

TRAUMA AND RATIONALIZATION:
ETHICAL TENSIONS AND CONFOUNDING EMPATHIES IN OPPENHEIMER'S *THE ACT
OF KILLING*

Joseph G. Kickasola (Baylor University)

INTRODUCTION

*It is forbidden to kill. Therefore, all murderers
are punished unless they kill in large numbers,
and to the sound of trumpets.*

--Voltaire

This barbed quote opens Joshua Oppenheimer's groundbreaking documentary *The Act of Killing* (2012), and characterizes its overall moral situation: a besieged ethic, wherein the language of morality has been forcibly co-opted by the powers that be. As Voltaire's satire hints, one can only maintain a sense of justice obliquely and somewhat insecurely in such a situation.

I argue that, generally speaking, ethical "principle" becomes difficult to maintain in the viewing of this film, as it does not easily cohere with the emotional and perceptual experiences the film generates. In this light, this essay is concerned with the ethical experience of cinema, and what such experience can reveal about the nature of ethics and emotion. I begin with a generalization: as moral creatures, we typically approach morals as idealizations in tension with the realities of social life. *The Act of Killing* is remarkable for its subversion of this pedestrian ethical process, and, in particular, for the way it problematizes empathy, that oft-hailed virtue of contemporary morality.¹ Oppenheimer's film is a dialectical, emotionally charged, and often befuddling experience, and this makes it productive for analysis.

The Act of Killing is one of the most complex of recent documentaries, at numerous levels (construction, narrative trajectories, character personalities and trajectories, ethical and emotional dynamics, etc.). Given this, any analysis requires a certain number of caveats, up front.

I use the royal "we" throughout this essay, and generalize "typical" responses to the film. Many would say this is ill-advised, but there are a few reasons for this. While there is no doubt my quasi-phenomenological approach is inflected by my own, Western perspective (and it is clear that, even among Western audiences, judgments regarding Oppenheimer's characters, their motivations, and the moral status of the filmmaker himself have varied²), I believe Oppenheimer

is challenging any simple ethical approach. In that light, any generalized ethic could work, and I have chosen one I take to be the most common, attempting to remain at the most general levels of human perception, sense-making, and morality to minimize cultural exceptions.³ And so, the “we” in this essay signals typical judgments on the broad moral issues at stake (the evil of genocide and racism, the failure of empathy as a moral problem), as well as the existence and legitimacy of various concepts developed in this analysis (many which were developed in the West, such as empathy and sympathy). Regardless, the main argument here does not hinge so much on a universal moral code as the widely shared desire for one, on these issues, at least.⁴

At various points, I will also have to make judgments about the verity of the documentary itself and I have (as a practical matter, really) chosen to give Oppenheimer the benefit of the doubt; I write as if the events roll out before the camera precisely as Oppenheimer suggests they do, without any substantive manipulation beyond what he freely admits.⁵ However, it is crucial to note that any doubts about Oppenheimer’s intentions or fidelity to actual events only add layers of complexity to the emotional topoi of the film, and so one of the central arguments of this essay still generally holds: the testing of empathy in this film reveals its limitations as a sufficient foundation for ethics.

In the first section of the essay, I will trace and articulate some primary experiential contours of the film: surprise, vexation, and bewilderment. This pattern, a deliberate strategy to incur epistemic doubt and moral uncertainty, will be shown, in itself, to have significance as a film-philosophical dynamic that ultimately highlights and scrutinizes moral intuition (as opposed to moral reasoning).⁶

Second, what also comes to light is that this experiential pattern often hinges on empathy; our intuitions for it, our search for it in others, and our bewilderment amid its absence. The typical course for audience empathy is short-circuited in various ways, and, so, the film becomes a kind of laboratory on the empathy-ethic dynamic in human experience, and a critique of the too-easy “empathy solution” for social problems. Given that empathy has become a core virtue in many contemporary theories, both ethical and cinematic, this is important and timely.

Finally, empathy links ethics and aesthetics in that they are both weighted toward experiences, sensations, and feelings over concepts. Threaded throughout these discussions, the film’s emotional contour amounts to a dialectic between the aesthetics of ethical rationalization and national trauma, forcing the audience to live through the strange, puzzling contortions of a society permanently shaped by a relatively recent genocide. In other words, the experience of viewing the film replicates the bewilderment that accompanies life in a society where power-driven ethical rationalizations refigure reality constantly. In this case, the structure upends the

traditional form of the genre, problematizing the basic moral touchstones on which the socially-conscious documentary typically depends.

CORPOREAL EPISTEMOLOGY, ETHICS, AND INCREDULITY

Following the opening Voltaire's quote (cited above), the ironic tone persists, as the imagery defies all expectation:



Figure 1. Screenshots from [The Act of Killing](#) (© 2012)



Figure 2. Screenshots from *The Act of Killing* (© 2012)



Figure 3. Screenshots from *The Act of Killing* (© 2012)

These surreal, uncontextualized images are suddenly ruptured by an off-screen voice, hollering ironic instructions for the promotion of a happy surface image: “Real joy! Not just pleasure! And natural beauty! This isn’t fake!”

Perhaps we are enchanted, through the sheer audacity of the fish, the bright colors and natural beauty of the waterfall. This experience may be matched with a feeling of amusement and

curiosity—even bewilderment— as women proceed forth from the fish’s mouth and dance among the mountains, accompanying an ecstatic man in drag and another in a black robe. That the fantasy is broken by the off-screen voice yields a reflexive clue and a slight feeling of superiority: we likely don’t understand what this film is about, exactly, but we have a general cognitive category available. This is a *movie* shoot, and we admit all kinds of license to the movies (and this is to become a key critical theme).

But this is all morally inappropriate. We have been deliberately misdirected, emotionally and intuitionally. We do not yet understand the moral significance of the scene, even though we were primed by the preceding Voltaire quote to look for it. As the quote indicates (but we have not yet fully perceived), the film begins with a broken language, where words, reason, argument, and logic are all immediately found neutered and co-opted by powerful forces. We struggle to find orientation in the realm of distracting experience, and this will continue.

