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The Story of History: Truth, Singularity, and Violence in *The Act of Killing*

The line between documentation and fiction has been tirelessly disputed, erased, and re-drawn. The French embrace this ambiguity linguistically—the word *histoire* denotes “history” as well as “story”. Even in English, *story* is embedded within *history*. History is, and must be, someone’s story, but how can history claim factuality when stories are the subjective retelling of an individual’s experience? The tools available to us in order to piece together the past include oral traditions, hand-written letters, history books, newspaper clippings, radio broadcasts, news programs, video recordings, and documentary films. All aforementioned are sources with value, but a value crafted through a process of selection and omission. In publishing an article or retelling a memory, we take on the role of a curator who defines, frames, and creates a narrative. The possibility of objectivity in a recording of history can be, and has been, thoroughly investigated with regards to a number of media forms. I have chosen to focus on documentary films, a medium which I believe straddles the line between documentation and fiction most precariously. As revered French film director, Jean-Luc Godard, said: “There is documentary and there is theater; but that ultimately, at the highest level, they are one and the same. Through documentary realism we arrive at the structure of theater, and through theatrical imagination and fiction we arrive at the reality of life.”¹

¹ Godard, John Luc. *Interviews*. Ed. David Sterritt. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1998. Print. Page 4.

Throughout this paper, I will focus on a specific documentary, Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing* (2013), which surrounds the 1965 mass killings of alleged "communists" in Indonesia. The groundbreaking documentary destabilizes the alleged boundary between documentation and fiction and universality and singularity by neglecting to include victim testimony, archival footage, or more than rudimentary background knowledge about the event on which it focuses. Using the theory of Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas, I will argue that the content of *The Act of Killing*, as well as the untraditional process through which it was constructed, does not in fact constitute a negation of the "truth" of the 1965 killings nor a further violence towards the massacre's victims. I will begin my analysis by using Derrida's conceptions of the "construction of self"² and "artificiality"³ to argue that Oppenheimer effectively uses fiction to attain a different relationship to truth in *The Act of Killing*, more complex than that of mere "objectivity". Subsequently, I will use Levinas' idea of "the other" as well as Derrida's theory on animals and the singularity of beings to argue that *The Act of Killing* creates a constructive empathy between the viewers and the perpetrators on-screen, thereby allowing for the possibility of justice.

In 1988, a man named Errol Morris released a film blurring the barrier between documentary and theatre more than ever before. This trailblazing film, *The Thin Blue Line*, focuses on the case of Randall Dale Adams, a 40-year-old inmate serving a life-sentence for the murder of police officer Robert. W. Wood. Convinced of his innocence,

² Derrida, Jacques. *Monolingualism of the Other or the Prosthesis of Origin*. Trans. Patrick Mensah. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998. Print. Page 28.

³Derrida, Jacques. *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001*. Ed. Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002. Print. Page 86.

Morris enlisted cinematic, theatrical, and stylistic tools to craft a narrative so powerful; it helped contribute to the exoneration of Mr. Adams. Critic Linda Williams describes Morris's drastic break with tradition as possessing "film noir-ish beauty, its apparent abandonment of cinema-vérité realism for studied, often slow-motion, and highly expressionistic reenactments of different witnesses' versions of the murder to the tune of Philip Glass's hypnotic score" and comments that "In place of the self-obscuring voyeur of vérité realism, we encounter, in these and other films, a new presence in the persona of the documentarian."⁴ The film ushered in a host of opinions and interrogations from critics, theorists, and academics. What is the place and responsibility of a documentary filmmaker in his/her films? What role should art play in documentary film? Do the subjects of a documentary have any agency in their on-screen portrayal? Have we reached the point where "the sheer mass of historical images transmitted by today's media weakens the link between public memory and personal experience?"⁵ In response to the critical upheaval over his new form of documentary, Morris responded in a 1989 interview, "There is no reason why documentaries can't be as personal as fiction filmmaking and bear the imprint of those who made them. Truth isn't guaranteed by style or expression. It isn't guaranteed by anything."⁶

Twenty-five years after *The Thin Blue Line* irrevocably transformed its genre, a film was released radically challenging the margins that defined documentary film: Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing*, executive produced by, none other than, Errol Morris. *The Thin Blue Line* may have set the stage for a conversation about truth and

⁴ Williams, Linda. "Mirrors Without Memories: Truth, History, and the New Documentary". *Film Quarterly* 46.3 (1993): Page 15. Web...

⁵ Kaes, Anton. 1989. *From Hitler to Heimat: The Return of History as Film*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. Page 198.

⁶ Morris, Errol. 1989. "Truth Not Guaranteed: An Interview with Errol Morris." *Cineaste* 17, pp. 16-17

responsibility in documentary film, but *The Act of Killing* provoked a reaction equivalent to a full-fledged brawl. In 2002, while in Sumatra, Indonesia filming a documentary for the International Union of Food and Agriculture Workers, Joshua Oppenheimer began to hear the stories of survivors and descendants of the state-sanctioned massacres that took place in Indonesia in 1965. The killings took the lives of approximately 500,000 alleged “communists,” and many of the perpetrators—Indonesian vigilantes and army units—still held positions of considerable power in their country in 2002. The young filmmaker wanted to document the workers challenges as plantation laborers trying to make sense of their country’s bloody history, but discovered that most of the workers refused to testify on-camera due to fear of reprisal.⁷

Desperate to tell a story no one wanted to listen to, Oppenheimer decided to approach the murderers themselves, presenting them with the opportunity to script and stage reenactments of the killings in whatever genre and style they pleased. Rather than recoil from a potentially incriminating situation, the men relished in the chance to orchestrate mass reenactments of their violent past in the various styles of the American movies that inspired them—the films of Marlon Brando, Al Pacino, Elvis Presley, and John Wayne.⁸ *The Act of Killing*, shot between 2005 and 2011, follows Anwar Congo, Herman Koto, and other self-proclaimed “movie-theatre-gangsters”⁹ turned paramilitary leaders as they hold auditions, choose costumes, apply stage make-up, edit scripts, and take their seats in the director chair in order to, in Anwar’s words, “step by step tell the

⁷ Lusztig, Irene. “The Fever Dream of Documentary: A Conversation with Joshua Oppenheimer”. *Film Quarterly* 67.2 (2013): 50–56. Web...

⁸ Oppenheimer, Joshua, dir. *The Act of Killing*. Final Cut For Real, 2012. Film.

