

LUMINOUS AMBUSH: SEIZING THE HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE OF CATASTROPHE THROUGH FILM

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Abstract

“There are wounds with which we should never cease to suffer, and, sometimes, in the life of a civilization, illness is better than health” [Ankersmit, “Remembering the Holocaust”].

My book, “Unspeakable Histories: Film and the Experience of Catastrophe” (2016), addresses films that depict 20th century atrocities and focuses on historical experience, not *historical truth*, and the emotions that still adhere to unresolved traumatic events. Using key concepts and analysis from this book, my goal here is to demonstrate, through the interpretation of three films, how such historical experiences can be represented. In Yaël Hersonski’s “A Film Unfinished” (2010) the filmmaker deconstructs a Nazi propaganda film on the Warsaw Ghetto and brings us into direct contact with the experience of survivors. Rithy Panh in “S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine” (2003) and Joshua Oppenheimer in “The Act of Killing” (2012), use a technique I call psychodramatic *mise-en-scène* to incite perpetrators to reenact their genocidal acts. These films, among others, I argue, are capable of triggering moments of heightened awareness in which the reality of the past may be recovered in its material being.

Keywords: *historical representation, historical experience, catastrophe, deconstruction, psychodramatic mise-en-scène.*

Introduction: Historical Representation or Historical Experience

I will argue for the essential importance of **historical experience** in the representation of the past in film. What do I mean by historical experience? Historical experience is the perceptual and sensorial inside of events: the concrete material of the past, as opposed to the more abstract analysis of events which is the objective of most historical narratives. Historiography has always considered experience as the

indispensable substratum that historians subsume (i.e., repress) in the process of constructing their *objective* discourse. From this perspective, experience dies its *natural* death in the finished, teleological narratives that are the aim of classic historiography. Representations of the past are at heart intellectual, cognitive forms. When we enter the space of discourse, we leave the world of experience behind. Historians have held that it is only through the verbal reconstruction of events that we can, credibly, know anything about the past. Indeed, as Frank Ankersmit points out, philosophers of history have categorically denied that one can have any sort of direct experience of the past “for the simple reason that the past no longer exists” [Ankersmit 2012: 175]. For historians, experience occupies a disquieting zone of impressions and emotions, alien to historical analysis. The historian’s task is to isolate historical facts from raw traces of events – sift through the evidence – then align the significant facts, brushed clean of extraneous material, in a meaningful (that is, causal) sequence.

I will hold, against historians, that historical experience is not in fact beyond our grasp. It can be recovered. However, the recovery of experience is of a totally different nature from the representation that historians advocate. Experience is anchored in *immediate* perceptions; it is made of undigested material, often preverbal, which emerges from the domains of emotion and sensation. If history gives us an **account of the world**, historical experience is about **being in the world**. In its strongest forms, the recovery of historical experience becomes, in Ankersmit’s estimation, *one of the many variants of ekstasis*, an uncanny experience of *truth* that takes you unaware and thrusts you into a sphere where the usual protocols do not apply: “This contact with the past that cannot be reduced to anything outside itself, is the entrance into a world of its own” [Ankersmit 2012: 187].

Film, I will argue, is exceptionally capable of evoking the world of past experience. It is even capable of triggering moments of heightened awareness in which the barrier between past and present falls and the reality of the past we thought was lost is momentarily rediscovered in its material being. Recovery of experience can be harrowing and is particularly so in films that speak about traumatic events of the twentieth century. Such films evoke unresolved historical situations – unresolved for the communities that experienced them – situations that continue to inflict individual and collective pain.

Experience manifests itself in the manner of what Ludwig Wittgenstein calls the *groan*, an inarticulate sound that escapes from us as if the pain of experience were speaking on its own. Following Wittgenstein, Ankersmit forcibly argues that civilizations also groan:

“These groanings may overwhelm us with an unequalled force and intensity... we should not interpret them as being about something else in the way that the true statement is about some state of affairs in the world. We should take them for what

they are, as the groanings of a civilization, as the texts in which the pains, the moods, and feeling of a civilization articulate themselves. In this way these groanings are essentially poetic: just like the poem they do not aim at truth but at making experience speak” [Ankersmit 2005: 197].