Indeed, the experience of the film yields a vexing epistemological pattern: constant vexation at multiple levels of understanding (rational, emotional, moral, intuition, social cognition, cultural, etc.), often in conflict. The core phenomenological contour of the film is a constant unfolding of surprise, incredulity, and bewilderment on the part of the spectator. Ethical horror will greet us, as we come to understand more, and that “horror,” as a moral anchor, will be tested. Going forward, our feeling of comprehension, mastery, and control will be continually subverted.

Regarding moral intuition, Jonathan Haidt, Antonio Damasio and others have argued that this *just is* morality, as reason is utterly wedded to, or even grounded in, our emotional life.⁷ Short of fully assenting to this claim, it is likely that many of our moral judgments flow from such lightning quick moral intuitions, with reason providing a kind of *ex post facto* considered justification/explanation to ourselves. For what it’s worth, there are critics of this theory (e.g., the philosopher Thomas Nagel⁸), but however true the theory may be, the film points to the peril in which state of affairs places us. For our purposes here, this is the central point: the film is largely *performing* this philosophical debate in experiential terms. Maarten Coëgnarts and Peter Kravanja argue this process can begin to explain how cinema itself can articulate and even “philosophize” ethics by its own formal, artistic, and experiential means.⁹ This film follows that account through, exemplifying the experience of a morally challenging cultural (and cinematic) situation, where moral reasoning is greatly hindered, and we left to work with moral impulse, only to find it also wanting, when it is so isolated.

The next images, of Indonesian street scenes overlaid with informational titles, gives us the standard “facts” of the matter, and so we are yanked back to something like conventional documentary “normalcy.” The titles read:

In 1965, the Indonesian government was overthrown by the military. Anybody opposed to the military dictatorship could be accused of being a communist: union members, landless farmers, intellectuals, and the ethnic Chinese. In less than a year, and with the direct aid of western governments, over one million “communists” were murdered.

The army used paramilitaries and gangsters to carry out the killings. These men have been in power – and have persecuted their opponents - ever since.

When we met the killers, they proudly told us stories about what they did.

To understand why, we asked them to create scenes about the killings in whatever ways they wished.

This film follows that process, and documents its consequences.

Thus ends what may be called the two-scene “prologue” to the film. The odd pairing of these two scenes—a surreal, constructed media fabrication against a more traditional, “factual” documentary opening—sets up an agonistic dynamic that will characterize the film, though not with the regularity we might find morally comforting. After being “disarmed” by cognitive disconnection in the opening scene, the heavy burdens of both morality and reason suddenly and definitively shift to us, the viewers. The weight of that burden feels particularly overwhelming precisely because we have been thrown into a place of confusion.¹⁰ In general, the “truths” and other moral touchstones for the reality before us will recede from visibility and we must, generally, maintain their presence in our minds amid a “post-truth” milieu.¹¹ They will return infrequently, in punctuated form, but will be all the more powerful for their suddenness, as a kind of moral shock to the system.

In the next scene, a group of men walk through a low-income neighborhood.



Figure 4. Screenshots from *The Act of Killing* (© 2012)

A heavy-set man in a quasi-military fatigues holds a little girl's hand (she sports a military beret). Titles indicate he is Herman Koto, a local gangster and paramilitary leader. The other prominent figure is older, in more sophisticated dress. He is Anwar Congo, an executioner in the 1965 genocide. Throughout this scene he coolly looks on, while Koto crudely jokes with local residents. The strangeness of the event is compounded by the way these “killers” seem bumbling, incompetent, and largely undirected.

“I’m looking for an actress...” Koto says to a village woman. She smiles and declines, and he jokes about her alleged aspirations for movie stardom. Koto then mentions to Anwar that this area was “all communist” during the time of the massacre, and so it will be difficult to cast his film here. And so, amid all the jocularly, we realize this is a particularly cruel manner of typecasting:

We’re looking for women with children to play communist wives. You try to prevent us from burning down your house, but in the end we burn it down.

The casualness with which Koto describes his project, and his attempts to recruit victim families to it, is properly rattling. However, our moral queasiness is held in tension with the overall humor and strangeness of the scene, instigated by Koto. At first, the villagers’ reactions are difficult to discern, partly because of their own inherently conflicted state: some of them are

“auditioning” for roles that will, conceivably, get them money or some other form of remuneration.



Figure 5. Screenshots from The Act of Killing (© 2012)



Figure 6. Screenshots from The Act of Killing (© 2012)



Figure 7. Screenshots from The Act of Killing (© 2012)

One prominent trigger of empathy, psychologists tell us, is our urge to imitate and mimic those to whom we are trying to relate.¹² This process is stymied with this ambiguity. Any moral reasoning assembled so far is not easily finding support in our emotional experience of the film.

Then the scene becomes more emotionally complicated. Koto does some actor coaching with a group of neighborhood children, regarding how they ought to act in the scene he is pitching. Naturally, the children should be distraught when contemplating their neighborhood's destruction, but we observe a shift from concern to laughter in the crowd, via Koto's wild theatrics and off-color humor. Tellingly, the adults only laugh belatedly (after the children, born after the massacre). All this incongruity points to how trauma hides away, after it has broken the world.



Figure 8. Screenshots from *The Act of Killing* (© 2012)



Figure 9. Screenshots from *The Act of Killing* (© 2012)



Figure 10. Screenshots from *The Act of Killing* (© 2012)



Figure 11. Screenshots from *The Act of Killing* (© 2012)



Figure 12. Screenshots from *The Act of Killing* (© 2012)

Oppenheimer thought that he'd be telling the untold stories of the victims, like a typical investigative journalist. However, the victims and their families would not speak to him, partly out of fear, and because the Indonesian military eventually forbade them.¹³ It's an open question as to how much they *could* have spoken. As Elaine Scarry has written, "Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it... Intense pain is world-destroying."¹⁴ This is so, largely because pain is an experience for which language does little justice and cannot readily be shared among those who have not experienced it. That lack of shareability opens the door for the abuse of power in a unique way, Scarry argues, in her discussion of torture.¹⁵

This also begins to explain how the killers could find some measure of acceptance in their respective areas to this day, more than fifty years later, and why a new generation of criminals idolize them, even as they continue in both corruption and social influence (e.g., Oppenheimer depicts the criminals as friends with political leaders, and one of them even runs for political office). Oppenheimer claims the Indonesian government has always framed the killings of 1965 in terms of national emergency (politically "saving the nation," and so on), and has downplayed any suggestion of cruelty, racism, or inhumane treatment of others.

