indonesia's much-celebrated entrance into the global economy. One of the military's main objectives in the killings was to destroy the anti-colonial labour movement that had existed until 1965, and to lure foreign investors with the promise of cheap, docile workers and abundant natural resources. The military succeeded (*The Globalization Tapes* is a testament to the extraordinary courage of the plantation worker-filmmakers as they challenge this decades-long legacy of terror and try to build a new union).

The killings would come up in discussions, planning sessions, and film shoots nearly every day, but always in whispers. Indeed, many of the plantation workers were themselves survivors of the killings. They would discretely point out the houses of neighbors who had killed their parents, grandparents, aunts, or uncles. The perpetrators were still living in the same village and made up, along with their children and protégés, the local power structure. As outsiders, we could interview these perpetrators – something the plantation workers could not do without fear of violence.

In conducting these first interviews, we encountered the pride with which perpetrators would boast about the most grisly details of the killings. *The Act of Killing* was born out of our curiosity about the nature of this pride – its clichéd grammar, its threatening performativity, its frightening banality.

*The Globalization Tapes* was a film made collectively by the plantation workers themselves, with us as facilitators and collaborating directors. *The Act of Killing* was also made by working very closely with its subjects, while in solidarity and collaboration with the survivors' families. However, unlike *The Globalization Tapes*, *The Act of Killing* is an authored work, an expression of my own vision and concerns regarding these issues.

## The Beginnings of *The Act of Killing*

By the time I first met the characters in *The Act of Killing* (in 2005), I had been making films in Indonesia for three years, and I spoke Indonesian with some degree of fluency. Since making *The Globalization Tapes* (2003), Christine Cynn, fellow film-maker and longtime collaborator Andrea Zimmerman and I had continued filming with perpetrators and survivors of the massacres in the plantation areas around the city of Medan. In 2003 and 2004, we filmed more interviews and simple re-enactments with Sharman Sinaga, the death squad leader who had appeared in *The Globalization Tapes*. We also filmed as he introduced us to other killers in the area. And we secretly interviewed survivors of the massacres they committed.

Moving from perpetrator to perpetrator, and, unbeknownst to *them*, from one community of survivors to another, we began to map the relationships between different death squads throughout the region, and began to understand the process by which the massacres were perpetrated. In 2004, we began filming Amir Hasan, the death squad leader who had commanded the massacres at the plantation where we made *The Globalization Tapes*.

In late 2004, Amir Hasan began to introduce me to killers up the chain of command in Medan. Independently in 2004, we began contacting 'veterans' organizations of death squad members and anti-leftist activists in Medan. These two approaches allowed us to piece together a chain of command, and to locate the surviving commanders of the North

Sumatran death squads. In early interviews with the veterans of the killings (2004), I learned that the most notorious death squad in North Sumatra was Anwar Congo and Adi Zulkadry's Frog Squad (*Pasukan Kodok*).

During these first meetings with Medan perpetrators (2004 and 2005), I encountered the same disturbing boastfulness about the killings that we had been documenting on the plantations. The difference was that these men were the celebrated and powerful leaders not of a small rural village, but of the third largest city in Indonesia (Greater Medan has a population of over four million people).

Our starting point for *The Act of Killing* was thus the question: how had this society developed to the point that its leaders could – and would - speak of their own crimes against humanity with a cheer that was at once celebratory but also intended as a threat?

## Overview and Chronology of the Methods used in *The Act of Killing*

Building on *The Globalization Tapes* and our film work outside Indonesia, we had developed a method in which we open a space for people to play with their image of themselves, re-creating and re-imagining it on camera, while we document this transformation as it unfolds. In particular, we had refined this method to explore the intersection between imagination and extreme violence.

In the early days of research (2005), I discovered that the army recruited its killers in Medan from the ranks of movie theatre gangsters (or *preman bioskop*) who already hated the leftists for their boycott of American movies – the most profitable in the cinema. I was intrigued by this relationship between cinema and killings, although I had no idea it would be so deep. Not only did Anwar and his friends know and love the cinema, but they dreamed of being on the screen themselves, and styled themselves after their favorite characters. They even borrowed their methods of murder from the screen.