Making experience speak

To clarify what I mean by historical experience in film, I begin with examples drawn from Yaël Hersonski’s “A Film Unfinished” (2010). The film was instigated by a family memory, or, rather, a refusal to remember. Hersonski’s grandmother, a survivor of the Holocaust and the Warsaw Ghetto, was interviewed by Ida Fink for the oral history archive at Yad Vashem. As Hersonski examined the transcript, one passage troubled, indeed dismayed, her: “We escaped the Warsaw Ghetto in 1943 to a little village near town. On my time in the ghetto I don’t want to talk.” Another discovery at Yad Vashem offered Hersonski an opportunity to overcome her grandmother’s reticence: the Nazi documentary film titled “Das Ghetto”, produced ostensibly as a record of Jewish life in the Warsaw Ghetto in spring 1942 (on the eve of first deportations to Treblinka). “Das Ghetto” exists as a rough cut: an image track lacking a sound track. Beginning with this terrifying yet mute propaganda piece, Hersonski wanted to recover something of the lived experience of the ghetto about which her grandmother had kept silent. She tells us in the film’s voice-over: “from the frenzy of propaganda, the image alone remains, concealing many layers of reality.”

Films, especially documentaries, always say more than their filmmakers intended. As Hersonski insists, in every documentary there are two gazes, the gaze of the filmmaker who chooses and frames material, and the gaze of the camera, which the filmmaker cannot completely control. What may emerge, as Marc Ferro so eloquently insists in his **counteranalysis of society**, are *truths* the filmmaker has been unable to suppress [Ferro 1988: 23–46]. From the image, which is never completely tamed, the unintended, the involuntary, the excessive spill over the discursive meanings the filmmaker seeks to impose.

“A Film Unfinished” is a film about a film. A representation about a representation. George Steiner, in *Real Presences*, tells us that “all representations, even the most abstract, infer a rendezvous with intelligibility”. Representations are an attempt to respond to the *sheer inhuman otherness of matter*. Representation attempts to attenuate the utter strangeness of the human experience of the world. And what could be more uncanny than the fearful images that “Das Ghetto” furnishes us? Referring to the cave paintings of Lascaux, Steiner develops a striking metaphor: “[The paintings] would draw the opaque and brute force of the *thereness* of the man-human into the luminous ambush of representation and understanding” [Steiner 1989: 139]. Hersonski’s film is such a luminous ambush.

Deconstruction

Hersonski's first task is, then, **deconstructive**. A work of refutation that she creates through the complex, often adversarial relationship between image and sound. She wants to tear apart the Nazis' "Das Ghetto", expose all the manipulation of its *mise-en-scène* (its deliberate staging), the virulence of its anti-Semitism, in short to unmask the perverse intentions behind this presumably transparent representation of ghetto life. The easiest way to do this would have been to append a voice-over commentary (after all the absence of a soundtrack in "Das Ghetto" is an invitation to use this technique), a running explication of the perversions and manipulations the image track illustrates. Although Hersonski includes a voice-over in her film, it is discreet and far from dominant, one voice among others. Instead, she prefers to deconstruct "Das Ghetto" by juxtaposing the Nazi images to texts she draws from other sources. Hersonski is a brilliant editor and the intertextuality of her film is complex. Here are three illustrations of her intertextual strategies.

(A) Hersonski makes frequent use of the notebooks kept by Adam Czerniakow, president of the Warsaw Ghetto Judenrat (the Jewish Council established by the Nazis to govern the ghetto). A brief example. On the image track we see two sequences from "Das Ghetto" that the Nazi film sets up in parallel. The two sequences embody one of "Das Ghetto's" essential messages: if the Poor Jew is dying in the ghetto, it is the Rich Jew's fault. The first sequence, composed of three shots, takes place in the sumptuous bedroom of a vain Jewish woman as she prepares for a night out (Czerniakow's apartment was frequently requisitioned for scenes portraying the presumed Jewish elite). The elegant woman examines herself in the mirror of an armoire; she crosses to her dressing table; she is shown in close-up as she preens; and then a final shot shows her smoking and gazing at her image. The sequence has all the marks of fictional *mise-en-scène*: the grace of the actress's movements, the smooth continuity editing, the three-point lighting system, and so forth. Against this brief sequence we hear on the soundtrack a voice reading from Czerniakow's diary: "May 5, 1942. In the afternoon, the filmmakers were busy. They brought in a woman who had to put on lipstick in front of a mirror." The sequence that follows, also composed of three shots, takes place in the utter misery of two ghetto bedrooms where we see emaciated couples, wrapped in filthy blankets, immobilized in the final stage of starvation. The scene is harshly lit from the front. In the third shot, a member of the film crew offers a crust of bread to a starving man who manages a smile. We are clearly in the realm of documentary. The authenticity of what we are seeing is undeniable: the setting is real, as is the physical and emotional state of the starving Jews. On the soundtrack we hear the continuation of Czerniakow's diary entry: "In addition to all this, there are persistent rumors about deportations, which appear not to be unfounded. Kommissar Auerswald ordered us to provide a contingent of 900 people."