⁹ Ibid.

story of what we did when we were young.”¹⁰ This result of six years of filming assaults the viewer with a wash of conflicting responses: disgust and incredulousness, but also laughter and empathy. *The Act of Killing* has been screened at the Library of Congress for congressional representatives, prompted an official response from Indonesia’s government, been deemed “one of the three pillars in the history of human rights in post-Suharto Indonesia,”¹¹ and has remained the topic of at least one article per month in Indonesia’s two major newspapers.¹² The documentary has clearly been the subject of extensive political, sociological, and media theory analysis, but what interests me is the philosophical implications of a film such as this one. *The Act of Killing* begs, not only a re-examination of the documentary genre, but an exploration into the philosophical implications of placing fiction so closely and ambiguously next to factuality.

In discussing the opportunity for and/or necessity of objectivity in historical testimony, some background regarding the 1965 killings is necessary to situate *The Act of Killing* in its historical context. On September 30, 1965, PKI, the most prominent communist party outside the Soviet Union, attempted a coup against Indonesia’s President Sukarno. The unsuccessful coup provided the United States, the UK, a range of local Indonesian militias, anticommunist students groups, militant youth groups, Islamic organizations, and the Indonesian Army with justification for the ensuing three months of barbarism against all alleged “communists”.¹³ Warren Crichlow explains, “The 1965 massacres were directed by the Indonesian army, but carried out by a loose network of

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Melvin, Jess. "An interview with Joshua Oppenheimer." *Inside Indonesia*. N.p., n.d. Web. 4 Dec. 2015. <http://www.insideindonesia.org/an-interview-with-joshua-oppenheimer>

¹² Ševčenko, Liz. “Film Review: The Act of Killing”. *The Public Historian* 36.3 (2014): Page. 176. Web...

¹³ Simpson, Brad. “The Act of Killing and the Dilemmas of History”. *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (Winter 2013): pp. 10-13. Web...

civilian and paramilitary groups. This creates particular patterns of responsibility and immunity, making the role of the state more difficult to legally establish, implicating a broader citizenry in collective violence, and investing a populace in maintaining a lasting culture of impunity”¹⁴ Economically and militarily supported by US and UK governments, the Indonesian army and its civilian and paramilitary allies ousted President Sukarno from power in March 1966 and began a new, Army-led, authoritarian regime called the “New Order.”¹⁵ Most relevant in the context of this philosophical deconstruction is not the event itself, but the subsequent inscription of (or more accurately, denial of) the event in the consciousness of the Indonesian nation and the world. As one reviewer deems *The Act of Killing*: “It’s a behind-the-scenes look at the construction of Indonesia’s official history by individual perpetrators. It exposes the artifice and make-up required to sustain the illusions about the past on which present state power—and individual perpetrators’ psychological coherence—is based.”¹⁶ In her essay on the *Act of Killing*, native Indonesian, Intan Paramaditha, writes:

At the age of nine, my history lesson was a four-hour propaganda film featuring pools of blood, slashed bodies, and the orgiastic chants of a crowd that I understood to be murderous communists. To grasp the impact of *The Act of Killing* on Indonesian viewers, the best place to start is the iconic film to which it is responding: Arifin C. Noer’s *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* (The 30th September Movement Treason, 1984). Like Oppenheimer’s film, *Pengkhianatan* blends documentary and fictionalized reenactments of events deploying modes of horror and melodrama. Unlike the amateurish films of Anwar Congo and friends in *The Act of Killing*, the reenactments in *Pengkhianatan* were carefully structured by one of the best directors of the period, Arifin C. Noer, a fact that makes the film very convincing and therefore highly problematic. *Pengkhianatan* presents the

¹⁴ Crichlow, Warren. “It’s All About Finding the Right Excuse” in Joshua Oppenheimer’s *The Act of Killing*. *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (Winter 2013): Page 37-43. Web...

¹⁵ Simpson, Brad. “The Act of Killing and the Dilemmas of History”. *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (Winter 2013): pp. 10-13. Web...

¹⁶ Ševčenko, Liz. “Film Review: The Act of Killing”. *The Public Historian* 36.3 (2014): Page 175. Web...

New Order version of ‘the communist coup,’ legitimized through history textbooks and museums, in which the Communist Party kidnapped, tortured, and murdered seven military officials during an attempted coup d’etat.¹⁷

Here lies the paradoxical quality of *The Act of Killing*: Oppenheimer’s response to fictionalized government-issued propaganda film is the creation of miniature, fictionalized propaganda films, scripted and created by the very men who committed some of the most heinous of murders. Why fight fiction with fiction? If *The Act of Killing* is an attempt to provide truer insight into the events of 1965 and 1966, does the blatant lack of historicity or archival footage do a further injustice to the massacre’s victims? If all historical retellings are in effect the creation of a narrative, is objectivity a futile goal?

With these questions in mind we can begin to examine *The Act of Killing* through a philosophical lens, specifically the lens of French critical theorist, Jacques Derrida. Crucial to understanding Derrida’s thought on truth and objectivity is the idea of testimony and the “construction of the self”¹⁸ — in his own words, the “not taking for granted the definition of truth as tied to declarative sentences,”¹⁹ but rather a constant acknowledgement that all truths are delivered as testimony at some point in their origin. Derrida writes, “[e]very theoretical, cognitive utterance, every truth to be revealed (...) assumes a testimonial form, an ‘I myself think,’ ‘I myself say,’ ‘I myself believe,’ or ‘I myself have the inner feeling that,’ and so forth...”²⁰. After establishing this keystone in Derrida’s thought, the next through-line would be the fact that this testimony, this

¹⁷ Paramaditha, Intan. “Tracing Frictions in *the Act of Killing*”. *Film Quarterly* 67.2 (2013): Page 44. Web...

¹⁸ Derrida, Jacques. *Monolingualism of the Other or the Prosthesis of Origin*. Trans. Patrick Mensah. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998. Print. Page 28.

¹⁹ Derrida, Jacques. *Arguing with Derrida*, edited by Simon Glendinning (Oxford, Blackwell, 2001). Page 84.

²⁰ Ibid.

“cognitive utterance”²¹ can never be entirely comprehensive and exact. In his book, *Monolingualism of the Other...*, Derrida writes, “in whatever manner one invents the story of a construction of the *self*, the *autos*, or the *ipse*, it is always *imagined* that the one who writes should know how to say *I*.”²² He goes on to counter, “We can believe, without the shadow of a doubt, that the *I* in question *formed* itself, if it managed to do at least that... This *I* would have *formed* itself, then, at the site of a *situation* that cannot be found, a site always referring elsewhere, to something other, to another language, to the other in general. It would have *located* itself in a *nonlocatable* experience of *language* in the broad sense of the word.”²³ Derrida argues that constructing the narrative of one’s lived experience, whether through a written reflection, spoken interview, or on-screen conversation is always invented and formed *elsewhere*, in a language outside of ourselves that never truly belongs to us. Trauma, specifically, shakes the standard structures of actuality and muddies the way one mentally frames an event and finds the words to discuss it. For *The Act of Killing*, a film dedicated to an exploration of the way the perpetrators of a massacre construct their own narratives of a past filled with violence, the philosophical question of how one can testify to trauma becomes crucial.

