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# THE FEVER DREAM OF DOCUMENTARY: A CONVERSATION WITH JOSHUA OPPENHEIMER

Irene Lusztig

In the haunting final sequence of Joshua Oppenheimer's early docufiction film, *The Entire History of the Louisiana Purchase* (1997), his fictional protagonist Mary Anne Ward walks alone at the edge of the ocean, holding her baby in a swaddled bundle. It is dawn and the scene is suffused



Joshua Oppenheimer behind the camera on location in Indonesia.

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with an elegiac blue light. The camera tracks as she passes a mirage-like series of burning chairs engulfed in flames. The scene has a kind of mysterious, poetic force: a woman wandering alone in the smoke, the unexplained (and unexplainable) lyricism of the flaming chairs, the intensely saturated color of 16mm film. This dreamlike cinematic fragment is a fitting introduction to Oppenheimer's work, a consummate example of what Oppenheimer himself calls the fever dream that has been at the core of his filmic explorations along the edges of documentary and fiction.

Born in Texas in 1974, Joshua Oppenheimer was raised between Washington, DC, and Santa Fe, New Mexico. Oppenheimer's early works, the black-and-white dreamscape *These Places We've Learned to Call Home* (1996)—in which Oppenheimer passes himself off to militia group members as an alien abductee—and the above-mentioned *Louisiana Purchase*—an exuberantly inventive, hallucinatory blend of performance, documentary interview, staged Super 8 home movies, B-movie monsters, and archival footage—were both projects that emerged from years of infiltration-based creative practice in which Oppenheimer penetrated right-wing militias, white-supremacist groups, UFO abductee groups, and cults. Indeed, infiltrative work, both the performance of the infiltration itself through the use of aliases and alter egos and the extensive documentary material generated from these processes (recordings of phone conversations, militia meetings, and interviews with group members), became in Oppenheimer's early projects a profoundly affecting means of engaging in a phantasmagoric collective portraiture. It yielded a meditation on the dark heart of our political consciousness.

Taken together, these two early projects provide an early glimpse into Oppenheimer's inspired methods of working across boundaries of fiction and documentary—a looseness very much influenced by and in conversation with the pioneering work of Oppenheimer's mentor, Serbian filmmaker Dušan Makavejev, with whom he trained at Harvard. In both *These Places* and *Louisiana Purchase*, fictional narratives are deployed to activate a heightened

and intensely performative documentary space, one that exceeded the bounds of realism to form a new topography of the human imagination.

In 1997, Oppenheimer left the United States. He lived for many years in London, where he completed a practice-based PhD in filmmaking at Central Saint Martins University of the Arts and was a founding member of the Vision Machine Film Collective, and then relocated to Copenhagen, where he is now based. In 2002, Oppenheimer and his filmmaking collaborator Christine Cynn were commissioned to create a film project in Sumatra for the International Union of Food and Agriculture Workers. Living for months outside of Medan in a village of palm oil plantation workers, Oppenheimer and Cynn ran intensive workshops in filmmaking and globalization studies with plantation workers, who became the collective authors of the profoundly collaborative film project that resulted. Initially envisioned as a case study-based training film for other food and agriculture workers worldwide, *The Globalisation Tapes* (2003), a self-proclaimed film “by workers for workers,” draws generatively from the methods of Jean Rouch and from Augusto Boal’s Theater of the Oppressed to create a work that transcends its agitprop origins. In retrospect, the project feels very much like a laboratory for the ideas, methods, and themes of *The Act of Killing*: it invites its subjects to participate in the making of the film and uses tactics that are now staples of Oppenheimer’s working method, as seen for instance in a startling scene of plantation workers staging an ironically upbeat commercial for Gramoxone, the toxic pesticide that is literally poisoning them.

Most significantly, *The Globalisation Tapes* reveals Oppenheimer’s earliest meeting with a genocide perpetrator, Sharman Sinaga, who casually describes his killing techniques in front of his enthusiastic wife, blasé granddaughter, and Oppenheimer’s tellingly shaky camera. It is this cinematic encounter that critically signals the genesis of what has become the singular mission of Oppenheimer’s extraordinary work of the last decade, work that has generated both *The Act of Killing* and a forthcoming companion film portraying Indonesian genocide survivors.