(B) Adrian Wood at the Library of Congress in the U.S. led an exhaustive search for filmed archival material on the Nazi regime and he unearthed outtakes from “Das Ghetto”, which Hersonski makes use of. Images never intended to be seen demonstrate the extent to which the Nazi film indulges in *mise-en-scène*. Hersonski shows, for example, four different takes that represent two ragged young boys, their eyes fixed on a butcher shop window. Take 1: the camera pans down to discover the two hungry children at the window. Take 2: the camera pans up as a well-dressed woman enters the shop and the boys approach the window. Take 3: a closer view in which the camera pans up to show the boys at the window. Take 4: the camera pans up as in take 3 but from a different angle. The motifs of the outtakes create melodramatic contrasts: ragged children ogling the unobtainable, the wealthy (Jewish) customer who ignores their misery, and so forth.

(C) *Fictional* reenactment. Nine sequences that punctuate the film at intervals are drawn from the court deposition of the only member of the Nazi film crew, Willy Wist, who was identified after the war. In these sequences, Hersonski not only quotes from the trial record, she stages a reenactment of the deposition. She is, however, very careful to avoid any hint of docudrama, the past made present in the mode of fiction. Two actors, playing Willy Wist and his interrogator, read passages from the four surviving transcripts. When we watch these sequences, we notice the detachment of the camera from the characters. We see them in distant long shots in the halls of justice or in extreme close-ups during the deposition, which give us only fragments of face and body. Hersonski doesn't intend for us to identify with the characters. For example, in the first reenactment we see a fragment of the tape recorder and the microphone, then the camera pans right to show us a hand and part of an arm belonging, we suppose, to the witness being deposed. When we see Willy Wist's face, it is de-centered and cut off by the frame. There are of course the actors' voices that reproduce the words spoken by the historical Wist and his interrogator. This testimony, which interpolated images from “Das Ghetto” often contradict, remains the focus of our attention.

Historical Experience

If Hersonski the editor employs discursive strategies in her deconstruction of “Das Ghetto”, she is equally intent on uncovering the layers of historical experience the film contains: those features that reveal the ways in which victims of the ghetto lived their clausturation, in particular their emotions and sensations and their intimate observations. It is possible, Hersonski shows us, to **restore**, if only fleetingly, moments in which the present comes to cohabit with the past. Here are two aspects of this restoration of experience. The first comes from the testimony of ghetto survivors.

What distinguishes the witness is that she or he was **there** at the scene of the crime and speaks with an authenticity unmatched by experts who were not present at the event and can only attempt to reconstruct it from a distance and always partially. Historians rightly contend, however, that memories have their dangers. To cite French historian Pierre Nora, memories are unlike the “scalpel-sharp representations of history; they are, rather, a phenomenon of emotion and magic that accommodates only those facts that suit it... They thrive on vague, telescoping reminiscences, on hazy general impression or specific symbolic detail” [Nora 1996: 3].

In “A Film Unfinished”, by contrast, memory is not a narrative of events cobbled together from reminiscences and warped by desire. Hersonski invites survivors of the Warsaw Ghetto into a screening room where she confronts them with the brutal footage from “Das Ghetto”. She knows the images have an enormous power of provocation. In these harrowing exchanges between the film and the spectator, Hersonski abandons the art of editing and is content to set up the situation: a simple alternation between two spaces according to the structure of point of view. First, there are the close shots of the witnesses: the beam of the projector comes from behind them, as the flickering images play on their faces. Then we see the images themselves on the screen, what these particular spectators are looking at. Hersonski is quite conscious of her strategy: to tear the witnesses away from well-worn narratives, personal or collective; to fix their gaze on the specificity of the image; and thus open them to their own forgotten experience. The close shots of the survivors make us particularly conscious of their pre-verbal reactions: gestures of the face and body that translate, without language, their direct experience of the past. Hersonski tells us, “I noticed that when my questions dwelled on detail and challenged what [the witnesses] remembered, for example: if this or that crew member wore a hat, in what angle they positioned the camera, all these specifics come together to an image that was scorched in their minds. The rest is a story they’ve been telling themselves as years passed by. Somewhere deep inside there was an image and I tried to reach that image” [Laliv 2013: 15].

The specificity of the images often provokes involuntary memories. For example, in the screening room an old woman confronts the grim realism of the Nazi footage of the dead and dying, lying against walls in the ghetto streets, on the sidewalk or in the gutters. The images provoke a sudden rush of memory in the survivor, a short, urgent narrative:

“When it was already dark and I was walking... [image of corpses] down Karmelitzka Street, which was crowded with people, I tripped on something and lost my balance [the witness’s face]. When I opened my eyes, I saw I had fallen on a corpse [image of another corpse]. My face was nearly touching his, and I was shaking. It

was as if all the corpses I had previously avoided looking at were there in the face of this one man [close-up of the witness, a hand over her eye]. It was a human being!" [image of a third corpse against a building]. As the witness speaks, we watch her haunted face: she cups one eye with her hand and massages it. The hand would like to assuage what the eye has seen. The witness has become momentarily fused with her experience from the past.