We see this propaganda portrayed in Oppenheimer's film, but we also see the "gangsters" (as they proudly call themselves) curiously resisting it. Our mind-reading abilities (related to the empathic) are tested, as one would think these gangsters would sanitize their own histories. Oppenheimer reveals the opposite. To our amazement, they are eager to share their exploits and

do not attempt to justify or reconcile their behavior with any obvious moral code. They are utterly comfortable: no shame, no guilt, not even a sense of discomfort with their past (with a few important exceptions near the end of the film, to be discussed below). Unlike their victims, they have their language fully intact, though we have reason to think it does not fully reflect actual reality. By the end of the film, it's clear that flexing power also has consequences. As they go on to express themselves further, things take a turn to the surreal. We discover that if "intense pain is world-destroying" intense guilt is world-warping.

To summarize the emotional contour of the opening few scenes of the film, we began with an intriguing yet bewildering reality. We know abstract historical facts about national trauma and what might be called genocide. We now look for experience, through footage – live characters moving, talking, and gesturing – to confirm and flesh out the truth that we have been told. What we have encountered so far, however, are gangsters that don't look like gangsters, talking to victims who don't act like victims, all embarking on a bizarre, troubling project without anyone acknowledging how strange it is.

We have been looking for *cues* to confirm our moral knowledge, but they are nowhere to be found. Our knowledge remains abstract – a moral truth we have been told but have not yet experienced. That lack of emotional anchor – so far – places us in a tenuous position. It's not that we disbelieve the massacre happened, or that it was anything but evil. We just don't feel experientially confirmed in this judgment, and so moral reasoning becomes harder to retain.

Another bewildering irony here is that those with the power—the killers, not the victims—feel their stories have not been adequately told. In the scene to follow, Koto and Congo discuss the significance of the project to come:

Whether it ends up on the big screen – or only on TV, it doesn't matter. But we have to show... that this is the history! This is who we are! So in the future people will remember!

So, they see national memory as a commitment to the detailed truth of their brutality. However, when given opportunity to tell their stories, they turn to the distorted language they know best: the heavily constructed, fanciful tropes of entertainment. They re-enact "history" as cinematic vignettes, each in a different cinematic genre: the musical, the western, the war film, the horror film, and (their specialty) the gangster film.



Figure 13. The musical. Screenshots from The Act of Killing (© 2012)



Figure 14. The Western. Screenshots from The Act of Killing (© 2012)



Figure 15. The War Film. Screenshots from *The Act of Killing* (© 2012)



Figure 16. The Horror Film. Screenshots from *The Act of Killing* (© 2012)



Figure 17. *The Gangster Film. Screenshots from The Act of Killing* (© 2012)

So, Oppenheimer's film becomes, unexpectedly, a story about how killers tell their own stories to themselves, through the media that inspired much of their brutality (they explicitly admit). In this way, the killers will psychologically, and aesthetically, frame "reality" for us for the rest of the film.

It's not difficult, by the end, to determine what has happened, but it becomes increasingly difficult to believe *that* it happened as it did, leaving us with numerous questions regarding why it happened at all. Whether this is a doubt of the filmmaker (is he manipulating us?) or a bewildered recognition that "truth is stranger than fiction," Oppenheimer deliberately puts us through the paces of doubt, incredulity, and disorientation, epistemically and morally. In so doing, the film is a moral critique, but an oblique, discouraging, and bewildering one, at best, calling for a better harmonization of our two tiers of moral experience: the intuitional and the higher ordered principle.

THE TESTING OF EMPATHY

There is a great deal of confusion in the popular use of the terms sympathy and empathy, such that they are often used interchangeably. Most debates surrounding the term have to do with the level of emotional/corporeal immediacy and/or intensity involved in the experience. Generally speaking, to be "sympathetic" is largely conceived as feeling "for" someone in a manner that

doesn't aim to take on the experiences or emotional state of the target person. To be "empathetic" is to feel "with" someone, with some measure of imagination, simulation, or embodiment of the experiences and emotions the target is experiencing.¹⁶

In Robert Sinnerbrink's account, cinema's ethical power is to promote a kind of "cinempathy," wherein both the intuitional and rational moral processes of a person are put in dialogue and mutually strengthen.¹⁷ Cinema can prompt ethical experience, that is, an experiential "space" to holistically work out ethical issues. "Cinempathy" is the power of cinema create this space by "render[ing] the dynamic movement between poles of empathy and sympathy in an experientially rich manner." That is, "[i]t can encourage shifting between central and peripheral imagining, thus enabling spectators to both inhabit and observe, emotionally engage with and ethically evaluate, the fictional characters with whom we align ourselves within a cinematic world." It is "a cinematic/kinetic expression of the synergy between affective attunement, emotional engagement, and moral evaluation that captures more fully the ethical potential of the cinematic experience."

In its ability to comprehensively embrace both dimensions of the encounter with the other, cinempathy is a valuable construct for film ethics.¹⁸ Likewise, it provides a baseline of "typical" ethical experience for film. However, this is not a typical film, and this "balanced" dynamic is precisely what is strained in *The Act of Killing*. The experiential dynamic of bewilderment and vexation in both empathic (central imagining) and sympathetic (peripheral imagining) operations, renders the whole equation challenging.¹⁹

This tension suggests the limitations of empathy *alone* as a sufficient foundation for ethics, cinematic or otherwise. When the language is broken in a minority culture, the natural recourse is to find common experience to bind people together in unity. And, yet, empathy is partly contingent on a shared ethic to form an evaluative ground for the emotions experienced. The film denies us any obvious resources for this. Any empathy we feel may,, in fact, be legitimate empathy, but without sufficient balance or support from peripheral imagining or abstract reasoning. The resources are so low in those areas that the total ethical equation becomes unbalanced, and prone to moral error. What's more, our empathic targets are very limited.