In addition to the inadequacy of personal testimony, Derrida also raises fault with the way testimony reaches the masses—through the media. In an interview titled “The Deconstruction of Actuality,” Derrida debates the possibility for objectivity in media. Throughout the discussion, Derrida coins the term “artifactuality,” a word intended to convey that “actuality is made: it is important to know what it is made of, but it is just as

²¹ Ibid.

²² Derrida, Jacques. *Monolingualism of the Other or the Prosthesis of Origin*. Trans. Patrick Mensah. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998. Print. Page 28.

²³ Ibid.

important to know that it is made. It is not given, but actively produced, sifted, contained, and performatively interpreted by many hierarching and selective procedures –*false* or *artificial* procedures that are always in the services of forces and interests of which their ‘subjects’ and agents...are never sufficiently aware.”²⁴ Whether in a documentary or news segment, Derrida argues that reality is not merely transmitted through pixels on a screen, but rather curated and diffused by the many forces of power in the media. The public space and political present are in a constant state of flux as they are interpreted, edited, packaged, and disseminated. Though carried out through different means, this same process of curating, assembling, and distributing is also at work in documentary films. One might question whether Derrida would consider the reenactments and stylistic liberties in *The Act of Killing* as another form of made actuality, constructed by a filmmaker with clear motives for his work.

Stopping here in Derrida’s body of work, one could assume that the philosopher negates the value of truth as a concept. If truth can always be traced back to a testimony, and all testimony is a narrative pieced together with tools provided by a language that cannot fully express the truth, why bother? Is testimony nothing more than an endless row of filters, sifting and diluting the objectivity of an event? His body of work does not leave these questions unanswered. In fact, Derrida could not be clearer on his opinion: “Truth is not a value one can renounce. The deconstruction of philosophy does not renounce truth - any more, for that matter, than literature does. It is a question of thinking

²⁴ Derrida, Jacques. *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001*. Ed. Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002. Print. Page 86.

this other relation to truth.”²⁵ This elusive “other relation to truth” is key, and the through-line I would like to focus on with regards to *The Act of Killing*.

Derrida provides readers with a framework for this alternative relation to the truth as a structure built around, counter-intuitively, the possibility of falsehood. In multiple books and essays he describes the importance of striving towards a truthful testimony through exploring the possibility of an *untruthful* testimony. This process of defining fact through fiction will be crucial throughout this paper, as it is the structure through which I believe *The Act of Killing* can be most effectively analyzed. Derrida writes, “whenever someone speaks, false witness is always *possible*...In my address to another, I must always ask for faith or confidence, beg to be believed at my word, there where equivocation is inefaceable and perjury always possible, precisely unverifiable.”²⁶ The core of any testimony, in Derrida’s eyes, is an appeal for the trust of another. He elaborates: “For one can *testify* only to the unbelievable...Whether we like it or not, and whether we know it or not, when we ask others to take our word for it, we are already in the order of what is merely believable. It is always a matter of what is offered to faith and of appealing to faith, a matter of what is only ‘believable’ and hence as unbelievable as a miracle. Unbelievable because *merely* ‘credible.’”²⁷ In Derrida’s *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, he clarifies that the possibility of fiction, perjury, and lying actually begets the idea of testimony. Without the option of falsity, testimony could never be defined as authentic.²⁸

²⁵ Derrida, Jacques, and Maurizio Ferraris. *A Taste for the Secret*. Trans. Giacomo Donis. Ed. David Webb. Cambridge: Polity, 2001. Print. Page 10.

²⁶ Derrida, Jacques. *Without Alibi*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. California: Stanford UP, 2002. Print. Page 111.

²⁷ Derrida, Jacques. *Monolingualism of the Other or the Prosthesis of Origin*. Trans. Patrick Mensah. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998. Print. Page 20.

²⁸ Derrida, Jacques, *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*. Trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000. Page

What about the possibility of perjury in the realm of artifactuality? I would argue that documentaries are created in order to explore the believability and faith required from a testimony, as opposed to media news sources focused on delivering the most accurate and precise combination of testimonies they have received. *The Act of Killing* specifically complicates this relation between truth and lie in a testimony, as viewers watch the character's construct, deconstruct, and doubt their own narratives. One key example comes from Anwar Congo, (arguably the film's protagonist as the only one who goes through a complete character evolution), after watching back a reenactment in which he played the part of a communist being tortured in an investigation room. He asks Oppenheimer, "Did the people I tortured feel the way I do here? I can feel what the people I tortured felt. Because here my dignity has been destroyed...But I can feel it, Josh. Really, I feel it. Or have I sinned? I did this to so many people, Josh. Is it all coming back to me? I really hope it won't. I don't want it to, Josh."²⁹ The desperation etched into Congo's face conveys sincerity, begging the filmmakers and the audience to believe his reality. Congo is undoubtedly asking for "faith or confidence,"³⁰ but the sincerity in his question and the truthfulness in his epiphany are left up to the judgment of the viewer. Derrida encourages readers to embrace the doubt that accompanies the muddying questions inherent in all information:

‘information’ is a contradictory and heterogeneous process. Information can and must transform itself; it can and it must serve—as it often has— knowledge, truth, and the cause of the democracy to come, along with all the questions that follow

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²⁹ Oppenheimer, Joshua, dir. *The Act of Killing*. Final Cut For Real, 2012. Film.

³⁰ Derrida, Jacques. *Without Alibi*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. California: Stanford UP, 2002. Print. Page 111.

from them. However artificial and manipulative it may be, we cannot help but hope that artifactuality will bend itself or lend itself to the coming of what comes, to the event that bears along and toward which it is borne.³¹

The Act of Killing is a funhouse mirror reflection of *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* because it embraces, not pacifies, the audience's doubt. The film allows information to embrace its "contradictory and heterogeneous process"³² and uses fiction as a tool in the pursuit of knowledge. Anwar's desperate self-questioning forces the film's viewers to deconstruct the nature of truth, provoking us to doubt, question, confuse, and contradict. Many of these blatant juxtapositions of historicity and fiction in the film come from Oppenheimer himself, whether in the form of a verbal interjection, textual overlay, or deliberate cinematic gesture. As opposed to other documentary films which attempt a "fly on the wall" camera approach, Oppenheimer makes no attempt to hide his participation in every aspect of the movie. In one scene in which journalist Soadun Siregar maintains his obliviousness to the crimes of 1965-66, Oppenheimer reminds him pointedly, "Your publisher directed the torture...he says so himself." Siregar vehemently negates his knowledge of any wrongdoing, but Adi Zulkadry, one of the most prolific killers during the massacres replies to the journalist, "Look, I'm not calling you a liar...but logically Joshua, but this man, a journalist distancing himself from these things...That's predictable. But logically, something we didn't hide—how could he not know? Even the neighbors knew!" Oppenheimer's willingness to insert himself into his film in order to provide some factual insight shines a harsh light on Siregar's process of "constructing the self" and reshaping his own narrative. A few minutes after this interaction, right after filming one of the more disturbing interrogation reenactments, Adi Zulkadry gives a

³¹ Derrida, Jacques. *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001*. Ed. Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002. Print. Page 88.

