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Remembering to forget

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Once upon a time, not so long ago, I guess, I lived in a ramshackle house perched perilously on a bank of the Malang River. By day, I trekked to the city's outskirts to interview members of Laskar Jihad, the earliest and most notorious of the Islamic militias that burgeoned like wildflowers after the fall of Suharto. The young men wore white robes and cultivated patchy beards and waved their machetes to shrieks of "jihad." Malang nights, by contrast, were quiet, and I would slip out to the local internet café, which stayed open as long as there were glassy-eyed customers to patronize it. So I often found myself in the wee hours of the morning, tracing a potted path home along the accordion shutters of the city's Chinese shop-fronts. I would pick my way over the sleeping sex workers and rickshaw [*becak*] drivers and street children, whose tender bodies curled in slumber like the green tips of budding ferns. Then it would be a short dash across a bridge swallowed in darkness before I found my ragged purple door and darted in.

One night, sometime after 3:00 A.M., after a long Yahoo bender, I leapt into this darkness and came suddenly upon a young bearded man, wearing white robes and jackboots and carrying a knife. The details are fuzzy. I can't quite sort between what actually happened and what might have happened and the stories I have since told about what happened. I can't stop my mind from churning out scripted chunks of image and detail heavy with drama that link one feeble memory to another. Why do I see him in my mind's eye, emerging from a thick mist? Did he brandish a knife or a machete? When I tell the story I say that he stared long and hard at me. I say that I remember how his body trembled with anger and anticipation. Did his hands really tighten on the handle of the blade? Did he angle the blade

as if to strike? Did we really stand on that bridge, machete cocked and eyes fixed upon each other, at the juncture of two civilizations locked in terror and fascination?

A greeting, punctuated by an honorific, saved my life, or so I like to recount in the limelight of dinner parties. “Good evening, *Pak*, I chirped. (Or was it morning?) He started for a second and something seemed to relax. (Did he exhale? Did I?) He nodded and then stormed on toward Malang central. I remember instructing my arms and legs to move casually lest the stiff dread in my limbs provoke him anew. There's no doubting that something spooky happened that night. Something that teetered on the edge of violence. Yet the memory comes to me now in a disorderly jangle of fragmented pictures and pricked skin and night-air smells so shot through with fear, adrenalin, and bravado that it seems as if the whole incident happened in a dream. Or, perhaps, a film.

This is, of course, not by chance. David McDougall has discerned the parallels between film and memory. Film and memory share an otherworldliness, similarly cast from an eerie miscellany of visual, sensory, oneiric, and aural media. Of all the modern media, only film can adeptly capture the “aura of insubstantiality and dreaming” that remembering invokes.¹ Indeed memories of state-orchestrated violence in particular seem to attract the kind of surplus of empty signifiers that Levi Strauss argued defined “pathological thought.” In pathological thought an “overflow of emotional interpretations and overtones ... [supplements] an otherwise deficient reality.”² And yet, as McDougall observes, films of memory, documentaries that interrogate historical events, have largely ignored film and memory's analogous qualities. Instead, films of memory string together objectified truths into historical accounts apparently made authentic by referents to memory—crackled sounds of newsreel, sepia photographs, and dusty objects. Few have successfully managed what McDougall identifies as memory films' ultimate problem, namely, “howto represent the mind's landscape, whose images and sequential logic are always hidden from view.”³

The parallels and slippages of film and memory in acts of grotesque violence are the subject of Joshua Oppenheimer's masterful film *The Act of Killing (TAOK)*. Anwar Congo, the film's hapless “star,” has materially profited from his role in killing suspected communists, in the form of teak furniture and slick shiny suits, but unlike his peers, Anwar is too guileless to have parlayed his role in the