In his "Sublime Historical Experience", Frank Ankersmit describes the recovery of historical experience as an intense exchange of looks between the present and the past:

"Everything surrounding us in the present is pushed aside and the whole of the world is reduced to just ourselves in this specific memory – where the memory sees us, so to say, and we see only it. The past event in question can present itself with such an unusual intensity when it was in one way or another incompletely or not fully experienced when it actually took place: We finish, so to say, in the present a task that we had prematurely laid down in the past itself" [Ankersmit 2005: 186–87]. This is, I would argue, exactly what happens in the confrontation between Warsaw ghetto survivors and the images from a Nazi propaganda film that calls upon them to relive devastating moments.

A second type of historical experience that Hersonski's film provokes in the viewer takes place without the intermediary of witnesses. The sense of immediacy is achieved through the filmmaker's manipulation of the image. Hersonski explains, "I had a few techniques I used to alter or reorient the gaze, like slow motion, pause resize." She disrupts our normal sense of cinematic time. The effect is hyperbolic: documentary images are stretched out, in a sense taken out of time. According to Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, such moments involve the **production of presence**. **Presence**, as he describes it, has to do with our experience of space and much less to do with our grasp of relationships in time: "The word *presence* does not refer (at least does not mainly refer) to temporal but to a spatial relationship to the world and its objects. Something that is *present* is supposed to be tangible for human hands, which implies that, conversely, it can have an immediate impact on human bodies" [Gumbrecht 2004: XIII].

For Gumbrecht, **production** is the gesture performed by writers, artists, or filmmakers as they exhibit objects for the sensual apprehension of their audience: "Production, then, is used according to its etymological root (i.e., Latin *producere*) that refers to the act of *bringing forth* an object in space. (...) Therefore, *production of presence* points to all kinds of events and processes in which the impact that *present* objects have on human bodies is being initiated or intensified" [Gumbrecht 2004: XIII]. The artist or filmmaker **intensifies** our experience of an object, pushes it toward us, so to speak, so that our attention is focused on its *being*.

An example. During one of the reenactments devoted to Willy Wist, the deposed filmmaker is defending himself, saying the Jews were frightened of the SS and there were no *incidents* during the filming. His testimony stops and what follows is a sequence of *portraits* of Jews, men and young boys, who are in an advanced stage of emaciation. They are framed in close-up against a neutral background. Each portrait has the quality of a mug shot, as the subject appears first in profile and then turns his head to face the camera or starts facing the camera and then turns aside. The film attempts to offer a typology of the male Jew, a kind of perverse phrenology, like the pseudo-science fostered by the Institute for Hereditary Biology and Racial Hygiene at the University of Frankfurt: figures of misfortune, hapless, utterly unredeemable, degenerate victims of their genetic destiny. Hersonski reduces the series to slow motion so that we have a long time to observe the faces and their unnatural movement. The subjects' look into the camera is wary, grim, beyond anger. Fluttering eyelids react painfully to the light; the eyes are deadened but penetrating. We read the tragic passivity, the pathos of the faces, as an accusation that shatters the ideology of "Das Ghetto".

Yet something more is happening: another experience of the past is taking place. The contact we feel with the subjects is intense. We are startled by these phantoms that are looking directly at us across the void of 70 years. Their faces, which could not have suspected our presence, engage with us and we are totally absorbed by the look that was not meant for us: we look at them, they look at us. The present suddenly **recognizes** the past. These faces are no longer cynical and disturbing representations in a Nazi film; we can no longer simply observe them. They are what they were: living beings, whose plight now strikes us to the depth of our souls.

Psychodramatic *mise-en-scène*

I will concentrate now on two films: Rithy Panh's "S-21: the Khmer Rouge Killing Machine" and Joshua Oppenheimer's "The Act of Killing". The parallels between the two films are striking. Both address genocidal events in the same global region – Cambodia in "S-21" and Indonesia in "The Act of Killing" – that took place in the context of the Cold War and were impacted by American foreign policy and the War in Vietnam. Both films focus on the (still unpunished) perpetrators of mass murder: the Khmer Rouge executioners, who were active between 1975 and 1979 in the first case; and, in the second, members of right-wing death squads culpable of mass killings from 1965 to 1966. Both Panh and Oppenheimer set out to expose the methods that totalitarian regimes – one Communist and the other anti-Communist – used to crush any real or imagined opposition. Both express the outrage we should feel toward violence that operates with impunity and iniquities that go unpunished.

I will focus on one approach the two filmmakers share: a technique I call **psychodramatic *mise-en-scène***, which is intended to reawaken the historical experience of genocide that still lives inside the perpetrators.

