

TOP STORIES IN Opinion



Robert Leider: Breaking the Gun Control Stalemate

1 of 12



Crovitz: America's First Big Digital Defeat

2 of 12



Buffett Knows That Tax Rates Matter

3 of 12

Of Libera

OPINION ASIA | December 5, 2012, 11:27 a.m. ET

Indonesia's Celluloid Reckoning

A shocking documentary could help exorcise the evils of Suharto's repression.

Article

Comments (2)

MORE IN OPINION »

Email

Print

Available to WSJ.com Subscribers

By DANIEL ZIV

In one of the early scenes of "The Act of Killing," on a rooftop courtyard in the North Sumatra capital of Medan, self-confessed mass murderer Anwar Congo demonstrates on a friend how he used to execute suspected Indonesian communists in 1965. He would tie them to a pole, wrap a metal cable around their neck and stretch the sharp wire until the victim was rendered lifeless.

Just as you're adjusting to Anwar's re-enactment of this gruesome technique, you notice something else: Anwar has placed a loose tile on the ground so that his friend, playing genocide victim, doesn't dirty the seat of his pants on the dusty asphalt. A serial killer who made bloodbaths out of hundreds of defenseless purge victims was now fussing over the cleanliness of his buddy's trousers.

Such incongruities pop up throughout "The Act of Killing," a new documentary directed by Joshua Oppenheimer. In it, he guides some of the most notorious perpetrators of Indonesia's horrific purges in 1965, as they joyfully deconstruct and recreate their darkest deeds. The absurdities shock and disturb even more than the graphic violence staged by the film's homicidal protagonists.

"The Act of Killing" is the most important film ever made on Indonesia, and for Indonesia, because it lays bare the country's most painful truths. Not since Claude Lanzmann's landmark Holocaust testimonial "Shoah" have I experienced such discomfort from a documentary. As Mr. Lanzmann remarked about his own film, "When one watches, one bears witness to the incarnation of the truth, the contrary of the sanitization of historical science."

Sanitizing history is exactly what Indonesia's government has done in molding the official narrative surrounding those 1965 purges. From primary school, Indonesians are indoctrinated with the myth that the killings were necessary to stop pro-communist army officers from seizing power in a coup.



Enlarge Image

Courtesy of 'The Act of Killing'

A scene from 'The Act of Killing.'

The purges brought Gen. Suharto to power and led to the ousting of Indonesia's founding president, Sukarno, who had flirted with communism. Suharto's military-backed government would hold power for 32 years, during which the communist bogey was often used to clamp down on civil liberties.

An estimated one million suspected communists died at the hands of state-approved paramilitary groups, one of the

20th century's most horrific genocides. One of these groups was Pancasila Youth, of



The Power of Negative Thinking



Japanese Voters Sweep In New Leader



A Shadow Over Banks As UBS Nears Deal

The Swiss bank is set to agree as soon as this week to pay roughly \$1.5 billion to settle allegations of wrongdoing. The higher-than-expected fine is among the ominous signs for other banks.

Inflation's Sting May Test Carney

Don't Miss

[?]



Video - Social Media Captures Nation's Sorrow - WSJ.com



The Financial Squeeze at State U



Conn. Gov. Malloy Speaks About School Shooting

Most Popular in Europe

The Power of Negative Thinking

Passing Along Life Lessons

HSBC to Pay Record U.S. Penalty

Italy Front-Runner Vows Steady Hand

EU to Put Reins on Regulators

More in Opinion

Robert Leider: Breaking the Gun Control Stalemate

Crovitz: America's First Big Digital Defeat

Buffett Knows That Tax Rates Matter

Of Liberals and Loopholes

Japan's New Old Hawk

which Anwar was a leader in Medan.

When "The Act of Killing" catches up with Anwar nearly five decades later, he's unpunished, unrepentant and regarded as a bit of a local hero. He and two of his close collaborators, Adi Zulkadry and Herman Koto, lead us nostalgically through Medan to see the spots where they rounded up, tortured and murdered hundreds of suspected communists. That Mr. Oppenheimer got the perpetrators to open up so completely is testimony both to the trust he earned through years of careful engagement, and to his protagonists' gross sense of impunity toward their actions.

Here the plot thickens, along with the film's cinematic language. Knowing the old men are fans of classic American gangster flicks, Mr. Oppenheimer helps them re-enact the killings by producing their own movie, complete with gory make-up, elaborate costumes, camp choreography and trippy set designs.

From this point, the documentary turns into an intense psychological exploration of what drove the militiamen, as Anwar and his pals alternate between playing perpetrators and victims. Will acting out the truth set these men free? As they step into the role of their torture victims, are they capable of feeling empathy or remorse?

"By giving people the stage to create themselves anew we are able to document their imagination," Mr. Oppenheimer said in a recent interview. "These are true moments. They may be fictional, but they have real effects in the world."

But "The Act of Killing" is about more than just catharsis for mass murderers. It's about the depth of moral corruption in Indonesia today that enables evil to persist and prevail.