³² Ibid.

speech to his fellow “actors,” further exploring the relationship between truth and history:

Listen, 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 were the cruel ones. It’s 40 years ago so any criminal case has expired. It’s not about fear. It’s about image... It’s not a problem for us. It’s a problem for history. The whole story will be reversed...³³

Fellow executioner Herman Koto questions why they should have to hide their history if it is the truth, to which Adi replies, “the consequence is that everything Anwar and I have ever said is false...not everything true should be made public. I believe even God has secrets.”³⁴

The Act of Killing’s stark juxtaposition of narratives, each with their own biases, prejudices, desires, falsities, and “construction of self,”³⁵ is what I believe Derrida would consider the “other relation to truth”³⁶. Viewers are privy to three narratives: that of the filmmaker attempting to insert a third party opinion, that of journalist Soadun Siregar, a man who has lied to himself for so many years that he cannot bare to accept any other version of the past, and that of Adi Zulkadry, a killer who manages to embrace his history of cruelty and lies while viewing himself as morally unscathed. Through the portrayal of three conflicting narratives— three conflicting realities—the task of discerning objectivity becomes much more difficult. According to Derrida, testimony is constrained by a language that cannot convey singular experiences, and similarly, media is constrained by artifactuality and the impossibility of an unbiased re-telling. Rather than

³³ Oppenheimer, Joshua, dir. *The Act of Killing*. Final Cut For Real, 2012. Film.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Derrida, Jacques. *Monolingualism of the Other or the Prosthesis of Origin*. Trans. Patrick Mensah. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998. Print. Page 28.

³⁶ Derrida, Jacques, and Maurizio Ferraris. *A Taste for the Secret*. Trans. Giacomo Donis. Ed. David Webb. Cambridge: Polity, 2001. Print. Page 10.

resign oneself to these concepts and negate the importance of striving for truth, Derrida encourages readers to discover a different kind of relation to truth. The way to approach objectivity would be through an acceptance of the slippery nature of information, and an investigation into the methods by which information transforms itself into knowledge. The juxtaposition of fantastical reenactments, false testimony sincerely believed to be true, self-aware false testimony, and factual interjections by the filmmaker (not without an agenda himself, of course) come together in *The Act of Killing* to create a reality that is both alarming and enlightening. In a 2013 interview, Oppenheimer explains:

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... the obvious form of reenactment that inheres in all documentary is people playing themselves.³⁷

Oppenheimer's goal with *The Act of Killing* was not for the film to become "any kind of complete or coherent view of what happened in 1965 in Indonesia in general,"³⁸ but rather an exploration into the different relationships humans can have to truth. In a Derridean world, in which testimony can never be objectively singular and accurate, it appears that defining truth negatively—figuratively and literally placing it next to *what it is not*—is the closest one can get to understanding the big picture, if you will. In

Demeure: Fiction and Testimony, Derrida writes, "there is no testimony that does not at

³⁷ Lusztig, Irene. "The Fever Dream of Documentary: A Conversation with Joshua Oppenheimer". *Film Quarterly* 67.2 (2013): Page 53. Web...

³⁸ Lusztig, Irene. "The Fever Dream of Documentary: A Conversation with Joshua Oppenheimer". *Film Quarterly* 67.2 (2013): Page 52. Web...

least structurally imply in itself the possibility of fiction, simulacra, dissimulation, lie, and perjury...if testimony thereby became proof, information, certainty, or archive, it would lose its function as testimony. In order to remain testimony, it must therefore allow itself to be haunted.”³⁹ *The Act of Killing* is nothing if not haunted—haunted by the falsehoods of the Indonesian history books and propaganda films, haunted by the revisionist narratives constructed by shameful and shameless consciences, and haunted by the fictions of the film’s fantastical reenactments. Oppenheimer continues, “I think if we want to understand how human beings do this to each other...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.”⁴⁰ Understanding an individual’s truth includes an exploration into his or her fantasies, wishes, hopes, false memories, and constructions of self. A viewer may deem Soadun Siregar’s reality as objectively untrue, while still attempting to understand his sincerity or insincerity in the context of his own reality.

What those versed in Derridean theory may view as a gaping hole in my current analysis is the use of words such as role-playing, narrative, reenactment, and testimony without a study of Derrida’s concepts of singularity and universality. We conceive of an event as something singular and non-repeatable, but all testimony necessitates the usage of a language, thereby relying upon generalities, labels, and pre-existing structures of language and thought to recall an experience. How can one understand “how human

³⁹ Derrida, Jacques, *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*. Trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000. Page 29-30.

⁴⁰ Lusztig, Irene. “The Fever Dream of Documentary: A Conversation with Joshua Oppenheimer”. *Film Quarterly* 67.2 (2013): Page 52. Web...

beings do this to each other”⁴¹ without categorizing and generalizing the men in *The Act of Killing*? Where is the boundary between empathy with the other and forcing assumptions upon the other? And, most relevantly, why would a viewer want to understand the singularity of the film’s protagonists when these men so violently negated the singularity of their victims?

Jacques Derrida has written extensively on singularity and testimony. The previous section of this paper discussed the possibility of falsity in testimony and the appeal for faith in the other. When one gives testimony, one appeals to the other to believe what is merely believable, in effect, asking the listener to trust that, if he or she were in the same time and space as the testifier during the event, he or she would have witnessed the very same occurrence. This hypothetical is where friction arises philosophically. In his book, “A Taste for the Secret,” Derrida illuminates his logic with regards to this theoretical situation:

it is a question of the fact that I cannot put myself in someone else's place, I cannot - as Husserl would put it - have any intuitive access to another's intention. The idea of testimony requires exemplarity, and that means absolute singularity: a testimony takes place *once* on the subject of what takes place *once*, the testimony is unique, irreplaceable - it is the logic of the instant. But this uniqueness must immediately be opposed to its contrary - I have to be replaceable in the very place where I am irreplaceable. When I say 'I'm telling you the truth about what I saw there', it means: (1) anyone whosoever in my place would have seen the same thing, that's why what I say is true; (2) I'm ready to repeat universally and infinitely this statement that is unique, but that becomes ideal - and so all of a sudden the unique becomes universal, universalizable.⁴²

Therefore, the nature of testimony is paradoxically singular in theory, but universalizable

⁴¹ Lusztig, Irene. “The Fever Dream of Documentary: A Conversation with Joshua Oppenheimer”. *Film Quarterly* 67.2 (2013): Page 52. Web...