With the discovery of mirror neurons – that is, motor dimensions of the brain that generate types of experiences that mirror the experiences of others²⁰ – the discussion of empathy has extended far more deeply into the territory of movement and what Julian Hanich calls "somatic empathy," the affective dimension (as opposed to the cognitive dimension) of empathy.²¹ Affective mimicry, as part of somatic empathy, is a phenomenon whereby we precognitively mimic the expressions, emotions and affects of someone else, and this forms a facial feedback

loop, whereby the perceiver comes to replicate similar emotions to the perceived resulting in something of an understanding of the other person's experience. Pre-cognitive mirroring mechanisms partially engage the motor system of the perceiver in solidarity with movements perceived in the other.

As a narrative, the emotional, dramatic arc, which *naturally demands* some kind of empathy, is hijacked in service to the wrong cause. The killers, we discover, are funny, curious, often joyful, untroubled characters, and affective mimicry, as an impulse, naturally drives us toward a kind of emotional attunement to the characters on the screen despite the protestations of our conscience. Most viewers will not be passive in this hijacking, but this means their energies will be split between the emotional pull of the film and ethical resistance to it. Likewise, we are taxed as we search for a moral center to the narrative before us.

Given the depths that "empathy" runs, and extent to which empathy defines human interactions from top to bottom (cf. Fritz Breithaupt's claim²²), we might think that these killers could not help but feel empathy for the victims they saw writing and dying at their own hands. To not feel empathy in these circumstances seems a truly daunting feat requiring great effort. Yet, there is no evidence this brutality was hard for them at all. Indeed, it seems as natural as respirating. Why?

One answer to this dilemma comes from an empathy critic, Yale University psychologist Paul Bloom.²³ His judgment is that empathy is, more often than not, an unhelpful or even dangerous dynamic. In this situation, he would argue that the empathic capacities of the killers are not lost, but the emotions and affections arising are perversely re-directed to their "tribe" of fellow gangsters. The energy and emotion generated by the suffering of victims cements their allegiance with the tribe, ironically, *against* the victim. In other words, the victim is not merely de-humanized, but *instrumentalized* for the facilitation of a perverse form of empathy, group bonding over another's suffering, often with a skewed, solipsistic moral telos (e.g., "do what must be done").²⁴ This criticism is supported, in many respects, by the philosopher Jesse Prinz.²⁵ Both admit to some benefits (personal, social, moral) of empathy in some situations, but they all fiercely decry its prominence in contemporary moral theory and warn that an over-reliance upon it can be disastrous.

Fritz Breithaupt envisions a middle way between "anti-empathy" critics and pro-empathy apologists. He takes an instrumental view, arguing for empathy as a powerful human *capacity* to "co-experience" with others at some key emotional and cognitive levels. As such, it forms an enormous part of our humanity and functions as the key to many human endeavors and achievements we hold dear, but should not be assumed to be inherently moral. To the point, here:

Breithaupt details how narcissists, rapists, stalkers, and sadists (among others) all make liberal and skilled use of empathy in their immoral pursuits.²⁶

The third full scene of the film is particularly disturbing in this regard, as Congo re-enacts, almost gleefully, one of his typical killings upon a rooftop. Here, he demonstrates an advanced embodied understanding of the movements and position of his victims, and suggests he had access to their feelings and existential dilemma, all without any resulting moral conviction.

Smiling, and as a way of introduction, he flatly states: “There’s many ghosts here because many people were killed here... they died unnatural deaths.” Then, he begins to “act” as he talks: “They arrived perfectly healthy. When they got here they were beaten up... and died.”



Figure 18. Screenshots from The Act of Killing (© 2012)



Figure 19. Screenshots from *The Act of Killing* (© 2012)

The casualness of his demeanor mixed with the precision of his account is chilling. He literally pantomimes the very qualities that affirm the humanity of the victims, as a demonstration of embodied understanding, on some level.



Figure 20. Screenshots from *The Act of Killing* (© 2012)

Congo believes it imperative that we understand how his favored execution system worked, and puts himself and his friend through the paces of it. He instructs his friend to play the victim. Given that we are now less than eight minutes into the film, and we are faced with yet another strange “genre,” of sorts: a particularly dark version of the “how-to” video.



In an odd turn, the next shot shows Congo with the wire casually ringing *his own* neck, discussing how he’s “tried to forget all this” through music, dancing, alcohol, drugs, etc.. He begins to dance, and, after a few moments, his friend announces, with a strange smile, “He’s a happy man.”

The idea of role-playing as empathy-enducing therapy is common in contemporary psychology, particularly in the study of pro-social behavior in children.²⁷ However, there has been nothing in Congo’s demeanor, to this point, to suggest that he is emotionally *aligned* with his victims, despite his detailed understanding of them. Congo wants “to forget,” not obviously for moral conscience, the film reveals, but because of the fear of vengeance. He has dreams and night terrors of his victim’s ghosts returning to kill him.

One would be tempted to relegate this man to an easy conceptual bin: that of the self-deluded psychopath, but Oppenheimer will not permit this. For instance, in a later scene, Congo teaches his grandson how to care for a pet duck, which the boy accidentally injured. His loving instructions rise to the most ironic levels: “Sweet little duck -- Don’t! You’ll hurt her again -- Say... I’m sorry duck. It was an accident. I was scared, so I hit you.”



Figure 21. Screenshots from *The Act of Killing* (© 2012)



Figure 22. Screenshots from *The Act of Killing* (© 2012)

No one disputes that empathy is an essential capacity that must be developed for normal, healthy human functioning. Likewise, empathy is a virtue the cinema is strongly positioned to engender (cf. Stadler 2008, Sinnerbrink 2014). Yet, this film functions as a giant qualification on these general statements: it is *often* so, but when it fails to engender *morally-directed* empathy, or engenders a false or misleading empathy, the results can be morally disastrous.

This is important, because another theme of this particular film is the movies and their influence. In addition to all the “genres” that characterize the “historical” film the killers are making, they were movie ticket scalpers before the government recruited them for violence. Not only did they watch movies to “get them in a happy mood” before killing, but they also talk about the gangster movies and other violent films that *inspired* their violence. At another point in the film Congo positively revels in how much violence they will be able to show in their own film, more than any ordinary Hollywood film, because he has done it himself, “in real life.”