S-21

The Tuol Sleng Museum occupies the buildings belonging to S-21, the notorious prison where the prisoners – presumed traitors to the Revolution – were tortured, forced to confess their *crimes*, and then summarily executed. The museum houses archives of written and photographic documents, many still lying uncatalogued and unexamined, which hold the promise of piecing together a historical account of incarceration during the Cambodian genocide. These documentary fragments can also constitute, in their **tangibility**, a field of traces capable of awakening memory in the killing machine’s perpetrators and the few victims who survived. The same documents thus serve distinct purposes. History intends to explain events by turning documents into historical facts that can be aligned on the causal chain that produces meaning. Reactivation of the past, on the other hand, moves in quite the opposite direction, back toward traces as the raw elements of experience. It is this *rawness* that Panh the provocateur exploits to stage the return of the repressed.

Rithy Panh refers to the former prison of S-21 as a *dramatic space*. The *reunion* he organizes by inviting survivors and perpetrators into that space is harrowing for his *actors*. The mode of representation Panh adopts is performative rather than narrative. The characters speak in their own voices and on their own account rather than being spoken about. Panh is not present in the scene. Instead, he assumes the role of *metteur-en-scène*, who directs his actors from the outside: “I deliberately chose to stage this situation, by imposing on myself a moral rigor that requires that I keep the necessary distance from witnesses and that I not let them deviate from the goal we had set” [Panh 2004:16]. He may maintain his distance, but he is implacable and unsparing in subjecting his witnesses to the evidence of their wrong-doing. Panh wants to goad his actors into confessing their crimes. He wants to know how these perpetrators functioned within the Khmer Rouge killing machine, how they represented their actions to themselves, and how they assume their responsibility when confronted with the enormity of their crimes.

The servants of death whom Panh confronts in “S-21” are on some level aware of their guilt because they suffer from it symptomatically. Headaches and insomnia torment them. However, while their bodies express their need to confess and seek absolution, they shield themselves with the Khmer Rouge’s empty slogans: the party doesn’t make mistakes; the arrested are guilty by definition; whole families, even small children, are guilty because class betrayal is contagious. In his account of his interviews with the sinister Commandant Duch in preparation for his documentary,

“Duch: The Master of the Forges of Hell” (2011), Panh is aware of the necessity of breaking down the defensive wall of language: “The executioner never falls silent. He talks. He talks endlessly. Adds. Erases. Subtracts. Recasts. And thus, he builds a history, already a legend, another reality. He hides behind speech” [Panh 2012: 255]. Faced with the lies of language, Panh remains vigilant. As he says in an interview with Joshua Oppenheimer: “Of course you can always look away. Take your focus off your subject. Let it move aside, drift, disappear – simple eye movement is enough” [Oppenheimer 2012: 244].

In Panh’s film, psychodramatic *mise-en-scène* is a method for focusing the attention of the guards on their acts of violence. It consists in asking them to replay moments from their lives at S-21, in the ghostly settings where their acts actually took place. Panh is quite explicit in describing how he imagined this imitation of the past: “And then I had the idea of taking the guard back to S-21...and because the guard said he worked at night, I took him there at night.” Panh lit the scenes with neon because that was how the Khmer prison was lit. Place evokes memory, he contends: “I sought to create an atmosphere, which recalled the situation which the guard was actually working in” [Panh 2012: 73].

This method relies, then, on a planned confrontation between the present of the subject and his past existence, often stimulated by settings, objects (*props*), texts, photos, and, perhaps most intimately, the replication of movements and gestures that Panh shrewdly suggests: “Often during the filming..., I ask the *comrade guards* to *make the gestures* of the period for my camera. I specify that I’m not asking them to *act*, but *make the gestures* – a way of extending their words. If necessary, they start, stop, and start again ten or twenty times. Their reflexes return; I see what really happened. Or what’s impossible. The method and the truth of extermination appear” [Panh 2012: 91].

It was in the process of working with the guards that Panh began to realize that language was not an effective vehicle for expressing traumatic memory but that a truer access to the past could be found through the *body*, especially the body’s response to the haunted space of S-21 (The archives are alive, Panh tells us). “And it’s then that I discovered,” he explains, “that there was another memory, which is the bodily memory” [Oppenheimer 2012: 244]. In the most charged examples of psychodramatic *mise-en-scène*, we witness the fusion of the subject – the executioner in the present – and the object – his acts in the past – as evidenced by the resurgence of long suppressed emotion.

Consider the following example. One perpetrator was abducted and brought to S-21 as a child, subjected to systematic brain-washing, drained of empathy, and trained in the cruel procedures of prison life. Panh asks this still young guard to go through the motions of his daily routines during which he torments his charges.