Of course, I began by trying to understand in as much detail as possible Anwar and his friends' roles in the killings and, afterwards, in the regime they helped to build. Among the first things I did was to bring them to the former newspaper office directly across the road from Anwar's old cinema, the place where Anwar and his friends killed most of their victims. There, they demonstrated in detail what they had done. Although they were filming documentary re-enactment and interviews, during breaks I noticed that they would muse about how they looked like various movie stars – for instance, Anwar compared his protégé and sidekick, Herman to Fernando Sancho.

To understand how they felt about the killings, and their unrepentant way of representing them on film, I screened back the unedited footage of these early re-enactments, and filmed

their responses. At first, I thought that they would feel the re-enactments made them look bad, and that they might possibly come to a more complex place morally and emotionally.

I was startled by what actually happened. On the surface at least, Anwar was mostly anxious that he should look young and fashionable. Instead of any explicit moral reflection, the screening led him and Herman spontaneously to suggest a better, and more elaborate, dramatization.

To explore their love of movies, I screened for them scenes from their favorite films at the time of the killings – Cecil B. DeMille’s *Samson and Delilah* and, ironically, *The Ten Commandments* topped the list – recording their commentary and the memories these films elicited. Through this process, I came to realize *why* Anwar was continually bringing up these old Hollywood films whenever I filmed re-enactments with them: he and his fellow movie theatre thugs were inspired by them *at the time* of the killings, and had even borrowed their methods of murder from the movies. This was such an outlandish and disturbing idea that I in fact had to hear it several times before I realized quite what Anwar and his friends were saying.

He described how he got the idea of strangling people with wire from watching gangster movies. In a late-night interview in front of his former cinema, Anwar explained how different film genres would lead him to approach killing in different ways. The most disturbing example was how, after watching a “happy film like an Elvis Presley musical”, Anwar would “kill in a happy way”.

In 2005, I also discovered that the other paramilitary leaders (not just the former movie theater gangsters) had other personal and deep-seated relationship to movies. Ibrahim Sinik, the newspaper boss who was secretary general of all the anti-communist organizations that participated in the killings, and who directly gave the orders to Anwar’s death squad, turned out to be a feature film producer, screenwriter, and former head of the Indonesian Film Festival.

In addition to all this, Anwar and his friends’ impulse towards being in a film about the killings was essentially to act in dramatizations of their pasts – both as they remember them, and as they would like to be remembered (the most powerful insights in *The Act of Killing* probably come in those places where these two agendas radically diverge). As described, the idea of dramatizations came up quite spontaneously, in response to viewing the rushes from Anwar’s first re-enactments of the killings.

But it would be disingenuous to claim that we facilitated the dramatizations only because that’s what Anwar and his friends wanted to do. Ever since we produced *The Globalization Tapes*, the thing that most fascinated us about the killings was the way the perpetrators we filmed would recount their stories of those atrocities. One had the feeling that we weren’t simply hearing memories, but something else besides – something intended for a spectator.

More precisely, we felt we were receiving *performances*. And we instinctively understood, I think, that the purpose of these performances was somehow to assert a kind of impunity, to maintain a threatening image, to perpetuate the autocratic regime that had begun with the massacres themselves.

We sensed that the methods we had developed for incorporating performance into documentary might, in this context, yield powerful insights into the mystery of the killers' boastfulness, the nature of the regime of which they are a part, and, most importantly, the nature of human 'evil' itself.

So, having learned that even their methods of murder were directly influenced by cinema, we challenged Anwar and his friends to make the sort of scenes they had in mind. We created a space in which they could devise and star in dramatisations based on the killings, using their favorite genres from the medium.

We hoped to catalyze a process of collective remembrance and imagination. Fiction provided one or two degrees of separation from reality, a canvas on which they could paint their own portrait and stand back and look at it.