⁴² Derrida, Jacques, and Maurizio Ferraris. *A Taste for the Secret*. Trans. Giacomo Donis. Ed. David Webb. Cambridge: Polity, 2001. Print. Page 73.

in practice. Humans' predisposition towards generalizing and appropriating in order to reach understanding may be at the crux of critical theory, and certainly at the heart of ethicality itself. Before delving any further into Derrida's thoughts on singularity and universality, one must put his writings in context. Much of his theory on this topic is a direct response to the work of Emmanuel Levinas, one of the most influential philosophers of the 20th century. Levinas will be especially relevant to *The Act of Killing* because of the philosopher's theories of "the face" and "the other" which help to frame the atrocities of the 1965 murders and the way in which Oppenheimer chose to portray the tragedy's perpetrators.

Opposed to the solipsism of many of his contemporaries, Emmanuel Levinas built his theory around the concept of "the other." In his essay, "Is Ontology Fundamental?" Levinas explains, "our relationship with the other certainly consists in wanting to comprehend him, but this relation overflows comprehension. Not only because knowledge of the other requires, outside of all curiosity, also sympathy or love, ways of being distinct from impassible contemplation, but because in our relation to the other, he does not affect us in terms of a concept. He is a being and counts as such."⁴³ Our relationship to the other, mysterious and incomprehensible, manifests itself in, what Levinas calls, "the face". The face is at the core of humanity—the way we access other humans by acknowledging the uniqueness of their being. Levinas writes, "The face is a hand in search of recompense, an open hand. That is, it needs something." (The Paradox of Morality 169) The face forms the basic command of thou-shalt-not-kill-me, which

⁴³ Levinas, Emmanuel. *Basic Philosophical Writings*. Ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996. Print. Page 6.

imparts on the looker both an imposing authority and a desperate plea. As Levinas explains, “There are these two strange things in the face: its extreme frailty—the fact of being without means and, on the other hand, there is authority. It is as if God spoke through the face.”⁴⁴ Levinas’ conception of the face leads us to a crucial concept in the analysis of *The Act of Killing*: killability. Simply, how is one human being able to kill another human being? The answer comes in the form of naming and generalizing in an attempt to possess another human being. Levinas writes, “it [comprehension] does not invoke these beings but only names them, thus accomplishing violence and a negation. A partial negation, which is violence...denies the independence of a being.”⁴⁵ The partial negation that is naming and appropriating the other may be violence, but humans also hold the capacity for total negation: the act of murder. Levinas continues, “At the very moment when my power to kill realizes itself, the other has escaped me... when I have grasped the other in the opening of being in general, as an element of the world where I stand, where I have seen him *on the horizon*, I have not looked at him in the face...To be in relation with the other face to face is to be unable to kill.”⁴⁶ To kill is to negate the presence of the face of the other. Murder is a complete denial of the other’s individuality as well as the sociality, language, and ontology carried within them.

Derrida was not in complete agreement with all of Levinas’ teaching on singularity. He believed Levinas relied too heavily on language as a prerequisite for recognition of the face of “the other” and also argued that one must deconstruct the

⁴⁴ Bernasconi, Robert, and David Wood, eds. *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*. Routledge: GBR, 1988. Print. Page 169.

⁴⁵ Levinas, Emmanuel. *Basic Philosophical Writings*. Ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996. Print. Page 9.

⁴⁶ Levinas, Emmanuel. *Basic Philosophical Writings*. Ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996. Print. Page 9.

meanings of the terms “other” and “self” before discussing the self’s responsibility to the other. That being said, Levinas’ conception of “the face” and “the other” provided Derrida with a framework in which to develop his notions of violence, appropriation, and singularity. In Derrida’s *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, he extends Levinas’ teachings by examining the violence of negation towards animals, not solely towards humans. Derrida argues that, by generalizing living beings into categories —“Human” versus “Cat,” or “Snake,”— philosophers such as Kant, Lacan, or Levinas “made of the animal a *theorem*, something seen and not seeing... they have denied it as much as misunderstood it.”⁴⁷ He writes that “the animal is a word, it is an appellation that men have instated, a name they have given themselves the right and the authority to give to the living other”⁴⁸ and appropriating an entire species into a generality which one can stare at in a zoo or kill by the thousands for meat constitutes a vicious negation of a being’s singularity.

The process of dehumanization through categorizing and generalizing groups of people is not a novel concept. All cases of mass violence can be traced back to the erasure of individual identities and replacement with a concept. *The Act of Killing* focuses much of its time on portraying the way the perpetrators of the 1965 killings were able to construct, enforce, and even believe their conception of a “communist,” just as Derrida argues our society has done with the idea of “Animals.” Oppenheimer’s unique process of filming *The Act of Killing* and selection of scenes to be included in the final product allows viewers to see the way the perpetrators internalized certain labels and allowed them to fuel and justify their actions. The primary example would be the word

⁴⁷ Derrida, Jacques. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Ed. Marie-Louise Mallet. New York: Fordham UP, 2008. Print. Page 14.

⁴⁸ Derrida, Jacques. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Ed. Marie-Louise Mallet. New York: Fordham UP, 2008. Print. Page 23.