As viewers, we are hereby implicated in this reflexive game. As the film runs along, we find ourselves, in all our confusion, looking for some relief. It is natural to laugh at the jokes (and there are quite a few), marvel at the novelty of the story, and come to find endearing dimensions in even the worst characters... until the amusements slip to talk of murder, as if there is little distinction between the two. Over and over again the pattern repeats.

RATIONALIZATIONS WILL ABIDE, BUT TRAUMA WILL OUT

Killing is the worst crime you can do. So the key is to find a way not to feel guilty. It's all about finding the right excuse. For example, if I'm asked to kill someone... If the compensation is right... then of course I'll do it, and from one perspective it's not wrong. That's the perspective we must make ourselves believe.

--Adi Zulkadry, executioner in 1965

As mentioned, most of *The Act of Killing* revolves around the making of this odd film, and various conversations with the gangsters in their normal day-to-day activities (which are typically amusing, inflected with morally discomfiting moments). However, two key scenes – both appearing as sudden divergences from everything else in the film, provide something of a moral bedrock from which the film can be evaluated. Without them, the film would not be a dialectic, as described in the introduction, but a nihilistic descent.

The first features Anwar's neighbor, Suryono, who is involved with the gangster's production and encourages them in their efforts to describe the truth of the genocide. He tells them he has a true story, and the others urge him to tell it because “everything in this film should be true.” He laughs as he speaks, even though he reveals, early on, this is the story of his own Chinese stepfather, who had raised him since he was an infant. When Suryono was “11 or 12,” unknown men came at 3 a.m. and kidnapped the man from his home (“I remember it well... and

it's impossible to forget"). The next morning they found him dead on the side of the road under a cut oil drum. The boy Suryono and his grandfather buried him. After that, the entire family was exiled, and this is why Suryono was never given an education and had to teach himself to read and write.

As he tells this deeply personal, tragic story, he smiles, and laughs, and ends with a disclaimer that he is "not criticizing" the gangsters or their film project, but merely wants to contribute a true story to the film. They are unsure what to say, but ultimately reject his idea as too complicated.

This does not keep them from having him do a stint as a rehearsal actor, however, playing the role of an alleged communist during an interrogation. Suryono's "performance" is absolutely devastating.



Figure 23. Screenshots from The Act of Killing (© 2012)

The "voices" of the victims are nearly absent in this film, but when they do emerge they puncture the fantasy in which we've lived. They function as a kind of shock to the system, which has largely been instantiated by various levels dramatic attraction to, even empathy for, the central (evil) protagonists. In this respect the film could be seen in a kind of Brechtian light: a suspicion and self-reflexive critique of the emotional powers of the medium.

This “performance” provokes no obvious emotional response from the gangsters, but they do go on to admit that they were cruel, and have a high-academic discussion of how this film they are making will undercut the propaganda that always suggested that *communist* cruelty necessitated the killings for the sake of the nation. They hold this matter-of-fact discussion in front of Suryono, who finds the entire discussion very evidently painful. He winces and fidgets throughout.

That traumatized individuals would hide their torment through laughter and other forms of social performance is not surprising, but Oppenheimer runs the audience itself through this disconcerting aesthetics of trauma. Through much of the film, our natural responses – facial mimicry and such – run in utter disharmony with the truths of the trauma that we know. Then, in an ironic turn, the emblematic-yet-fictional scene reveals the most emotional truth. Though Suryono was never interrogated as such, to our knowledge, he has little trouble empathetically channeling his stepfather’s emotional experience.

This naked, powerful moment is followed by a strange, even ominous image of Congo on studio camera, aiming right at us. We have been witnessing the truth of the victims slip out, here and there, amid the ostentatious, insensitive cinematic constructions of the gangsters. Congo’s camera breaks the fourth wall, reminding us that we are also watching a construction in the form of Oppenheimer’s film. We are ontologically destabilized in this moment.

The aesthetics of trauma mingle with and run up – in complicated ways – with the aesthetics of the filmmaking process, which (for the gangsters) amount to a kind of aesthetics of rationalization.

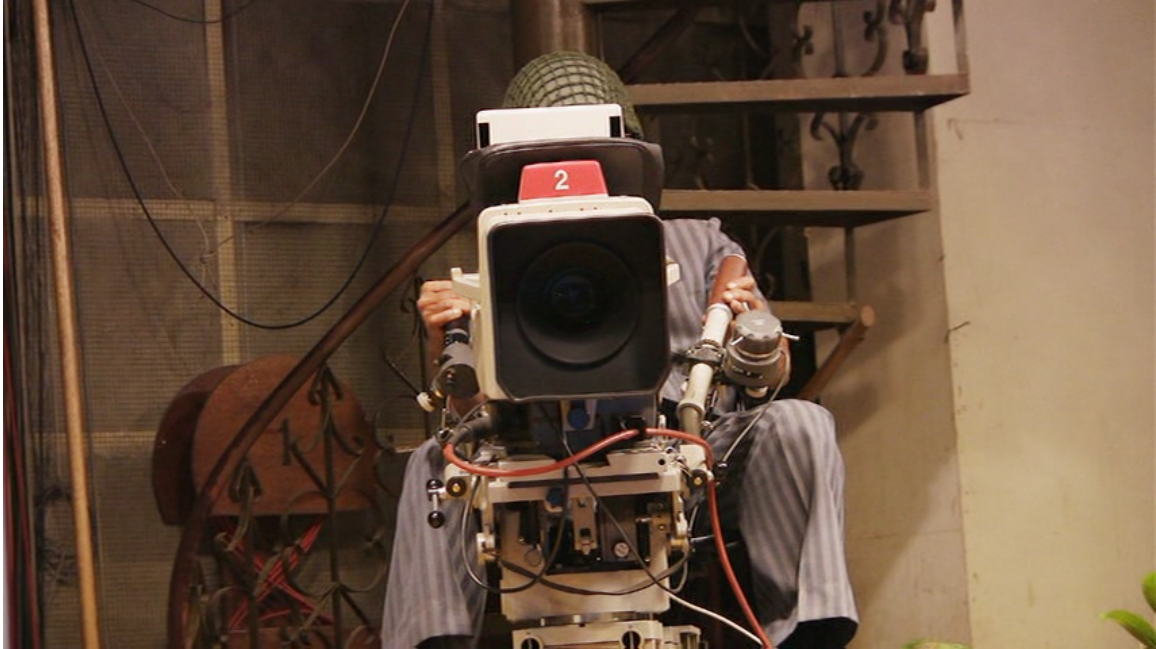


Figure 24. Screenshots from The Act of Killing (© 2012)