More than the others, this guard is unusually susceptible to psychodramatic techniques and prone to tipping from repetitive imitation into real experience. He appears in two sequences – both shot as very long takes.

In the first, the camera is a stationary set-up in the vast room where other reconstructions in the film have taken place. Panh and his crew keep a discreet distance from the guard, who is seen in long shot throughout the sequence. As the guard moves about inspecting the imaginary rows of shackled prisoners, he narrates his actions: “When on guard duty, I inspect the locks four times. I rattle the lock and the bar. I test it. All’s well. I do the next row.” And then: “I start the body search. I feel their pockets. I look here and there. They mustn’t have a pen with which they can open their veins or hide screws or rivets they can swallow to kill themselves.” At this moment there is a shift in register as the narration is mixed with direct speech: “*Sit! No one move!* Then onto this row. *On your feet! Hands up!* I start my search. *You! Taking your shirt off? Without the guard’s permission? To hang yourself by your shirt? Give me that!* I grab it and take it away.” The mechanical action becomes charged with emotion; the guard’s voice rises in anger as he rebukes the inmates. In his reenactment, the guard is, on the one hand, the narrator, who describes his own actions as if he were observing himself, explaining himself to others. On the other hand, he casts himself, at moments, as the character who performs them and speaks in his own voice, thus placing himself at less of a remove. This ambivalence positions the guard somewhere between self-representation and the recovery of experience. The latter asserts itself insistently as we can judge from the guard’s mounting rage.

The second sequence takes place in the *real* space of a former cell. Everything about the *mise-en-scène* is different. The camera is placed in the corridor outside the cell where the action can be seen through the observation windows the guard also uses or through the entrance whose imaginary door the guard repeatedly pretends to unlock, open, then close and relock as he brings prisoners water, the *can*, or a bowl of rice soup. The moving camera allows us to follow the activities within the cell in medium long shots but also gives us intimate closer shots of the guard as he observes the prisoners through the windows and threatens to beat them with a club. If the first sequence is a chilling view of violence at a distance, the second brings us into a relationship with the guard that is uncomfortably close, as if we needed to resist identifying with the perpetrator.

In “S-21” the settings are not theatrically constructed spaces but the real space of the Khmer Rouge prison: the abandoned buildings with their prison cells and interrogation rooms where the dust and debris of the past still move in the wind and the walls are still stained with blood that diligent washing has not completely effaced. The prison execution ground remains unchanged except that the corpses, which lay scarcely below the surface, have been removed for decent burial.

The remnants of murder and the ghosts that memory sees everywhere are still so chilling that the guilty, whom Panh brings there to bear witness, speak in hushed voices. It is a place, Panh tells us, that is still haunted *as if impregnated with the drama that unfolded there*.

The Act of Killing

Joshua Oppenheimer spent eight years in Indonesia interviewing perpetrators of the mass killings of 1965, accumulating a massive amount of documentary footage, some of which he would incorporate into his second film on the Indonesian genocide, "The Look of Silence". For "The Act of Killing" he decided to focus on a particular right-wing death squad in the city of Medan on the island of Sumatra. Oppenheimer was particularly drawn to a charismatic figure among the killers, the gangster named Anwar Congo, who becomes the film's protagonist. He and his fellow perpetrators identify themselves as the *movie house gangsters* because they operated out of a movie theater where they earned money by scalping tickets. Across the street a storefront served as their office, and upstairs on the rooftop they established their killing ground. The movie house gangsters were not only ruthless killers, but also ardent cinephiles, in love with the Hollywood cinema. Hollywood provided them with their ego ideals (tough gangster figures or flinty Western heroes), the iconography of urban violence or the lawless frontier, and all the conventions associated with these and other genre styles, including the musical.

Oppenheimer's strategy is based in a subterfuge. In essence, he says to these mass murderers, who were still publicly venerated as heroes in Indonesia: I want you to use your imagination, tell your own stories; feel free to model them after the Hollywood films you love; create your own *mise-en-scène*; and act your personal histories in the scenes you create. My role will simply be that of a technician. I will teach you about cinematic representation. Oppenheimer's intuition was that the gangsters' flights of fancy would disclose the sinister underbelly of their genocidal acts.

Thus, Oppenheimer encourages the outrageous parodies of Hollywood genres for what they reveal about the gangsters' moral perversity. He of course has no intention of simply acting as a facilitator for the murderers' self-representations. With his vigilant camera he lies in wait for moments when something unexpected (unscripted) takes place. Something cracks in the process of filming the sequences the gangsters have created, and a reality of one sort or another intrudes. This is when, normally, the director calls out *Cut!* so that the diegetic effects he or she is seeking to produce can be preserved. All can be repaired on the editing table. Oppenheimer, on the other hand, embraces such intrusions for the latent realities they reveal. He keeps the camera rolling when representation fractures, and he has not the least intention of correcting such *mistakes* on the editing table.