“communist”—a title bursting with contradictions and ambiguities. Many of these conflicting meanings are exemplified in a scene from the film in which Anwar, Herman, and two fellow perpetrators are interviewed on the Indonesian daytime talk show, “Dialog.” During the course of the interview, the host declares, “God hates communists. That’s why he’s made this film so beautiful” to a roar of applause from the audience, but she also praises Anwar’s use of innovative killing methods that were “more humane, less sadistic, and avoided excessive violence” but also “just wiped them [the communists] out!”⁴⁹ The way the host describes the murder of communists is the way most people would describe outfitting their house with sophisticated rattraps. She acknowledges that a more humane way of killing communists is a good thing, but congratulates Anwar on his ability to “wipe them out!”— as one might say to a pest control worker. The host also says, “2.5 million communists were killed. Why haven’t the victim’s children ever tried to take revenge?” Again, she congratulates the men on their extermination of an inflated (and inaccurate) number of communists, while also deeming the communists as “victims”—a world which unmistakably carries notions of innocence and inability. Throughout the film, one gets the feeling that the individuals in power in Indonesia are in on a big secret, like *The Truman Show* without a Truman. They speak openly about the injustice, about the corruption, about the atrocities, but continue to espouse the ideology constructed by those in power whether they believe it or not. That being said, it is extraordinarily difficult to believe that some of the perpetrators did not fully buy into the construction of the illusory “communist,” when one paramilitary fighter recounts with regards to the Chinese communists, “If they’re pretty, I’d rape them all. Especially back

⁴⁹ Oppenheimer, Joshua, dir. *The Act of Killing*. Final Cut For Real, 2012. Film.

then, when we were the law...Especially if you get one who's only 14 years old. Delicious. I'd say it's gonna be hell for you but heaven on earth or me."⁵⁰ A 14-year-old is no longer a girl, but a "one" in the sea of anonymous Chinese communists. The word communist becomes an excuse for evil of all kind. Throughout the *Act of Killing*, men describe stealing, raping, and torturing under the pretense of the victim being communist. The word became not only a title, but also a justifier. Just as one can justify a squashed insect because it is a "wasp" (although invoking the word wasp implies self-defense because of the insect's ability to cause pain), so too do the characters in the film use "communist" as a self-explanatory motive for violence. Oppenheimer's selection of interviews and behind-the-scenes sequences emphasize the way the perpetrators' internalize the label of "communist," and allow it to justify their actions by erasing the singularity of their victims. The film presents a more nuanced picture of how one can morph a human being into, as Derrida says, a "*theorem*, something seen and not seeing."⁵¹

The most fascinating label explored throughout *The Act of Killing* is that of the "gangster." Similarly to "communist," the word encompasses a multitude of nuanced and contradictory meanings, which allow both the gangsters and the political bureaucrats to justify their actions. "Gangster" is introduced as both a heroic, independent man who crushed and prevents the rise of communism, as well as a low-life thug who requires careful monitoring and instruction by those with real political power. In once scene in which Anwar meets with Syamsul Arlfin, the governor of North Sumatra, the governor

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ ⁵¹ Derrida, Jacques. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Ed. Marie-Louise Mallet. New York: Fordham UP, 2008. Print. Page 14.

says:

Now the communist's children are starting to speak out-to reverse history....But this wont last long, because people wont accept it. Communism will never be accepted here because we have so many gangsters and that's a good thing. The word 'gangster' comes from English. 'Free men.' Thugs want freedom to do things even if they're wrong. But if we know how to work with them, all we have to do is direct them.⁵²

Arlfin dismisses the possibility of a communist revival because of the omnipresence of gangsters in Indonesia—"thugs who want freedom to do things even if they're wrong,"⁵³ who are useful to the government if managed correctly. In this way, the governor introduces the dichotomy of the gangster as man with lower moral standards than the Indonesian bureaucrat, who is nevertheless justified in acting on his violent tendencies by a government who needs someone do its dirty work. The leader of Indonesia's primary paramilitary group, Pancasila Youth, exemplifies this dichotomy in a speech to the organization's almost three million members. He declares, "Pancasila Youth members are heroes. From exterminating the communists, to fighting neo-communists, and left-wing extremists, and those who want to destroy our country... They say Pancasila Youth is a gangster organization. If we're gangsters, I'm the biggest gangster of all."⁵⁴ His speech simultaneously enforces and muddies the judgment value associated with labels; Pancasila Youth are heroes, Communists and left-wing extremists are villains, and if Pancasila Youth are accused of being gangsters, then I, in my singularity, will embrace this label and internalize it. Perhaps the most influential character to provide insight into the "gangster" is the Vice President of Indonesia himself, Jusuf Kalla. In a speech to Pancasila Youth, he says:

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Oppenheimer, Joshua, dir. *The Act of Killing*. Final Cut For Real, 2012. Film.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

Gangsters are people who work outside the system, not for the government. The word ‘gangster’ comes from ‘free men’. The nation needs free men. 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. Use your muscles! Muscles aren’t for beating people up, although beating people up is sometimes needed.⁵⁵

Once again, viewers observe an Indonesian politician drawing a strict distinction between gangsters and bureaucrats. Bureaucrats hold the power and status, but gangsters are the ones who get things done. A clear moment of internalizing one’s label comes from one of Anwar’s musing in between takes of a reenactment. He says, “All this talk about ‘human rights’ pisses me off...back then there was no human rights...But I’m a gangster. A free man. A movie theatre gangster. Not much education.” A fellow actor offers, “A human drop out,” and Anwar agrees, “A drop out. There are people like me everywhere in the world.”⁵⁶ Anwar embraces his status as a gangster and a free man, using the title to justify his aversion to human rights and prove the universality of men like him around the world.

The self-identification in the testimonies of Anwar Congo or the leader of Pancasila Youth allow for an interesting perspective on Derrida’s ideas of singularity and universality in testimony. In Derrida’s *Monolingualism of the Other...* he poses the question of what it means for one to testify to an “allegedly uncommon ‘situation,’” in a “language whose generality takes on a value that is in some way structural, universal, transcendental, or ontological?”⁵⁷ He answers with the concept of the “universal hostage”⁵⁸—one who is “alone in a genre which becomes in turn a universal example, thus interbreeding and accumulating the two logics, that of exemplarity and that of the

⁵⁵ Oppenheimer, Joshua, dir. *The Act of Killing*. Final Cut For Real, 2012. Film.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Derrida, Jacques. *Monolingualism of the Other or the Prosthesis of Origin*. Trans. Patrick Mensah. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998. Print. Page 20.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

host as the hostage.”⁵⁹ I believe the internalization of labels exemplified in *The Act of Killing* epitomizes this “interbreeding and accumulating of the two logics,”⁶⁰ of which Derrida speaks. When Anwar defines himself and others by given names—“gangster” or “communist”—he holds both himself, and the other, hostage to a universality that negates the singularity of the individual. This construction of self with labels provided by others allows Anwar and his fellow executioners to commit cruelties against “the other” through the negation of “the face,” while justifying their actions as part of the inherent nature of a “gangster.” Viewing the world in this fixed language of labels allows the men in the film to avoid the concept of ethicality by neglecting, as philosopher Marc Crépon describes, “The uniqueness of the other, inappropriable and irreplaceable, irreducible to knowledge and to assimilation.”⁶¹

One of the rare examples of a singular testimony in the film, (not singular under Derrida’s definition, but singular in its uniquely personal nature), comes from Anwar Congo’s neighbor, Suryono, who is a frequent actor in the reenactments. Speaking to Anwar, Herman, and a few other executioners, Suryono says, “If you want a true story. I have one,” to which the men respond, “Tell us. Because everything in this film should be true.”⁶² Suryono proceeds to embark on the tale of his stepfather, a shopkeeper who Suryono had lived with since infancy. He tells the men how his stepfather was the only Chinese person in the area, and after being awoken by angry knocks on the door at 3AM, he watched his stepfather being taken away. He graphically describes finding the body

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Crépon, Marc. *The Thought of Death and the Memory of War*. Trans. Michael Loriaux. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2013. Print. Page 118.