We started to suspect that performance played a similar role during the killings themselves, making it possible for Anwar and his friends to absent themselves from the scene of their crimes, *while they were committing them*. Thus, performing dramatizations of the killings for our cameras was also a re-living of a mode of performance they had experienced in 1965, *when they were killing*. This obviously gave the experience of performing for our cameras a deeper resonance for Anwar and his friends than we had anticipated.

And so, in *The Act of Killing*, we worked with Anwar and his friends to create such scenes for the insights they would offer, but also for the tensions and debates that arose during the process – including Anwar's own devastating emotional unraveling.

This created a safe space, in which all sorts of things could happen that would probably elude a more conventional documentary method. The protagonists could safely explore their deepest memories and feelings (as well as their blackest humor). I could safely challenge them about what they did, without fear of being arrested or beaten up. And they could challenge each other in ways that were otherwise unthinkable, given Sumatra's political landscape.

Anwar and his friends could direct their fellow gangsters to play victims, and even play the victims themselves, because the wounds are only make-up, the blood only red paint, applied only for a movie. Feelings far deeper than those that would come up in an interview would surface unexpectedly. One reason the emotional impact was so profound came from the fact that this production method required a lot of time – the filmmaking process came to define a significant period in the participants' lives. This meant that they went on a deeper journey

into their memories and feelings than they would in a film consisting largely of testimony and simple demonstration.

Different scenes used different methods, but in all of them it was crucial that Anwar and his friends felt a sense of fundamental ownership over the fiction material. The crux of the method is to give performers the maximum amount of freedom to determine as many variables as possible in the production (storyline, casting, costumes, mise-en-scene, improvisation on set). Whenever possible, I let them direct each other, and used my cameras to document their process of creation. My role was primarily that of provocateur, challenging them to remember the events they were performing more deeply, encouraging them to intervene and direct each other when they felt a performance was superficial, and asking questions between takes – both about what actually happened, but also about how they felt at the time, and how they felt as they re-enacted it.

We shot in long takes, so that situations could evolve organically, and with minimal intervention from ourselves. I felt the most significant event unfolding in front of the cameras was the act of transformation itself, particularly because this transformation was usually plagued by conflict, misgivings, and other imperfections that seemed to reveal more about the nature of power, violence, and fantasy than more conventional documentary or investigative methods. For this same reason, we also filmed the pre-production of fiction scenes, including castings, script meetings, and costume fittings. Make-up sessions too were important spaces of reflection and transformation, moments where the characters slip down the rabbit hole of self-invention.

In addition, because we never knew when the characters would refuse to take the process further, or when we might get in trouble with the military, we filmed each scene as though it might be the last, and also everything leading up to them (not only for the reasons above), because often we didn't know if the dramatization itself would actually happen. We also felt that the stories we were hearing – stories of crimes against humanity never before recorded – were of world historical importance. More than anything else, these are two reasons why this method generated so many hours of footage (indeed, we have created a vast audio-visual archive about the Indonesian massacres. This archive has been the basis of a four-year United Kingdom Arts and Humanities Research Council project called *Genocide and Genre*).

After almost every dramatization, we would screen the rushes back to them, and record their responses. We wanted to make sure they knew how they appeared on film, and to use the screening to trigger further reflection. Sometimes, screenings provoked feelings of remorse (as when Anwar watches himself play the victim during a film noir scene) but, at other times, as when we screened the re-enactment of the Kampung Kolam massacre to the entire cast, the images were met with terrifying peals of laughter.

Most interestingly, Anwar and his friends discussed, often insightfully, how other people will view the film, both in Indonesia and internationally. For example, Anwar sometimes commented on how survivors might curse him, but that “luckily” the victims haven’t the power to do anything in today’s Indonesia.

The gangster scenes were wholly improvised. The scenarios came from the stories Anwar and his friends had told each other during earlier interviews, and during visits to the office where they killed people. The set was modeled on this interior. For maximum flexibility, our cinematographer lit the space so that Anwar and his friends could move about freely, and we filmed them with two cameras so that they could fluidly move from directing each other to improvised re-enactments to quiet, often riveting reflection after the improvisation was finished.