This becomes powerfully evident, a bit later, when we see the re-enactment of the village burning, the casting for which was depicted earlier. The laughter and frivolity of that scene turns to shock and terror once the shooting of the re-enactment is over. Several participants are very clearly traumatized.²⁸



Figure 25. Screenshots from The Act of Killing (© 2012)



Figure 26. Screenshots from *The Act of Killing* (© 2012)



Figure 27. Screenshots from *The Act of Killing* (© 2012)

Regarding this scene, Congo remarks “Honestly, I never expected it would look this awful. My friends keep telling me to act more sadistic, but then I saw the women and children. Imagine those children’s future. They’ve been tortured...Now their houses will be burned down. What future do they have? They will curse us for the rest of their lives.” The girl (“Febby”) in the

picture above is Koto's daughter, recruited for the film, and she's been emotionally shattered. Congo's own "tribe" has now experienced trauma, in at least some simulated fashion, and the negative empathic bonding he had enjoyed has been ruptured by empathic trauma, causing him to rethink the experience of his victims.

So begins Anwar's very delayed, incremental epiphany regarding the moral calamity he has wrought. This tiny bit of perspective taking, present in that last bit of empathetic dialogue, gives way to a scene that depicts Congo talking about judgment: "Karma.... A law straight from God" and a "terrifying" darkness surrounding him. For this moment, whatever empathy did in him in this moment is quickly displaced by a sense of self-preservation, fear of judgment, and concern over consequences.

The next scene heightens this dynamic. Congo plays a communist being tortured for information (with everyone dressed up as gangsters, see still image, above). And, so, he embodies his victims one step further than the rooftop scene. He plays the victim in the strangulation. He is visibly disturbed after a scene with a knife in his face, and then has an emotional breakdown after a shot in which he is faux-strangled by a wire garotte. He is so emotionally distraught afterwards he cannot go on filming, and there is some hope that he is finally beginning to understand, on an experiential level, what his victims endured.

"The body keeps the score," Bessel van der Kolk writes.²⁹ The quote from Congo's fellow murderer Adi Zulkadry, above, suggests a kind of moral trauma of guilt on the part of the killers that must be suppressed and denied, and Zulkadry himself claims extraordinary success in this regard.³⁰ However, could it be that the corporeal knowledge builds and builds in a kind of corporeal economy that eventually tips from somatic empathy into the realm of cognitive empathy? It doesn't quite happen here, but, in yet another alarming reversal, it does seem to occur in the next scene.

CONCLUSION: TRAUMATIC CINEMA, EVIL, AND OTHER EPISTEMOLOGICAL TANGLES

In the first section of this essay, I described the opening "movie set" scene and how we were inclined to shelve moral incomprehension for surreal entertainment. Now we can begin to imagine how a minority culture might receive this scene if it were epistemologically and ethically exhausted, knowing only a broken, distorted language, with little means of expression.

Toward the end of the film, just before Congo's epiphany, we return to that scene. Contextual information, withheld from us before, is now readily apparent. Two (previously unseen) men remove steel wires from their necks. One takes a medal of honor from his pocket and places it over Congo's head, before the waterfall.



Figure 28. Screenshots from The Act of Killing (© 2012)

“For executing me and sending me to heaven, I thank you a thousand times, for everything,” he says.

The film suddenly cuts to Congo watching this scene on his home television. He gushes with enthusiasm: “I never imagined I could make something so great. One thing that makes me so proud is how the waterfall expresses such deep feelings!”

He then eagerly requests to see the gangster scene, wherein he is “strangled.” He requests his young grandsons get out of bed to “watch the scene where grandpa is tortured and killed,” rebuffing admonitions that the scene is too violent. Congo himself becomes more and more disturbed as he watches himself on screen.

“Did the people I tortured feel the way I do here?” he suddenly asks. “I can feel what the people I tortured felt, because here my dignity has been destroyed... and then the fear comes, right there and then. All the terror suddenly possessed my body. It surrounded me, and possessed me.”

Oppenheimer responds, off camera: “Actually, the people you tortured felt far worse – because you know it’s only a film. They knew they were being killed.”

“But I can feel it, Josh. Really. I feel it. Or have I sinned? I did this to so many people, Josh.”

He starts to cry.

“Is it all coming back to me? I really hope it won’t. I don’t want it to, Josh.”

The final scene of the film depicts Congo ascending to the same rooftop execution site he showed us before. “I know it was wrong – but I had to do it.” He says.

And then he starts to retch. And retch again. And again. And again.

The visceral power of the scene is heightened by the abnormally loud, undeniably corporeal sound of the retching, which is voiced directly into the lavalier microphone on Congo’s shirt.

So, the aesthetics of rationalization yield to the aesthetics of trauma. The empathic revelation we have sought finally arrives, but with an ironic vengeance. The pain of acting out the scene was not enough. It took *seeing himself* on the screen, with some experiential distance from the moment (what Gregory Currie has described as a cinematic “running one’s emotions off-line”³¹) to *connect* his own suffering to those of his victims. It took the mediated image—the very medium that had catalyzed so many of his crimes—to present a distanced and yet potent simulation of his own trauma, and “really feel” the suffering of his victims.

To take him at his word, a kind of moral empathy does good work in Congo, in the end, though the road has been long and halting, and required extraordinary intervention on Oppenheimer’s part. The experience of acting permitted Congo to acquire a vocabulary of suffering at the experiential level, at the image schematic level (as Mark Johnson might describe it³²). That vocabulary, in itself, is not enough, but the cinema eventually provided the impetus to *morally utilize* those experiences. It was out of Congo’s new experience that the words finally came.

The body keeps the score, but the cinema preserves the body in time, not in the dead “mummified” way André Bazin suggested,³³ but as an empathetic call to the senses of those who are still among the living.

However, the experience of this film has taught us of the limitations and ethical indeterminacy of both the cinema and empathy. We have some (small) hope for Congo now, but this does not explain why it took so long, how efficacious this change will be long-term, or how we could begin to care for the multitude of unseen victims. This society’s enormously propagandistic structure, built to sustain the rationalization of genocide, still stands. If we care to

follow this experience through, we must interrogate propagandistic structures everywhere, including those we find in the West.

The Act of Killing is a truly complex rumination on morality, seeking to experientially traverse the aesthetic and emotional terrain of great moral failure. The “problem” is not knowing the historical truth in this film, but rather that the truth (and, thus, the “right” or “good”) seems powerless and inaccessible in the wake of surreality. There is no clear “message” here, except a warning of the depths of human evil and the exceedingly strange mental and emotional gymnastics one can perform to avoid personal guilt or responsibility. The audience finds itself—paradoxically—*alone* in the moral equation, limited to observation, and powerless amid the dynamics that normalize injustice.

Indeed, the primary emotional contours of this film are characterized by repeating cycle of surprise, fascination, incredulity, vexation, and bewilderment. This is by design, accomplishing multiple objectives: they highlight and interrogate moral intuitions (over moral reasoning), simulate personal and national trauma, and mirror the incoherent spirals of ethical avoidance.

So much of this stems from the need and desire to “get inside the heads” of killers, and fruits of our efforts are unclear, difficult to accept, and beg even more questions. This is, perhaps, because these killers do not fit easily into our expectations of how human beings behave, guilty or innocent. What’s more, there is little access to victims; instead, most of our time has been spent in the warped universe of killers, who fancy themselves entertainers and artists. Given who they are, we may also struggle with their credibility. For most of the film we have been taxed, challenged to avoid our natural inclinations towards empathy with most of the characters we have seen, to resist empathy for the moral good.

The film deliberately and relentlessly presents us with scenarios where our intuitive and categorical moral faculties fail to harmonize. This is a cinematic, experiential correlate to the “loss of language” that accompanies great pain and trauma, as well as suggesting something about tensions involved in the rationalization of evil. Likewise, we are implicated in the moral equation, as we have consumed this film, as well as the film within the film.

All this problematizes recent theories of ethics that largely build upon empathy, suggesting that empathy may be “natural,” but an ethical empathy is quite difficult work, and not always as efficacious for ethical behavior as it is sometimes portrayed. This raises dark questions about human nature and points to the need for other measures of ethics to supplement empathy.

In the end, we don’t fully disbelieve what we see and feel. We just struggle to believe that this experiential reality can fully account for it.

¹ This, admittedly, pedestrian summation of ethics reflects the common amalgamation of various ethical theories that still abide in the West. Immanuel Kant, famously, put forth a dramatically normative “deontological” ethics over the moral sense theory (“sentimentalism”) of his day, and I believe it’s fair to say that most people operate on (at least) both these theories at different times, with consequentialism thrown in (for good measure), and attempt to harmonize them. Assuming “pedestrian” views of things is, of course, very imprecise, but I have generalized ethics in this way for a particular purpose: this is not an essay on moral intuitional or ideal ethical theories, but on the *experience* of having them, and how the film manipulates and challenges these amalgamations of theory and intuition in our ethical lives. This is most pronounced in the contemporary concern for “empathy,” for which, President Barack Obama famously claimed, we suffer a “deficit” (in a speech for the gala for K.I.D.S./Fashion Delivers, December 4, 2006, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4md_A059JRc). In this way, the analysis here is more phenomenological and aesthetic than argumentative, and I admit I am generalizing from a broadly Western perspective with hopes of transcending it. I do believe, however, at this very general level, this ethical posture does have at least *some significant* compatibility across many cultures and ethical theories, particularly in regard to some of the largest issues in this film, which have received broad, international attention over the last century (e.g., genocide, ethnic cleansing, etc.).

² To take one potent example, see the special issue of a prominent academic journal dedicated entirely to this film. Ed. Thomas Fenton, *Critical Asian Studies*, 46:1 (2014) contains a wide range of thoughtful opinions and interpretations of the film.

³ The reader must judge me right or wrong, but, in the end, I maintain that some variance in reception is precisely what we should expect from such a complex film. However, based on widely accepted principles of human psychology, I still maintain that some broad generalizations about the emotional shape of this film can be made and made productively.

⁴ For example, the desire for human beings to universally view genocide as evil is in keeping with the position of the United Nations (see the U.N. General Assembly Resolution 260: https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocities-crimes/Doc.I_Convention%20on%20the%20Prevention%20and%20Punishment%20of%20the%20Crime%20of%20Genocide.pdf). However, clearly, the provocative question hanging over this film is “Why is such a resolution necessary? Why is this not the state of world affairs?”

⁵ This essay, in its attempt to capture a kind of experiential contour of ethics in cinematic encounter, assumes a certain trust in the filmmaker and its subjects. One could view the film more critically than I do here, and perhaps one should (Oppenheimer has not fully escaped criticism for some of his methods, see Ed. Fenton, *Critical Asian Studies*), but the assumption here is that most viewers will receive the film as Oppenheimer’s own, native experience, and will generally trust his framing of the issues, even as they negotiate the complex “realities” they experience throughout the film. This whole issue is difficult to summarize, however, because so much of the film *confesses* manipulation in light of its artificial construct (i.e., giving criminals the means to cinematically fantasize about their own histories). Likewise, there are clearly temporal manipulations (which Oppenheimer doesn’t hide) where scenes are presented sequentially that were clearly not shot sequentially (e.g., the obvious changing color of Congo’s hair, back and forth, between scenes). In these cases, I am choosing to believe that Oppenheimer is editing thematically, rather than sequentially, and doing so as a means of presenting a portrait of a man as accurately as he can perceive the man himself. This is, of course, a contestable judgment, but that feeling of contestation also, *itself*, becomes part of the confounding, bewildering ethical dynamic of the film.