It has been my own good fortune to have known Oppenheimer for the past seventeen years, since meeting as undergraduates studying film at Harvard. I was briefly in Sumatra in 2002 to help with field editing on *The Globalisation Tapes*, and since that time I have followed with fascination (and occasional worry) the progress, completion, and extraordinary international reception of the project that has become *The Act of Killing*. It was



**Joshua Oppenheimer documents the restaging of a village massacre by paramilitary death squads for *The Act of Killing*.**

a great pleasure to reconnect with Oppenheimer over Skype for this interview.

**Irene Lusztig: Primo Levi talks about perpetrators as primary witnesses, the only ones who have a real understanding of the system that allows genocide to happen—a point that your film makes as well.<sup>1</sup>**

**Joshua Oppenheimer:** We first filmed with perpetrators while making *The Globalisation Tapes* for one reason: survivors told us that “this neighbor was a death squad leader, and he might have information about how our loved ones died.” Because all that the survivors knew was that their relatives had been taken away and never came back. They never got a confirmation that they had been killed by the state. In using paramilitary civilian death squads, the state was trying to pretend it was not involved—this was a way of outsourcing the killing. If you want to study killing, you have to look at the people who do it.

In Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985), too, the perpetrators are the ones who know what happened. In *Shoah*, the bystanders only have glimpses, and everybody who provides details about what happened is either a perpetrator or a slave laborer forced to participate in perpetrating the Holocaust. Lanzmann draws a red line around the question of why the perpetrators did what they did. I don't draw that line. By approaching them as human beings, I try to understand how. Through the question of how they live with what they've done, how they narrate what they've done, how they want to be seen, and how they see themselves, I then try to glimpse why they did what they did at the time. Lanzmann famously said that it's obscene to ask that question "why." I utterly disagree. I think if we want to understand how human beings do this to each other—because every act of evil in our history has been committed by human beings—we have to look at the people who do it as human beings and understand how and why they do this. And if we don't want to understand why we do this to each other, then we are throwing away the opportunity of preventing it.

*The Act of Killing* does not claim to be any kind of complete or coherent view of what happened in 1965 in Indonesia in general. What the film is really concerned with is how human beings deal with guilt—the stories we tell in the present to lie about the meaning of our actions so that we don't have to face their actual meaning. I think in a way the fact that both *Shoah* and *The Act of Killing* do *not* use archival footage signals what is most important about both films. In *The Act of Killing* I claim directly that the film's focus is mainly on the present. I don't think that Lanzmann claims that about *Shoah*, but I think it is what is most important: *Shoah* is really about how the present is still traumatized by the past.

**Lusztig: When you're alone with the perpetrators for that long, they become the people that you're identifying with, and that does something that is very complicated and very different from the easy moral space of being with victims and feeling sorry for them.**

**Oppenheimer:** The film's fundamental moral challenge is to ask people to see themselves somehow in the perpetrators, and that is of course why the survivors cannot be in the same film. Because the moment they are there, framing the perpetrators, we will disidentify with the perpetrators and we will cling to the survivors for dear life to have a safe space. I think the film puts viewers in a very uncomfortable place where they walk this tightrope between

empathy and repulsion: empathy for human beings who are likeable, repulsion for the horrible things they've done, but also empathy for a man who is tormented by what he has done but lacks the courage and the space to express it . . .

**Lusztig: The strongest moments in the film for me are the reenactments in which people's bodies are overtaken by something that's outside of their control, outside of their performative intention: the arm that can't stop twitching in the film noir scene is almost a kind of psychosis, where history comes up in the body.**

**Oppenheimer:** I'm always looking in the shooting for the moments where the mask falls. Film is a terrible medium for words—it's a medium for subtext. It's great when people don't believe the words they are saying, and if you can see that in any way on their face. There's a line that holds this whole film together, and it is somehow the evolution of Anwar's doubt. I asked him in the final scene to take me back to where we started and tell me what he did in each place as he walked through the office. And suddenly blindsided, caught totally by surprise, his body has this reaction for which he has no words: it is the moment where the mask is off. He's trying to show me what happened on that roof, and suddenly he starts retching, choking. I think the last thing you would want to do is find words for what is happening to him there—it is a purely disruptive space. Cracks are appearing in the middle of a sentence and the rupture is traumatic.