Says Anwar's buddy Adi nonchalantly, "War crimes are defined by the winners. I'm a winner. So I can make my own definition." Their gang is so firmly in bed with Indonesia's present-day power brokers that it's easy to understand how none of them has faced sanction.

We see Anwar get a personal audience with an adoring governor of North Sumatra—an old buddy who celebrates Anwar's notoriety. We see an Indonesian deputy cabinet minister don a paramilitary Pancasila Youth uniform, urge former killers to chant "Hang the Communists," then supervise a flaming mock pogrom. And we see Indonesia's former Vice President Jusuf Kalla declare at a Pancasila Youth rally, "Thugs are folks who do the external work that government cannot do."

Anwar's other partner in crime, the obese and grotesque Herman Koto, not only isn't running from the law, he's running for a seat in provincial parliament. He campaigns through town like a kid in a candy shop, greeting voters while openly fantasizing about all the extortion opportunities ahead.

In this sense, "The Act of Killing" is a film about 2012 as much as it is about 1965. And it couldn't be released at a more timely juncture. Indonesia's embattled National Commission on Human Rights is under intense pressure after it declared the 1965 purge a gross human rights violation. Meanwhile, Prabowo Subianto, a former army general accused of extra-judicial killings, is making a strong run to become the country's next president. Even the film's closing credits remind viewers of the risks involved: Dozens of crew are named as "Anonymous."

The documentary will hit nearly every top international film festival early next year. An Oscar nomination is likely, which means Indonesia is about to gain notoriety for the wrong reasons. Most importantly, though, for a nation prone to chronic political amnesia, "The Act of Killing" is the perfect antidote for the act of forgetting.

Mr. Ziv is the director of "Jalanan," a documentary on Indonesia as seen through the lives of three Jakarta street musicians.

Most Popular In Europe

- [Read](#) | [Emailed](#) | [Video](#) | [Commented](#)

- 1. [Shooter's Persona Drew Concern at School](#)

- 2. [Facebook's Wal-Mart Gambit](#)

- 3. [New Calls for Gun Limits](#)

- 4. [France's Depardieu Defends Move](#)

- 5. [The Power of Negative Thinking](#)

Latest Headlines

- [Town United by Grief Searches for Answers](#)
- [New Calls for Gun Limits](#)
- [GOP Poses Millionaire Tax-Rate Increase](#)
- [Police: Indiana School Threat Made During Argument](#)
- [Utilities Revisit Storm Plan](#)
- [U.S. to Shift Afghan Strategy](#)
- [Talk of Kerry Move Triggers Scramble](#)
- [Of Liberals and Loopholes](#)
- [Diamond Sellers Seek Clarity on 'Most Brilliant' Ad Claim](#)
- [Facebook's Wal-Mart Gambit](#)

[More Headlines](#)

Content from our Sponsors [?]

JOIN THE DISCUSSION
2 Comments, add yours

MORE IN
Opinion »

Tweet 105

[Email](#) | [Print](#) | | [Order Reprints](#)

Don't Miss



Gunman Killed in Connecticut School



'Lincoln' Leads Field of Golden Globe Nominees



Classic Garment Gets an Update for a New Era



Christmas Decorating Tips From a Pro

You Might Like

- China Coal Mine Accident Kills 17
- Canon Aims Cameras on China
- What You Wish the Boss Had Said (Before He Said 'You're Hired')
- Political Turmoil Hits Mongolia Bond Sale
- Nike Sues in Chinese Trademark Dispute

Content from our Sponsors

- What's this?
- Malaysia's Penang state (Global Connections)
- Youths have similar ideals to government, says ESM Goh (Channel NewsAsia)
- World's Strangest Prisons (Travel + Leisure)
- Israel is not the problem (Daily News)
- Some Americans Are Deeply, Deeply Stupid (The Daily Beast)

Add a Comment

JOURNAL COMMUNITY

View All Comments (2)

[Community rules](#)

To add a comment please

[Log in](#)

[Create an Account](#)

Your real name is required for commenting.

Track replies to my comment

CLEAR

POST

Editors' Picks



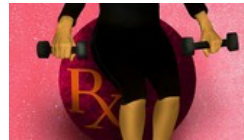
49ers Withstand Furious Patriots' Rally



Peter Jackson Puts Funds Into Justice Documentary



Yo: In Russia, Two Dots Can Mean a Lot



Potential Drug for Fatigue to Get New Review



Lionel Messi vs. History



[Subscribe](#) / [Login](#)

[Back to Top](#)

Customer Service

- Customer Center
- Contact Us
- WSJ Weekend
- Contact Directory
- Corrections

Policy

- Privacy Policy
- Data Policy
- Copyright Policy
- Updated: Subscriber Agreement & Terms of Use

Ads

- Your Ad Choices
- Advertise
- Advertise Locally
- Place a Classified Ad

Tools & Features

- Apps
- Newsletters
- Alerts
- Graphics & Photos
- Columns
- Topics
- Guides

More

- Register for Free
- Reprints
- E-books
- Content Partnerships
- Conferences
- SafeHouse

[Jobs at WSJ](#)

Copyright ©2012 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved.