

Memory clash. On “The Act of Killing”

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Gangsters are men; fantastic men created in Hollywood *film noir* scripts. Gangsters are men who smoke stylishly. Distant and cold, they meet their obligations; they kill and torture. The gangster offers himself to the service of the state, acting in the margins of the legal, yet sheltered by it. He smokes, he meditates, and he executes. He later forgets to remain faithful to the coldness expected from that masculinity he participates of. He belongs to the universe of film and he is exported from the West as a political construction versatile enough to signify everywhere, particular and global. Anwar Congo was a gangster at the service of the Indonesian government after Suharto accessed the power. He is also the main character in *The Act of Killing*, a documentary about some of the ingredients that contributed to the writing of a certain account of recent Indonesian history fostered by some of its present political leaders.

Joshua Oppenheimer launched this film to the world in 2012. Oppenheimer hands over the agency of the camera to the shoulder of the main character in the film, Anwar Congo. It is he who guides the optics, and who proudly opens the door to an individual process of negotiation with memory, naively started by chance, after embarking with other ex-colleagues in the shooting of their own movie about their past as state torturers. Under the protection offered by paramilitary extreme right groups, in their movie state violence and *film noir* masculinity go hand in hand. The killer's guilt must be atoned for with growing efforts; the state permanently reinforces discourses aiming to close the wound opened by this conflictive foundational past.

In their film, Congo and the rest of the crew want to recreate their moments of glory, going back to those times when they signified as stars, when their inner gangster was allowed to shine, provoking fear and respect. Tearing anuses apart with wooden stakes [1] was then understood as part of the gestural repertoire of “free men” at the service of the state in its fight against communism, the ethnic Chinese, and any other identity signification that would stand out from the homogeneous mass required by Suharto's and Murtopo's *Golkar* in their pursue of “*economic development and stability*”. With this project, former killers return to their work spaces in an attempt to recreate the tortures. They do so drunk, among dances and songs, possessed by the spirit of the gangster – he who escapes from guilt. Anwar Congo and his companions believe that acting as a character one gets close to it. What they do not suspect is that the ritual inaugurates a space for the radical transformation of the subject.

The former gangsters re-enact tortures in their original scenarios. “*We have to stage this properly*”. “*I have tried to forget all this... with drugs... with music...*”. Congo moves like a movie star; he is a gangster and he is a man, and he has

killed and he is free. He is unable to distinguish between the real and the fictive model. He kills and then he dances to forget. In Congo's case, the gangster's identification with the fighters against communism is twofold. Their bond with the model of the gangster as a free man who dances, smokes and "lives happily", testifies to how Hollywood cinema was instrumentalized to help forge a state ideology that still prevails. Indonesia's heroic past (at least that aspect related to gangsters and their repressive function) lies partly in Hollywood movie fictions. The case is therefore that a mythology alien to the material conditions of Suharto's raise to power is used as one of its legitimizing agents. The effectivity of this mythological construction has been proved in mass entertainment, and it has shown its versatility addressing global audiences. Due to its high degree of abstraction, this particular national story becomes both ecumenical and unquestionable to a type of public whose access to forums for the development of critical political thought has been curtailed.

Anwar Congo returns to the scene of the thousands of killings he carried out as a gangster at the service of the state. To prove the limits of the cold yet charming masculinity in which he seems to partake, he deems it necessary to get into the shoes of his victims. From the very beginning, this trope comes about as an irony. It is the cunning simulation of he who pretends to ignore what he believes to be well aware of. To his surprise, dressing and making up as the mutilated victim paves the way to becoming him, sitting on the same chair, acting as he remembers his victims did. And then gradually, after faking it at first, he realizes how from his body emerge the fear of death, the illusion of the extreme stinging of the open flesh, the shivers, the crying, and the fainting. We can trace back to the line of performance studies that reclaims the potential of the body – as opposed to the voice – to serve as the meeting point between the subject and the character he incarnates. Let us also recall the work of the anthropologist Victor Turner, who related the learning of social behaviours to the re-enactment of the body routines constituting those same patterns.

Rituals are experiences that alter bodies and allow access to other states of consciousness and knowledge. They prepare the actor to develop empathy for the other. This ritual is also a spectacle (it is conceived from the start to be seen by a third person, and it is also articulated as a performance in front of the camera). What is key to this re-enactment is not its narrative value but the transformative experience building up in it. In Erika Fisher-Lichte's words: "*The central concern of the performance [is] not to understand but to experience it and to cope with these experiences, which could not be supplanted there and then by reflection*" (2008: 27).

Certain types of knowledge are only accessible through physical experience. In the scene of the re-enactment of torture, the camera documents one of these cases. Our experience as spectators is a transference mediated by the translation from one support to another, but it also works as an indexical proof of the torturer's discovery during the re-enactment. In the beginning he acts for the camera, but in the dramatic experience the camera disappears from the focus of his attention. Overwhelmed by the intensity of the passions that he is experiencing for the first time, he backs away from the lens. Reinforcing the ritual character of this experience, he moves away from the recording, maybe granting the video with a greater documental value – separating it from the first-person narrative that had seemed to prevail until then in the film.

The camera intercedes here marking out as a stage the space where the actor lives his metamorphosis. But the fact that camera and screen set a distance should not lead us to ignore the transformative value of the experience the actor is really having at the time of the shooting. As James Naremore (1988) points out, anything designated as a stage or acting area tends to foster, above all, the symbolic role of phenomena, thus incorporating them in the field of representation.

However, it is important not to forget that, in the case of this documentary film, what our eyes see is not just a cold sign, but the indexical proof of a torturer's transformative event after daring to walk in his victims' shoes. Maybe the second question one should pose here is where does the protagonist's interest to relive the suffering he imposed on his victims lie. In the case of this movie, the audience witnesses a change process in the flesh of a character whose concealment of personal guilt was based in a series of film mythologies that also served to justify nationalistic discourses preached from the pulpits of paramilitary forces and sympathizing politicians.

This ability to render abstract the actuality of the documentary device goes hand by hand with the possibility it opens to the creation of a new time layer for what is recorded. Documenting an experience is generating an historical image from it. The recording of an event -the submission of the resulting image to a certain order- results in its monumentalization. Far from criticising this phenomenon, far from falling into the handy edge that makes us chose between the aesthetization of a crime or its condemnation, the recording of the torturer's trauma works here as the monumentalization of this conflict. That is, what becomes monumentalized is the clash of two different memories in Anwar Congo's body: that of the repressive state and that of the victims.

Looking at Indonesian history from this lens, Joshua Oppenheimer stakes on deformation of the historical account as a point of departure. The film protagonists are themselves perverse productions of a national memory sustained on the unstable balance between a collective trust in film mythologies as universal, timeless truths, and the contingency of historical circumstances.

References

Fischer-Lichte, E. (2008), *The transformative power of performance*, London, Routledge.

Naremore, J. (1988), *Acting in cinema*, Berkeley, University of California Press.

Footnotes

[1] All throughout *The Act of Killing*, the characters provide us with details on the different torture methods they employed in their daily routine. Among them: the insertion of wood stakes in their victims' anuses until their death, decapitation of prisoners with wire, battering suspects to death, etc.