I had been trying to get back up to that roof the whole time. The first time I filmed there was the very first day I filmed Anwar, and I was finding out what happened in that office for the very first time. When I went back, I was there on the roof with my camera person and a sound recordist, and I gave them one direction: When we're on the roof, stay against the wall, always film Anwar from against the wall, because the terrace belongs to the dead—that's not our space. Perhaps Anwar felt that distance, that we were staying a few meters away from him and zooming in for close-ups instead of coming near. Maybe it was the sense that something had come between us: the space, and the absence of all the people he killed. Maybe that's why there was this traumatic reaction.

Whenever we film anybody, we're creating reality with that person, and it's therefore incumbent on us to create whatever reality is most insightful to the most important questions . . . that helps us pose those questions or answer them. One wants the real issues inherent there to make

themselves felt, to burst through the performative surface. Once you recognize that all documentaries are about creating occasions in which you create reality with your subjects, and you stop hiding the collaborative and performative nature of all nonfiction shooting, then the fact that people are role playing or reenacting becomes less remarkable. Maybe it's a legacy of how the tradition of cinema verité as defined by [Jean] Rouch has been hijacked by "direct cinema" and fly-on-the-wall observational documentary that reenactment has come to be a tool for slick illustration of events that you cannot film. But the obvious form of reenactment that inheres in all documentary is people playing themselves. That seems to be a great innovation in *The Act of Killing* but it's really something immanent to all nonfiction film.

**Lusztig: When the woman passes out in the village-burning scene, it marks another moment where history seems to materialize in the body.**

**Oppenheimer:** Indonesians don't say, "she's passed out," they say she's *kesurupan*, which means "possessed." They're doing a ritual to exorcise a ghost when they are kneeling around her. One really interesting thing about the massacre scene is that I felt that it was our duty to create an icon for a genocide for which there are no icons. I knew that the massacre of this village—the fire, the burning houses—could be that icon. And yet I knew that it was obscene that there should be an icon at all for something as singular and unspeakable as a genocide—which is why on the poster for *The Act of Killing* I really insisted that we don't use Anwar's face, we don't show shots of the massacre, that we use the fish, which is about fantasy.

I was recognizing that it was horrible to create an icon for a genocide that doesn't have icons, but also feeling like it was absolutely necessary. I addressed that in a couple of ways. First, I have the scene come from Anwar's mind: he is in bed before the massacre begins, and the sound disappears and is replaced with the sound of an insect and the sound of Anwar's breathing. We take off the high frequencies as we fade the sound out, so it is as if it is being smothered by a pillow. And then, of course, we see the massacre being deconstructed as they call, "Cut cut cut cut." We see its construction. And yet, even though it is fake, even though it is a construction, all this real trauma bubbles to the surface, particularly through the woman who is possessed.

Another thing that alarms people is the children crying in the massacre . . . and some people even think it is a real village and those are real survivors. Of course, that is not

true. It is a set, and the people are all the children and grandchildren of the perpetrators. But they auditioned for their ability to cry . . . And the violence looked extremely fake [at the time] and was shot through long lenses and through fire and smoke and a wobbly camera to obscure the falseness of it. The takes were short and . . . the children were instantly comforted by their parents or grandparents. I think they are the only people in that scene who don't know what the scene is about. But in the face of the generalized denial of the meaning of what the scene is, they appear to be the only people in the scene who do know what the scene is about, apart from the woman who faints and apart from Anwar, who sees in the children crying and the woman fainting the first glimpse that this was awful.

I think there is a way in which that scene also evokes a sort of moral nausea for viewers, because they are fascinated watching the village be destroyed. And what are we doing when we are fascinated watching screen violence? I don't think screen violence begets real violence [though] some superficial readings of *The Act of Killing* have said that. I don't see it that way at all. I think normally when we watch movies, we're fascinated by perfectly wrought, beautiful images of violence, people getting their heads blown off, and normally the real-world referent is absent. And that absence is essential: it is the key to enjoying screen violence. Here in the village massacre, the real-world violence is not absent. It haunts every frame, because it is the real killers and possibly the real locations. Real trauma is coming up, and I think that evokes a sort of vertigo. It is like when the room is spinning and you get nauseous. You suddenly feel sick because it is this thing that is very familiar—our love and enjoyment of screen violence—suddenly turned inside out.