⁶² Oppenheimer, Joshua, dir. *The Act of Killing*. Final Cut For Real, 2012. Film.

under an oil drum, and working tirelessly with his grandpa to bury his stepfather “like a goat next to the road.” He even describes his family’s subsequent exile and his own struggle to self-educate. Suryono recounts the story as richly and precisely as possible, and when it is finished, the visibly uncomfortable spectators reply, “Everything’s already been planned,” and “We can’t include every story or the film will never end,” and “Your story is too complicated. It would take days to shoot.” Suryono’s testimony stands out in the film as the only one not to rely on “communist,” “gangster,” “paramilitary,” or other signifiers to explain history.⁶³ He attempts to recall his memory in its singularity the best that he can, in such a manner that disturbs Anwar and his friends. I would argue that the men in power in Indonesia speak, think, and trade in the language of labels so regularly that perceiving Suryono’s “face” through his testimony terrified them. No longer being able to “recognize a common or collective identity... to generalize, to globalize, or even to classify or to characterize,”⁶⁴ would utterly destroy the men’s self-constructed narratives of themselves, the other, and the past. And yet, Derrida argues, it is the only condition in which justice can be achieved. Derrida explains, “Justice is not the same as rights... It is the experience of the other as the other, the fact that I let the other be other, which presupposes a gift without restitution, without appropriation and without jurisdiction.”⁶⁵

The last connection I would like to draw between Derrida’s writings on singularity and *The Act of Killing* relates to Derrida’s notion of the animal. In a scene that

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Crépon, Marc. *The Thought of Death and the Memory of War*. Trans. Michael Loriaux. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2013. Print. Page 118.

⁶⁵ Derrida, Jacques. *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001*. Ed. Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002. Print. Page 104.

could be viewed as out-of-place or superfluous, Anwar and his grandchildren play with a group of ducks next to a pond. As Anwar's grandson goes to pick up one of the babies, Anwar exclaims, "Don't! You'll hurt her again...She's weak because you broke her leg...don't do that. She's a baby! Say 'I'm sorry, duck'...Now say 'it was an accident. I was scared, so I hit you.' ...speak loudly...and pet her a little."⁶⁶ This scene baffled me. The same man who confesses to "killing happily" and acting "more cruel than the movies"⁶⁷ insists his grandson use care and empathy when handling a baby duck, which he calls by the singular, feminine pronoun: "she." This scene appears as an extreme inversion of Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. While Derrida argues that humans use the broad categorization of animals to negate an animal's suffering and enable mass violence, Anwar, a mass murderer of human beings, remains able to recognize the singularity of a baby duck and its ability (or "inability,"⁶⁸ as Derrida would specify) to suffer. Interestingly, Oppenheimer himself uses the treatment of animals to frame the Indonesian massacres. When asked about the blatant misogyny present in the film he says:

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.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Oppenheimer, Joshua, dir. *The Act of Killing*. Final Cut For Real, 2012. Film.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Derrida, Jacques. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Ed. Marie-Louise Mallet. New York: Fordham UP, 2008. Print. Page 28.

⁶⁹ Lusztig, Irene. "The Fever Dream of Documentary: A Conversation with Joshua Oppenheimer". *Film Quarterly* 67.2

Oppenheimer's decision to include Anwar's interaction with the baby ducks in the film provides a fascinating insight into the contradictions inherent in the "moral and cultural vacuum" of Indonesia's most privileged citizens.

Oppenheimer clearly considers the murders of 1965 to be an abhorrent act of dehumanization, but what is his objective for *The Act of Killing*? Did Oppenheimer do an injustice to the victim's by allowing the audience into the homes and innermost thoughts of the perpetrators? Excluding Suryono's testimony regarding his stepfather, no other victims are given a chance to relay their own personal stories. By permitting the perpetrators free reign to say what they please and frame the reenactments in whichever way they choose, is Oppenheimer unintentionally perpetuating the language of labels that Indonesia has officially championed for so many years? Is *The Act of Killing* a violence in itself? Film theorist and native Indonesian, Intan Paramaditha, criticizes the way that Oppenheimer presents himself parallel to the killers without interviewing any victims, writing, "Through Oppenheimer's eyes, we might sympathize with the killers but maintain a certain distance in our quest to reveal 'the truth.' The danger of this kind of universe is that it allows us to put the finger on 'someone else'...and assert a higher moral ground."⁷⁰ I would have to disagree with Paramaditha due to my earlier analysis of the way truth manifests itself in *The Act of Killing*. Rather than measuring the perpetrators on-screen performances in opposition to Oppenheimer's "truthful" perspective, I found the film's juxtaposition of fictional and factual narratives to provide

(2013): Page 55. Web...

⁷⁰ Paramaditha, Intan. "Tracing Frictions in The Act of Killing". *Film Quarterly* 67.2 (2013): Page 48. Web...

us with an “other relation to truth”⁷¹ in which the viewer must consider all information as indeterminate, before translating that information into knowledge. In response to criticisms such as Paramaditha’s, Oppenheimer says that the method of filmmaking in *The Act of Killing* is best viewed as a technique 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.”⁷² Possibly the most credible advocate of Oppenheimer’s method is, in fact, the film’s assistant director, a native Indonesian listed in the credits as “anonymous” because the political climate in Indonesia makes it too dangerous for him to do otherwise. In his statement on *The Act of Killing*’s official website, the assistant director writes:

People like Anwar and his friends are the projectionists, showing a subtle but unavoidable form of propaganda, which creates the kind of fantasy through which Indonesians may live their lives and make sense of the world around them; a fantasy that makes them desensitized to the violence and impunity that define our society. This is the true legacy of the dictatorship: the erasure of our ability to imagine anything other. I worked with Joshua to make *The Act of Killing* in order to help myself, other Indonesians, and human beings living in similar societies around the world, to understand the importance of questioning what we see, and how we imagine. How else are we to envision our world in a different way?⁷³

I pinpoint the key phrase in this statement as “the erasure of our ability to imagine anything other.”⁷⁴ Unlike propaganda films or crime television shows consisting of

⁷¹ Derrida, Jacques, and Maurizio Ferraris. *A Taste for the Secret*. Trans. Giacomo Donis. Ed. David Webb. Cambridge: Polity, 2001. Print. Page 10.