A particularly striking example of Oppenheimer's strategy can be seen in a pair of sequences that *mirror* each other across more than an hour of the film-text and represent two different stages in Anwar Congo's psychological evolution and self-awareness. These studio-shot sequences reenact a scene of torture and execution in the film noir style. Oppenheimer uses multiple cameras so that he can produce the psychological effects of analytic editing, in this case an alternation between medium shots and close-ups that focus on the expressive gestures of face and body. In this sequence, Anwar assumes the role of the perpetrator. He appears totally at ease, as the camera shows us by focusing on his face and not that of the victim. The medium shots follow Anwar as he helps tie the victim to a table, then crawls into the dark space under the table to secure the garroting wire around his victim's neck. As he emerges, he feels enough in charge to halt the shooting because he hears from off-screen the muezzin's call to prayer: "Hold on, Joshua. It's evening prayers."

In the second sequence, Anwar is cast in the role of the victim, not that of torturer. Although this recasting of roles remains unexplained, we can well imagine why Oppenheimer would want to reverse Anwar's position. Is Anwar capable identifying with his new role? Would playing the part of the victim provoke a moment of empathy? Oppenheimer must have known that at this point in Anwar's development, the gangster might respond to the stimulus.

This sequence, like the first, makes expressive use of analytical editing. Medium shots frame Anwar seated in a chair surrounded by his tormentors; close-ups focus on his face, in which we begin to discern unanticipated emotions. At first, Anwar appears to be in control as he tells the younger gangster Herman: "Hit the table to frighten me." As Herman threatens Anwar with a knife to his throat and then ties a blindfold across his eyes, the close-ups on Anwar's face are disturbing. Herman places the garroting wire around Anwar's neck and steps back to increase the tension. Anwar gurgles to feign strangulation, a last gesture that adheres to the mechanics of acting. Then something unexpected occurs. In medium shot, we see Anwar raise his right hand, presumably tied behind his back, to the level of his leg where it appears to shake uncontrollably. Herman is unnerved: "Are you alright?" he asks Anwar, as he loosens the wire. Anwar responds, "I can't do that again." A voice cries "Cut!" but the camera continues to roll as we watch Anwar slowly blowing air in and out in an attempt to recover his composure.

Oppenheimer intuits in Anwar a yearning to break through his ego defenses. He is obviously eager at moments to get Anwar alone, away from the bravado and banter of his cohorts, so that he can probe emotions that would otherwise remain repressed. In a sequence, apparently shot at Anwar's instigation, Oppenheimer films his subject as he travels by train to the site of an atrocity he committed that has deeply disturbed him. As the camera shifts between shots of the countryside taken from the train and

a medium shot of Anwar seated in the railway car, we hear him explain the pull of this particular place: "Why am I coming to this place? Because it affected me deeply. Because the method of killing was very different. Is it because I've been telling you my story so honestly? Or maybe the vengeance of the dead? I remember I said, *Get out of the car.*"

The imagery changes radically: we see a sky, blue with dusk, and the flight of countless birds. In voice-off, Anwar continues: "He asked, *Where are you taking me?* Soon he refused to keep walking... I saw Roshiman bringing me a machete." A medium close shot reveals Anwar obscurely lit, his back against the trunk of a tree. He continues the narrative: "Spontaneously, I walked over to him and cut his head off. [He imitates the gesture of the *coup de grâce.*] My friends didn't want to look. They ran back to the car. And I heard this sound. [Anwar gurgles.] His body had fallen down and the eyes in his head were still open." Anwar looks up, his own eyes shining in the light. Now the camera frames Anwar in long shot as he lifts himself up. "On the way home, I kept thinking, why didn't I close his eyes? All I could think about was why I didn't close his eyes?" The camera shifts back to the medium close shot that frames Anwar as he stretches out his hand. "And that is the source of all my nightmares. I'm always gazed at by those eyes I didn't close." The sequence closes with a shot repeating the motif of bird flights against the night sky.

"The Act of Killing" is, among other things, the study of a man who, under the pressure of memory, is increasingly unable to hold it together. Consider this episode near the end of the film in which Anwar once again loses his balance. Structured as a point of view series, the sequence opens with a close-up of Anwar, dressed with his usual flamboyance and seated in a throne-like chair. The camera records in intimate detail the emotions that cross his face. The continuous take of Anwar in close-up alternates with seven shots of a television monitor showing moments from the sequence of torture in which he plays the part of the victim. During these moments, Anwar's commentary and exchanges with the filmmaker are heard off-screen. In the first shot Anwar says, "You know the scene where I'm strangled with wire? Please put it on." He lights a cigarette. While an image of his bloodied head appears on the monitor, we hear Anwar calling his grandson: "Yan? I want him to watch this." We return to the close-up of Anwar: "Yan, come see grandpa beaten up and bleeding." Anwar gets up and exits.