**Lusztig: Let's talk about how humor works in the film. So much of the critical response to the film is about how horrifying, chilling, devastating, or disturbing it is. But it's also very funny, like all of your work.**

**Oppenheimer:** I think one form of humor is disarming: I always try to choose people for the main characters of my films who are open in some way . . . who are generous with themselves and are not self-conscious. I think there are moments where we love them because of this openness. Like the scene where they're trying on hats: Herman chooses a pink cowboy hat for Anwar and says, "This is perfect for you because it's what the big boss would wear." And Herman takes his own gangster hat and he is





Anwar and Adi smile as they take direction from Joshua Oppenheimer on location for *The Act of Killing*.

delighted that it fits him perfectly on the first try. We love them in these moments because they're not trying to act sophisticated; they're not trying to hide the vulnerability that we feel whenever we are molting, moving from one costume to another. We laugh in those moments and then something violent or transcendent happens immediately afterwards.

There has been a lot of misbegotten critical response to the film comparing it to a horror movie. In a horror movie there is a buildup of suspense with a score that anticipates something terrible that is going to happen. So we can prepare ourselves and draw away from the characters and the action and be ready. This functions in the opposite way. There is no suspenseful music—we draw close to them. And then, in the very next moment, the knife is plunged in. Similarly, right after they try on the pink hats, Anwar tells the story of crushing the man's neck with the table leg. And it is one of the most terrible scenes in the film.

There are moments when we laugh, and that takes us into something transcendent that is really dream-like and strange. Humor plays a strange role in disarming us and

letting our guard down so that we can enter these very painful or magical experiences.

Then, there is a kind of humor that I think is distinctly different, which is the mounting grotesque absurdity of it all . . . where something becomes allegorical and holds in it a deeper pathos which allows us to glimpse with joy a diagnosis of the whole sick system. At the waterfall scene, the victim says, "Thank you for killing me and sending me to heaven." That is a moment where most non-Indonesian viewers are not laughing—they are really moved and disturbed. On Twitter I've read people's responses saying they are anguished that someone else in the cinema was laughing . . . you know, how can they laugh? But when I've sat through screenings with largely Indonesian audiences, they are crying in that scene, because it is the culmination of all that pain and horror, but there is also a kind of cathartic joy, which leads to laughter amidst the tears . . . because people see the regime unmasking itself. Indonesian audiences laugh more than any other, but they come away more moved than any other as well.

**Lusztig:** I want to ask you about how you work with the genre of the musical. The film plays so much with genre. Most are the expected genres about good guys and bad guys and vengeance: film noir, the western. The musical is the outlier, but it is so important to the film.

**Oppenheimer:** Although there is only one full-blown musical number, I think it is somehow important to claim that *The Act of Killing* is a musical, because it creates a kind of allegorical space of collective celebration. What I really love about musicals is that there is an emotion inside of a character, or two characters, and they start singing. And then suddenly there is a chorus that starts singing along and dancing along—especially in Vincente Minnelli musicals. So the emotion of the protagonist is suddenly generalized and collectivized.

There is something in the way that the film bridges the gap from Anwar's desperate effort to justify what he's done by using the collective celebration of the official history (where they speak of the extermination of the communists as something heroic) to the Pancasila Youth's collective justification of what they've done. I think the musical fits perfectly there, because the personal sentiment becomes social – and that is what is so magical and strange about Hollywood musicals. It is Fellini-esque . . . Fellini injects a darkness into Vincente Minnelli and thereby creates the style we call Fellini-esque. Here the fish scene and the scene with the waterfall are Anwar's versions of Vincente Minnelli . . . He [Anwar] is the darkness; the fact that the main character has committed mass murder, and is celebrating it, provides the darkness that transforms Minnelli into Fellini.

Of course, Anwar also loves Vincente Minnelli. I think it was really important to try and make those scenes as undeniably majestic as possible, as beautiful as possible, as profound as possible—just as Anwar would wish them to be. We could have made the musical numbers look like cheap Southeast Asian karaoke videos, but to do so would be sneering at them and it is very important that we enter Anwar's nightmare or his fantasies and [that] we enjoy them or are afraid of them—just as he is. Although the waterfall scene is kitschy, crazy, tacky, and ridiculous, it is also beautiful and heart-stirring. That is what allows the fiction scenes to take over the film's form and what allows the scenes they are making and the film that we are watching to melt together into a kind of fever dream. I think that would not have been possible if we didn't do everything we could to make those scenes as powerful as possible.