executions into any real political capital. Even his sidekick Adi, whose terrifying honesty renders him the film's truly psychopathic jester, has stopped returning his calls. In the twilight of Anwar's life, shadowed by his corpulent and devoted sidekick Herman Koto, his ducks, and wide-eyed twin grandsons, Anwar embarks on the film with Oppenheimer as a commemorative project, one crafted with all the political and simulative intent of the commemoration; to reinvigorate the community and social hierarchy of Medan's anticommunist elite through mimesis and enactment.⁴ By filming simulations of his remembered executions of suspected PKI sympathizers, Anwar is making a political claim, reasoned in the authenticity of *performance*, to a higher perch in Medan's social order. That Anwar hopes to milk Oppenheimer's camera for personal gain does not obstruct or divert the film's aims. Nor would sieving truth from Anwar's bluster strengthen *TAOK*. On the contrary, Anwar's ambitions are integral to Oppenheimer's vision of film as radical intervention into the wider Indonesian social memory.

Erik Mueggler observes that studies of social memory generally “employ a well-worn conceptual vocabulary: inscription and erasure, commemoration and transmission, repression and the return of the repressed.”⁵ Yet in Yunnan Province, where Mueggler conducts his ethnography, he notes that “a psychoanalytic vocabulary, dominated by the old familiar round of state repression and personalized returns of the repressed hardly seems adequate to deal with imaginative accounts of social memory and forgetting” around the Cultural Revolution. Rather, he agrees, “[they seem] to emerge from another logic altogether.”⁶ What might a culturally and historically nuanced understanding of social memory and forgetting look like? What divergent idioms, what referential regime might be revealed? Might repression, remembering, realization, and redemption be part of an “Indonesian” social memory or would they be sequenced into new, perverse formulations? *TAOK* is a remarkable response to these questions.

TAOK is not intended as a conventional film of memory wherein “historical narrative as a mediation of a past...can be made coherently and fully present,”⁷ a neglect for which the film has been criticized.⁸ But the absence of explicit historical narrative in *TAOK* should not be misunderstood as neglect of the regime and its institutions that organized, mobilized, and proceeded to justify the

killings. Beyond history, Oppenheimer is interested in the *effects* of “historical narrative as performance.”⁹ Performance is the culturally and historically specific idiom through which social memory and forgetting are enacted in Indonesia. Across the country, in classrooms and national parades, paramilitary rallies and labor structures, these performances reference and reinforce an underlying apparatus of terror at work, through indirect but generic spectral references to 1965. These state-scripted simulations find their apotheosis in the propaganda film *The Treachery of G30S/PKI*, which restages the alleged Communist coup in all its slasher glory. In *TAOK*, Oppenheimer excerpts a scene from this film in which we witness a young Ade Irma shrieking wildly, slathered in the blood of father Nasution. For all of the propaganda film's violent excess, *The Treachery of G30S/PKI* stops short at simulations of the anticommunist massacres and their victims. Oppenheimer claims that it is precisely this absence that lends the simulations their spectral power.¹⁰

If reenactment and its absence are critical to the architecture of power in Indonesia, then, reasons Oppenheimer, filmic reenactment can “render the spectral explicit” and in so doing, restore performance and film's “role in a critical and interventionist historiography.”¹¹ Through the idiom of performance, Oppenheimer seeks to construct a different logic of memory and forgetting. By filming Anwar's simulations Oppenheimer “renders legible the scripts of such performances, describing their mise-en-scenes and revealing the ways in which the operations of the genocide were generic—that is, both routine and conditioned by genre.”¹² John Roosa complains that the study of 1965 killings has too readily focused on localized, individualized accounts of face-to-face killing of the PKI by their *algojo* [civilian executioners], which has the effect of obscuring the structural forces that incited, mobilized, and organized the killings.¹³ But Oppenheimer suggests just the opposite. He argues that it is precisely in the stilted and depersonalized simulations of individual perpetrators killing, precisely in the studious, routinized practice, and then the immediate relaxed face, thumbs-up you-got-it-right, that the military imprint is laid bare. The generic nature of the acts of killing, absolved of any personhood or genuine individual memory, is suggestive of a kind of standard operating procedure that only the military 1965's true perpetrators, could have promoted. And yet Anwar's studious refusal to reference

the military officials that mobilized and guided the killings indicates a broader fetish of state power and yearning to claim this power as his own.