Anwar reenters the frame and gathers his two sleepy grandsons on his lap. He asks the filmmakers to turn up the volume and is unresponsive to the voice from off-screen: "But this is too violent, Anwar. Are you sure?" The point of view series continues, the dark spectrum of the scene of torture contrasting with the brightly lit, saturated colors that show Anwar and his grandsons. Anwar reassures his grandsons that *this is only a film*, but is overtaken by the realism of his own

performance. Smiling broadly, he says, "It's so sad, isn't it? That's your grandpa. That's your grandpa being beaten up by the fat guy. Grandpa's head is smashed." The children look dazed, and Yan giggles. Anwar kisses one grandson, and the children leave the frame.

Alone again and confronted with his suffering image, Anwar winces and half closes his eyes. "Did the people I tortured feel the way I do here?" he asks. We then see Anwar the actor threatened with a knife as he says, "I can feel what the people I tortured felt." In close-up again, Anwar gestures with his hands as if he were trying to grasp something. "Because my dignity has been destroyed... [He glances off-screen] and then fear comes, right then and there. All the terror suddenly possesses my body. It surrounded me and possessed me." A voice from off-screen tells him: "Actually, the people you tortured felt far worse [Anwar looks stunned] because you know it's only a film. They knew they were being killed." Anwar replies: "But I can feel it, Josh [his face contorts, and his eyes tear up]. Really, I can feel it. Or have I sinned? Is it all coming back to me? I really hope it won't. I don't want it to, Josh." Anwar shakes his head as if to rid himself of a vision. He has – and not unwittingly – staged his own moment of revelation. The contract of fiction – this is only a representation and therefore I am not in danger – is broken. We hear Anwar's stunned voice (*Is it all coming back to me?*) and we see, in his face and his desperate gestures, the signs of a devastating recognition.

This sequence is followed by the haunting episode that closes the film. In long shot we follow Anwar, dressed in a mustard yellow suit, as he approaches the entrance of what once was the gangster's office, now a tawdry boutique lined with handbags suspended from rods. In long shot we see him begin to climb the stairway. On the rooftop, two very long takes in medium shot shadow his movements. "This is where we tortured and killed the people we captured." A long pause follows. "I know it was wrong – but I had to do it," he confesses – but then recants, as if the murders were somehow beyond his control. He paces, then begins to retch. Moments later, he discovers the garroting wire he used earlier in the film to demonstrate the gang's technique of strangulation. He leans over a long basin and continues to retch. Oppenheimer's camera – the moral force that traps him in this sinister confessional – gives him no quarter as it continues to roll.

At the end of the sequence, a long shot frames Anwar's diminished figure in the rooftop doorway as he slowly begins to descend the stairs. A deep shot of the salesroom, with its stacks of handbags, frames Anwar in the background as he pauses at the door, then exits. The penitent's climb toward the place of his ordeal and his descent as a diminished human figure have strong mythological resonance. The verbal confession of wrongdoing he makes on the rooftop is inept and incommensurate with his crimes. The dry retching, which Oppenheimer records unmercifully, is a

much more potent avowal. Anwar's body would purge itself of its sickness of the soul but to no avail. Re-experiencing the past does not promise resolution.

As Arthur Danto reminds us, Aristotle, in "The Poetics", gave us a stunning insight into the psychological dimension of mimetic representations: "The sight of certain things gives us pain, but we enjoy looking at the most exact imitations of them, whether the forms of animals which we greatly despise or of corpses" [Danto 1981: 14]. Pleasure depends, of course, on the sort of contractual guarantee that spectacle offers, as psychoanalyst Octave Mannoni describes in his brilliant analysis of theatrical illusion: "When the curtain rises, it is the imaginary powers of the Ego which are at once liberated and organized – dominated by the spectacle" [Mannoni 1969: 181]. But as we have seen in "The Act of Killing", things are much less clear when *the master of the game* – Anwar Congo – is telling his own terrifying story, no matter what distance he attempts to take from his harrowing past. Although he seems less vulnerable the more fantastical the spectacle he imagines, irony, humor, and all the trappings of *mise-en-scène* are ultimately not enough to protect him from the sinister *real things* he attempts to transfigure. A feigned corpse can without warning become a real corpse, or at least *the living memory of a real corpse*. Indeed, we have witnessed the chilling moments when Anwar falls from the realm of the imaginary into the realm of the real, as he does so painfully in the last sequence of the film. His exit from the rooftop killing field and from the film is full of existential pain and suggests that the dangerous game he is now fated to play is far from over.

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