I'll say another thing about the fish. We were driving along the banks of Lake Toba towards the waterfall, when we came around a bend and there was this huge four-story-high goldfish perched on the hillside. Anwar said, "It's so sad—it was once beautiful and now look, it's been pillaged and it's been looted for building material by nearby villages." It was a seafood restaurant that had closed down in 1997 in the Asian economic crisis, a product of the sort of boundless optimism of the first big Asian boom, and it just sits there . . . this product of optimism and fantasy, on this hillside. And I thought it was perfect as well. So we shot a second musical number there. I thought there were moments of pure poetry . . . pure truth about how we human beings get lost in the stories we tell about ourselves. All the times we cut to that fish . . . it is like an artifact, like a dream, like a half-remembered outtake from the shoot.

Lake Toba, the lake behind the fish—this is not in the film, but this is very important—is the most important place in our history as a species. It actually was a crater lake from a volcano that erupted 75,000 years ago. At the point when it erupted, human beings had been on earth for nearly a million years. That eruption produced a volcanic winter so severe that it killed everybody on earth apart from a small band of around a thousand people living somewhere in isolation. We're all much more closely related than we should be and one explanation for this is the Toba super-catastrophe. So in that sense, at the very end of the film where they are dancing with the lake behind them, they really are dancing this sort of danse macabre at the edge of the abyss.

**Lusztig:** The space of power in the film is an intensely homosocial space. It's an insight of the film that women are so absent.

**Oppenheimer:** You are absolutely right. This is a film about the male space of the perpetrator, because it is a distinctively male space. We use Yapto the paramilitary leader's objectification of women in the grossest way, for example, when he says to the golf caddy, "You have a mole on your pussy." Dehumanization becomes endemic to the entire moral vacuum founded on a celebration of genocide. Everyone is treated as an object.

This objectification is not unrelated to the museum of dead animals: it is promoted as the Rahmat Wildlife Gallery, the greatest wildlife exhibition in Southeast Asia. It is one of the biggest tourist attractions in the city of Medan, and what they neglect to tell you in every brochure is that all of the wildlife in the gallery is dead. So this treating of human beings as objects that we see as misogyny becomes

an important allegory for the moral and cultural vacuum in which the Indonesian kleptocratic elite live.

**Lusztig:** Could you speak about how your relationship to “infiltration” has evolved? It was obviously different to work in the US where the stakes were direct and personal and you were using a false name.

**Oppenheimer:** What I was doing in the US in the late 1990s was direct and personal. I was joining groups that were very homophobic. I was going into neo-Nazi and Aryan Nation-like groups. I couldn’t do that as an openly Jewish gay man. And I wasn’t trying necessarily to get close to the people whom I was meeting. They were never becoming characters. They were a kind of imagined, murderous other. . . . It was a kind of attempt to conjure, imagine, fathom that space somehow.

I haven’t used the word “infiltration” in my work with the perpetrators [in Indonesia]. I think at the beginning of the process there were traces of it. I began in the plantation workers’ villages, [when] workers would point out neighbors’ houses that they knew were death squad leaders’ and suggest that we go and film to see if we could find out how their relatives were killed. I clearly felt I was on a mission. So I think there is something inherently infiltrative about that: my moral commitment throughout the process was to the survivors and human rights community.

But I think there is a telling story about the evolution in my relationship to what I was doing and my moving away

from anything that felt like infiltration to me. The first time I filmed Sharman Sinaga, the death squad leader who appears briefly in *The Globalisation Tapes*, must have been the spring of 2003. I had been to his house and he had shown me horrific methods of killing that he used. When I got back to my house, his wife came over and brought a plate of fried bananas as a gift. I accepted it politely, and when she left I threw the bananas away.

I was really disturbed by [my own] reaction afterwards, and as I met more and more perpetrators in the months that followed, I thought again and again about [it]. Gradually it seemed increasingly unimaginable to me: in that moment I recognized that I was treating this woman—her generosity, her hospitality, her kitchen, her food—as something radically other that I would not taint myself by eating. And I understood that all I am doing is reassuring myself that I am not like her and I am not like them. And if you draw a line like that and say, “I am not like them,” what options does it leave open for understanding them? At some point, I made the decision that I will never make the leap from saying this person has done something monstrous to [saying] this person is a monster.

## Note

1. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, translated from the Italian by Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Summit Books, 1988).