The film's theoretical and methodological approaches are insightful and exciting. But they are not apparent in remarks Oppenheimer makes in media and press statements released to promote the film. In these the filmmaker presents *TOAK* with lumpen references to Arendt's "banality of evil" and the capacity of the individual to narrate away their sins of genocide. Oppenheimer proclaims, "I think this film wants us to say: 'There's no good guys, there's no bad guys, there's just people. That's its deepest message.'" ¹⁴ In the letter read aloud before the screening of the director's cut, Oppenheimer dutifully intones, "in reality every act of killing has been committed by human beings like us The moment you identify, however fleetingly, with Anwar, you will feel, viscerally, that the world is not divided into good guys and bad guys—and, more troublingly, that we are all much closer to perpetrators than we like to believe."¹⁵ Why has Oppenheimer abandoned his novel thinking in the press surrounding the film? The banality of evil repertoire dulls the cultural sensitivity and the theoretical originality of Oppenheimer's work and understandably invites criticism, however mistaken, accusing the film of contextual and historical apathy.

With each simulation, we see Anwar invoking two opposing forces—a wooden faithfulness to "what really happened" and hyper-stylized histrionics, much the way my memory did in the tale at the start of this essay. The tension between the real and the embellished creates a slippage in the regime of signs, bringing forth a convulsion of surreal but empty signifiers. We are about a third of the way through the film when we find out that Anwar has nightmares. We watch him sleep to the soundtrack of a reverberating drone, pitched low for maximum creepiness. He is troubled by memories of a decapitation he executed and the lone head whose eyes he regrets not closing. As the movie moves tensely forward, Anwar devises increasingly bizarre scenes that confuse his earlier positionality as executioner and perpetrator. A giggling Koto eats his penis next to Anwar's own blinking decapitated head. Macaques scurry down to polish off his bloodied remains. With each reenactment, Anwar appears to physically and mentally decay. Midway through a garroting scene in the office, Anwar

chokes on Koto's wire, "I feel as though I lost myself for a minute." "Don't get too into it," soothes Koto, rubbing him with fatherly concern.

Oppenheimer amplifies the slippage by re-screening the scenes, a simulation of a simulation, for Anwar to chew over, correct, and criticize. This process allows the simulations to be "critically reframed...[opening] onto the potentially redemptive and retributive possibilities."¹⁶ At home, Anwar asks Joshua to replay the scene. At first he huddles with his grandsons and giggles. Later, he is bewildered, "Did the people I tortured feel the same as I do here?. Is it all coming back to me?" he asks Oppenheimer in tears. In the final scene devised by Anwar, we see him before a waterfall—that "symbolizes emotion" Anwar later tells us—arms outstretched in humility as his victims thank him for his benevolent murdering. We get Oppenheimer's point. Beneath the braggadocio, Anwar has repressed his guilt and the slippages of mimesis scratch his conscience anew. In the final scene, we watch Anwar's re-reenactment of garroting PKI sympathizers on the office roof and this time he hasn't made the mistake of wearing his cha-cha pants. He starts, he lurches, and retches. Bile seems to weigh him down. He staggers downstairs, the simulation abandoned. The suggestion is that Anwar has come to the ghastly realization of the true gravity of his crimes.

If Oppenheimer successfully constructed grammar for the workings of a truly "Indonesian" social memory about the 1965 killings, then by the film's end we are fully back on Freudian turf.

Oppenheimer's filmic intervention through the rigors of enactment, critical reframing, and reenactment has prompted a psychoanalytic circuit in Anwar—from repression to empathy, confrontation, and finally, true consciousness. The film's end offers its audience some resolution, the punishment and liberation of true awareness and the glimmering hope of enlightenment, recantation, and redemption. But the film's suggestion of a psychoanalytic trajectory for 1965's perpetrators troubles me. Anwar himself has subsequently rejected the film, saying he was misled and that he thought Oppenheimer work was merely for a doctoral thesis.¹⁷ Moreover, in interviews Oppenheimer argues that the film has precipitated a broad process of confession and discussion within Indonesia.¹⁸

This is sadly, but also patently, untrue. The film has provoked some serious responses from the country's writers and journalists but, tellingly, the film is not available for general screening. A news

office in Bandung that reviewed the film was attacked.¹⁹ After a promising burst of remembering, Indonesians are silent once again.