⁶ As Robert Sinnerbrink, Tom Wartenberg and others have argued, this is film-philosophy, which is to say it “does” philosophy by its own unique, aesthetic and experiential means. The familiar “contents” of philosophical ethics are present, but largely hang as constellations around a core set of experiences. Films “do” philosophy by having the audience *live through* philosophically steeped situations, cinematically. This process yields philosophical insights and sets the terms of philosophical debate in ways that rational thinking, alone, cannot. Indeed, this film often strategically undercuts the rational, but does so as a critique of moral intuition as sufficient unto itself, suggesting that moral reasoning remains intuition’s essential partner. See Sinnerbrink, Robert *New Philosophies of Film* (London: Continuum, 2011) and Wartenberg, Tom, *Thinking on Screen: Film as Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

⁷ See Haidt, Jonathan, “The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment”, *Psychological Review* 108.4 (2001): 814-834) as well as *The Righteous Mind: Why*

Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion (New York: Pantheon, 2012), and Damásio, António, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain* (New York: GP Putnam, 1994).

⁸ See Nagel's review of Haidt's *The Righteous Mind*, entitled "The Taste for Being Moral", *The New York Review of Books*, December 6, 2012, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2012/12/06/taste-being-moral/> (accessed June 24, 2019).

⁹ Cöegnarts, Maarten and Peter Kravanja, *Embodied Cognition and Cinema* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2015), 171-4.

¹⁰ It's worth noting this is precisely the opposite of the Classic Hollywood model of screenwriting, wherein the story world is comprehensively defined and the moral stakes of the story clearly laid out.

¹¹ McIntyre, Lee, *Post-Truth*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2018).

¹² See Hatfield Elaine, Richard L. Rapson, and Yen-Chi Le, "Emotional Contagion and Empathy," and van Baaren, Rick B., Jean Decety, Ap Bijksterhuis, Andries van der Leij, and Matthijs L. van Leeuwen, "Being Imitated: Consequences of Nonconsciously Showing Empathy," in Eds. Decety, Jean and William Ickes, *The Social Neuroscience of Empathy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2009).

¹³ Such is Oppenheimer's claim. Goldberg, Matt. "Director Joshua Oppenheimer talks *The Act of Killing*, How the Film Has Affected Indonesia, Seeing Horror through Cinematic Prism, the Director's Cut," *Collider* (online), (January 9, 2014) <http://collider.com/joshua-oppenheimer-the-act-of-killing-interview/> (accessed June 29, 2019).

¹⁴ Scarry, Elaine, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 4.

¹⁵ Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, chapter 1.

¹⁶ There are many resources on empathy, but some of the main ones guiding this essay are Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie's *Empathy: Philosophical Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), Decety and Ickes' *The Social Neuroscience of Empathy*, and Jane Stadler's *Pulling Focus: Intersubjective Experience, Narrative Film, and Ethics* (London: Continuum, 2008).

¹⁷ Sinnerbrink, Robert, *Cinematic Ethics: Exploring Ethical Experience through Film* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 94-95.

¹⁸ One of the virtues of Sinnerbrink's elegant construct is that it encompasses and tames a lot of the confusion surrounding empathy as a term. As C. Daniel Batson notes there are at least eight uses of the term in the social scientific and psychological literature. See Batson, Daniel, "These Things Called Empathy: Eight Related but Distinct Phenomena", Ed. Decety and Ickes, *The Social Neuroscience of Empathy*, 3-15.

¹⁹ While Sinnerbrink clearly regards this film highly, and sees it as ethically productive, he does not fully articulate how his "cinempathy" construct operates within the film, despite giving a whole chapter to the film in his book. I argue that it doesn't easily work here, and this is both deliberate and significant.

²⁰ See Vittorio Gallese and Michele Guerra, *The Empathic Screen: Cinema and Neuroscience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

²¹ Hanich, Julian, *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers: The Aesthetic Paradox of Pleasurable Fear* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 181-3.

²² "...[W]e are 'homo empathicus,'" he states. Breithaupt, Fritz, *The Dark Sides of Empathy* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2019), 7.

²³ Bloom, Paul, *Against Empathy* (New York: Harper Collins, 2016).

²⁴ Bloom, *Against Empathy*, chapter 5 ("Violence and Cruelty").

²⁵ Prinz, Jesse, "Against Empathy," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 49, no. 1 (2011): 214-33.

²⁶ Breithaupt, *The Dark Sides*, chapters 3-5. Note that negative empathies are not limited to the pathological or wickedly motivated. Breithaupt also critiques helicopter parenting and German Chancellor Angela Merkel's humanitarian refugee policies as misguided, unproductive empathies, for instance.

²⁷ Examples are not difficult to find today, having emerged from influential research on "perspective taking" exercises among children in the 1970s: Iannotti, Ronald J. "Effect of role-taking experiences on role taking, empathy, altruism, and aggression", *Developmental Psychology* 14, no. 2 (1978): 119, Iannotti, R. J., "Naturalistic and structured assessments of prosocial behavior in preschool children: The influence of empathy and perspective taking", *Developmental Psychology*, 21 no.1 (1985): 46-55, Paula B. Boorman, "Biography and Role Playing: Fostering Empathy in Abnormal Psychology," *Teaching of Psychology*, 29 [1] (2002): 32-36.

²⁸ It is unclear in the film, but Oppenheimer has clarified that he never knowingly cast a victim in the film (he explains that no one knew Suryono was the stepchild of a victim until after the scene was shot, due to a language gap). The children in the burning scene are all the children and relatives of gangsters and perpetrators. The old woman who dramatically faints during filming is, in fact, the wife of an executioner who publicly announced, in a previous scene, “God hates communists. There will be no reconciliation.” She claimed she fainted because she was “possessed” of a spirit. See Oppenheimer, Joshua, “When Killers Played Victims,” *The New York Review of Books* (online), (November 19, 2015) <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2015/11/19/when-killers-played-victims/> (accessed June 30, 2019).

²⁹ Kolk, Bessel van der, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Viking, 2014).

³⁰ Over emotionally contrapuntal scenes of an upscale shopping mall visit with his family, he recounts his crimes in merciless detail (“We shoved wood in their anus until they died... we ran them over with cars...,” etc.). In the end, Zulkadry and his cohorts were never punished, and “there’s nothing to be done about it.” The victims “have to accept it.” Remarkably, Zulkadry claims “I’ve never felt guilty, never been depressed, never had nightmares.”

³¹ Currie, Gregory, *Image and Mind: Film, Philosophy, and Cognitive Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 144.

³² Johnson, Mark, *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

³³ Bazin, André, *What is Cinema? Vol. 1.* (2nd ed.) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 9.