⁷² Oppenheimer, Joshua. "Director's Statement." *The Act of Killing*. N.p., n.d. Web. 8 Dec. 2015. <<http://theactofkilling.com/statements/>>.

⁷³ Oppenheimer, Joshua. "Co-Director's Statement." *The Act of Killing*. N.p., n.d. Web. 8 Dec. 2015. <<http://theactofkilling.com/statements/>>.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

reenactments and a few, select interviews, Oppenheimer does not take the viewer by the hand and guide them through this film, but rather presents complexities for the audience to navigate on their own. While watching *The Act of Killing*, I felt disgust as Anwar tap dances on the site of his mass murders, sympathy as he describes the dreams that plague him each night, incredulousness as I listened to his irritation with “human rights,” amusement as he and Herman attempt bowling or karaoke, and complete perplexity as the movie ends with Anwar’s dry heaving at the site of his murders, wracked with a guilt that could be genuine, performative, or both.⁷⁵ As Levinas would say, my relationship with this man “certainly consists in wanting to comprehend him, but this relation overflows comprehension.”⁷⁶ My inability to comprehend, possess, categorize, and appropriate Anwar constitutes, in my mind, a radical accomplishment for Oppenheimer and *The Act of Killing*. The desire to, yet inability to, fully understand the other is the seed of compassion with which empathy is harvested. Some may argue these men deserve anything but empathy, but I would argue that, unless we question how the other constructs his reality, fiction though it may be, we can never create change.

I wrote earlier in this paper that *The Act of Killing* is “ready-made for deconstruction.” I would like to recant that statement. For Derrida, justice is the “best term, today, for what will not let itself be deconstructed, that is, for that which gives deconstruction its movement, for what justifies it. It is the affirmative experience of the coming of the other as the other.”⁷⁷ I believe *The Act of Killing* is an investigation into

⁷⁵ Oppenheimer, Joshua, dir. *The Act of Killing*. Final Cut For Real, 2012. Film.

⁷⁶ Levinas, Emmanuel. *Basic Philosophical Writings*. Ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996. Print. Page 7.

⁷⁷ Derrida, Jacques. *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001*. Ed. Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002. Print. Page 104.

justice, and therefore presents us with characters, narratives, and truths that cannot be fully understood or deconstructed. I would not glorify any one film by claiming it exemplifies Derridean justice, but I would venture to argue that *The Act of Killing* embraces the “openness of the future” and “priceless dignity of others”⁷⁸ by not providing its viewers with a straightforward answer or argument regarding the nature of human beings capable of murder.

But how can a documentary without any archival footage, very few historical facts or statistics, and not a single victim testimony hope to make any kind of concrete progress? Oppenheimer expressed his desire to create change with this film, but many would deem *The Act of Killing* as nothing more than a well-crafted psychoanalysis of deeply disturbed men. I find a response to this question in Derrida’s “Deconstruction of Actuality” in which he discusses ghosts and the “return of the worst.”⁷⁹ He writes,

The question of the ghost is also the question of the future as a question of justice. This double return encourages the irrepressible tendency to confuse. One confuses the analogous with the identical: ‘exactly the same thing is happening again, exactly the same thing.’ No: a certain iterability (difference within repetition) allows for what returns to be another event entirely. The return of a ghost is another return, every time, on another stage, under new conditions to which one must pay the greatest attention if one does not want to say or do just anything.⁸⁰

Education and awareness of the past are relied upon as the tools with which society can combat “the return of the worst”⁸¹— most commonly cited as “the worst” being, of course, the atrocities of World War Two. But how do we most accurately educate

⁷⁸ Derrida, Jacques. *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001*. Ed. Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002. Print. Page 105.

⁷⁹ Derrida, Jacques. *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001*. Ed. Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002. Print. Page 104.

⁸⁰ Derrida, Jacques. *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001*. Ed. Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002. Print. Page 108.

⁸¹ Derrida, Jacques. *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001*. Ed. Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002. Print. Page 104.

ourselves about the past? History books and archives can only take us so far. When the political, social, technological, journalistic, and economic spheres are in constant flux, how can any factual knowledge of a past event hope to properly inform our actions in the future? When a journalist asked Derrida whether a current situation in Germany was a “return to the tradition of ‘J’accuse!’” the philosopher replied that “Everything has changed...it’s not ‘J’accuse!’ that is out of date, but the form and space of its inscription. One must of course remember the Dreyfus affair, but one must also know that it cannot be repeated as such.”⁸² I do not believe that Oppenheimer’s neglect to include more historicity around the massacres of 1965 constitutes a neglect of truth nor a violence towards the victims’ singularities, because the film focuses instead on the truth of humanity: dehumanization, self-justification, and guilt. These signifying processes at work within language act as a discourse of power allowing the men to justify, not only their self-interest, but also an autonomous notion of self, ironically both devoid of “the other.” Context, relationships, discourse, and politics will change throughout time, which is why we must instead focus on what is considered “universal” at present and challenge those assumptions. Explore the complex, destabilizing relation of the “self” to “the other.” Learn from the ghosts of our past without heralding their return.

Many ghosts haunt *The Act of Killing*—ghosts of the dead, ghosts of the forgotten, ghosts of false narratives, ghosts that plague the perpetrators in their sleep. One cannot evoke a ghost in a singular form to prevent “the return of the worst”⁸³, but rather “whoever inherits chooses one spirit rather than another. One makes selections, one

⁸² Derrida, Jacques. *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001*. Ed. Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002. Print. Page 108.

⁸³ Derrida, Jacques. *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001*. Ed. Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002. Print. Page 104.

filters, one sifts through the ghosts or through the injunctions of each spirit. There is legacy only where assignments are multiple and contradictory, secret enough to defy interpretation, to carry the unlimited risk of active interpretation. It is here that a decision and a responsibility can be taken.”⁸⁴ One must actively sift, search, and investigate the many ghosts of the past in order to begin to make sense of the “openness of the future”⁸⁵ and take on a responsibility towards justice. And so we arrive back at the beginning. Piecing together the past entails a process of selection and omission—a stepping into the role of curator who defines, frames, and creates a narrative. And yet, looking towards the future also necessitates this process of filtering and sifting through the ghosts of the past. A documentary, in its purest, most theoretical form, hopes to accomplish both.

⁸⁴ Derrida, Jacques. *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001*. Ed. Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002. Print. Page 111.

⁸⁵ Derrida, Jacques. *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001*. Ed. Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002. Print. Page 105.

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