For instance, Anwar re-enacted how he killed people by placing them on a table and then pulling tight a wire, from underneath the table, to garrote them. The scene exhausted him, physically and emotionally, leaving him full of doubt about the morality of what he did. Immediately after this re-enactment, he launched into a cynical and resigned rant against the growing consensus around human rights violations. Here, reality and its refraction through fiction, Anwar’s memories and his anticipation of their impact internationally, are all overlaid.

The noir scenes were shot over a week, and culminated in an extraordinary improvisation where Anwar played the victim. Anwar’s performance was effective and, transported by the performance, the viewer empathizes with the victim, only to do a double take as they remember that Anwar is not a victim, but the killer.

The large-scale re-enactment of the Kampung Kolam massacre was made using a similar improvisational process, with Anwar and his friends undertaking the direction. What we didn’t expect was a scene of such violence and realism; so much so that it proved genuinely frightening to the participants, all of whom were Anwar’s friends from Pancasila Youth, or their wives and children. After the scene, we filmed participants talking amongst themselves about how the location of our re-enactment was just a few hundred meters from one of North Sumatra’s countless mass graves. The woman we see fainting after the scene felt she had been possessed by a victim’s ghost. The paramilitary members (including Anwar) thought so, too. The violence of the re-enactment conjured the spectres of a deeper violence, the terrifying history of which everybody in Indonesia is somehow aware, and upon which the perpetrators have built their rarefied bubble of air conditioned shopping malls, gated communities, and “very, very limited” crystal figurines.

The process by which we made the musical scenes (the waterfall, the giant concrete goldfish) was slightly different again. But here too Anwar was very much in the driver’s seat: he chose the songs and, along with his friends, devised both scenes. Anwar and his cast

were also free to make changes as we went.

In the end, we worked very carefully with the giant goldfish, presenting motifs from a half-forgotten dream. Anwar's beautiful nightmare? An allegory for his storytelling confection? For his blindness? For the willful blindness by which almost all history is written, and by which, consequently, we inevitably come to know (and fail to know) ourselves? The fish changes throughout the film, but it is always a world of "eye candy", emptiness and ghosts. If it could be explained adequately in words, we would not need it in the film.

For the scenes written by the newspaper boss Ibrahim Sinik and his staff, Sinik enlisted the help of his friends at state television, TVRI. He borrows the TVRI regional drama studios, and recruits a soap opera crew. In these scenes, our role was largely to document Anwar and his friends as they work with the TV crew, and to catalyze and document debates between fiction set-ups. In our edited scenes, we cut from the documentary cameras to TVRI's fiction cameras, highlighting the gap between fiction and reality – often to comic effect. But above all, we focused our cameras on moments between takes where they debated the meaning of the scene.

The *Televisi Republik Indonesia* "Special Dialogue" came into being when the show's producers realised that feared and respected paramilitary leaders making a film about the genocide was a big story (they came to know about our work because we were using the TVRI studios.) After their grotesque chat show was broadcast, there was no critical response in North Sumatra whatsoever. This is not to say that the show will not be shocking to Indonesians. For reasons discussed in my director's statement, North Sumatrans are more accustomed than Jakartans, for example, to the boasting of perpetrators (who in Sumatra were recruited from the ranks of gangsters – and the basis of gangsters' power, after all, lies in being feared).

Moreover, virtually nobody in Medan dares to criticise Pancasila Youth and men like Anwar Congo and Ibrahim Sinik. Ironically, the only significant reaction to the talk show's broadcast came from the Indonesian Actors' Union. According to Anwar, a representative of the union visiting family in Medan came to Anwar's house to ask him if he would consider being president of the North Sumatra branch of the union. According to Anwar, the union was angry that such a large-scale production had occurred in North Sumatra without their knowing about it. Luckily, Anwar had the humility to tell them that he is not an actor, that he was playing himself in scenes made for a documentary, and therefore would decline the offer.

Anwar and his friends knew that their fiction scenes were only being made for our documentary, and this will be clear to the audience, too. But at the same time, if these scenes were to offer genuine insights, it was vital that the filmmaking project was one in which they were deeply invested, and one over which they felt ownership.