I started this essay with an anecdote. I will end with one, too. Not so long ago, earlier this year, we broadcast our own intervention into Indonesia's social memory in *Eat Pray Mourn*, a radio documentary that unearths the 1983-84 Petrus massacres—that short, sharp, shock of time in which thousands of criminals were executed.²⁰ This period of time has been masterfully documented by scholarship, but like *TAOK*, *Eat Pray Mourn* is not a historical documentary. It's about *now*. My research shows that Petrus never ended. Indeed, every day in this freshly democratic archipelago, the Indonesian police disappear and execute young men of the lower classes accused of petty crimes. It is a kind of ongoing genocide, so routine and normalized that even the targeted criminalized classes reassure me of the legitimacy of their own extrajudicial execution.

Initially, the radio documentary was well received by our select Indonesian audience in the early test broadcasts. In my notes dated January this year, I document one woman who turned to me suddenly, and I have underlined the words, *as if waking from a dream*. Memories rushed out of her.

Mum brought me up middle class, but really we lived in a poor *kampung* [village] like everyone else. It was a tough neighborhood, with thugs and street urchins on every corner. I wasn't allowed outside. I wasn't allowed to play with the neighbors. But I remember the yellow flags. It seemed as if the young men died all the time. I never thought to ask why. Once, one of the boys harassed me. Mum drew me close and said, “don't worry, he'll get shot one day” [*ditembak nanti*].

She looked at me, in horror. These were not memories repressed and revealed, but reframed and sequenced anew.

Slowly, however, the radical possibilities of the *Eat Pray Mourn* documentary withered away. Talks were abruptly canceled. There followed a wave of threats, accusations, and denunciations. My young Indonesian collaborators suddenly rejected the piece, arguing that I was unethical and had misled my interviewees. One of my friends even independently apologized to the police for his role in voicing a bit part.

These are not responses one can understand readily by a conceptual psychoanalytic circuit where confrontation and acceptance follow consciousness. But having outlined the necessity of social memory and forgetting to Indonesia's political and social institutions, Oppenheimer and I forgot to ask, what are the stakes for individuals who have been forced through creative intervention to critically reframe their memories? Whether it be the mass killings of 1965, or Petrus, or the slow disappearance of hoods in the kampung, memory is a burden and a dangerous one at that. Who wouldn't rebuild those memorial devices? Documentary may make its momentary intervention, but Indonesians seem to devise anew the mechanisms to remember and forget. The fact is Indonesia is neither ready to remember its acts of killings from long ago, nor those that continue today.

¹MacDougall 1992, 29.

²Levi-Strauss in Mueggler 1998

³MacDougall 1992, 29.

⁴George 1996, 16.

⁵Mueggler 1998, 167.

⁶Ibid., 168.

⁷Oppenheimer and Uwemedimo 2009, 87.

⁸Cribb 2013; Lane 2013.

⁹Oppenheimer and Uwemedimo 2009, 87.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid., 93.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Roosa 2013.

¹⁴Applebaum 2013.

¹⁵Oppenheimer 2013.

¹⁶Oppenheimer and Uwemedimo 2009, 93.

¹⁷Gunawan and Kurniasari 2012; Tertipu Sutradara Film PKI. 2012.

¹⁸Reese (no date).

¹⁹Many of the original links to this story from Radar Bogor are no longer active. “Radar Bogor didtemo, Wapemred dipukul”. 9 October 2012. Accessible at us.video.news.viva.co.id/read/21288-radar-bogor-didemo—wapemred-dipukul (accessed 11 October 2013). See also, *The Act of Killing* Facebook Page, accessible at www.facebook.com/actofkilling. The post dated 9 October 2012 has a full account of the attack.

²⁰Baker and McHugh 2013.

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