The Humanity of Evil:
Bahá'í Reflections on *The Act of Killing*

Bernardo Bortolin Kerr
September 2014

Dissertation submitted as partial requirement for the degree of
MA in Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Nottingham

Contents

Abstract

This paper is a theological study of evil and the treatment of evil, approaching the subject through an exploration of the 2012 documentary *The Act of Killing*, directed by Joshua Oppenheimer, and the scriptures of the Bahá'í Faith. Throughout the paper I draw on the already vast quantity of text written in response to the film, including numerous interviews, articles and essays. I also draw on the texts of various key thinkers, such as Paulo Freire, Paul Ricoeur and Stanley Cavell, among others. I begin the paper by looking at the part evil plays in a Bahá'í theological, or spiritual, anthropology, referring also to the theory of evil exposed in Pseudo-Dionysius' *The Divine Names* and drawing on the many illuminating comments on evil made by Oppenheimer himself. From this section I move on to a study of the ways in which the human is dehumanised by acts of evil, most of all the perpetrator, who dehumanises himself by the mere intention of harming another. I particularly focus on the ways in which the characters in the film demonstrate a disordered sense of value. In the next section I examine the way in which the very approach of the film, which centres on the perpetrators re-enacting their crimes, leads to them recognising their alienation from their own humanity, from their own selves, reflected in the fantasy of their narratives of justification. I then explore how, as the audience, we must in turn see ourselves reflected in the characters on the screen if we are to overcome, both in ourselves and in others, the dehumanisation, and its perpetuation, that we might suffer in even our most seemingly inconsequential acts of evil. Finally, I conclude with a section on forgiveness, in which I suggest an approach to forgiveness that, using the "mirroring" effect of the film, neither merely forgets nor clings to blame, instead seeking a merciful love that is itself the most just punishment.

Introduction: *The Act of Killing*

The Act of Killing[1] had its premiere in September 2012 at the Telluride Film Festival. Joshua Oppenheimer, the director, has described it as "a documentary of the imagination",[2] while Nick Fraser, a commissioning editor of the BBC's *Storyville* documentary series and perhaps the film's most recognised critic, has called it a "snuff movie".[3] The reasons for both of these descriptions might be made more apparent by an overview of the film itself.

Ostensibly the documentary takes as its subject the Indonesian genocide of 1965-1966, led by General Suharto, for which the number of dead is estimated to range between 250,000 and 3 million. Supposedly aimed at eliminating the Communist Party (PKI) after a failed coup staged on 30 September 1965 to overthrow President Sukarno, its scope was somewhat less focused than this might suggest, taking in anyone the military decided had to be "purged", which, among others associated or not with the PKI, included anyone of Chinese ethnicity. The focus was particularly difficult to define and the number particularly difficult to track because much of the killing was carried out by state-sanctioned civilian death-squads, made up mostly of paramilitary groups and gangsters. In a secret report from 1968, the CIA, who supported the killings, described it as "one of the worst mass murders of the 20th century",[4] and yet until *The Act of Killing* brought it to international attention it had not been widely spoken of outside Indonesia and spoken of only in hushed tones in most parts of the country itself.

Perhaps the crucial reason for this silence within Indonesia has been what Ariel Heryanto calls the "master narrative"[5] propagated by the "New Order" regime in the decades since the genocide. While the killings are not necessarily spoken of entirely openly, everyone is aware of them, but more than this, everyone is aware of the supposed justifications, and more importantly than this, the narratives of justification are widely accepted to the extent of no longer being seen as justifications, but as facts. In such an acceptance these narratives are interwoven with the patterns of daily life – of emotional and, as we will go on to discuss, of spiritual life. These narratives of justification are most centrally canonised in the four and a half hour 1984 film *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI*, which translates as *Treachery of the 30 September Movement*, and depicts the supposed communist uprising with a level of brutality not evidenced by the coroner's reports. A telling embellishment is the scene that shows a group of communist women castrating and mutilating one of the assassinated generals. Meanwhile, the film makes no reference to the hundreds of thousands of "communists" massacred in the purges that followed. Of a poll carried out in the secondary schools of Indonesia's three largest cities in 2000,

---

[1] This essay refers primarily to the director's cut of the film. All quotations are from this version. *The Act of Killing*, directed by Joshua Oppenheimer (2012; Norway, Denmark, UK: Dogwoof Pictures, 2013), DVD

[2] Joshua Oppenheimer in the booklet for the British DVD release

[3] Nick Fraser, "*The Act of Killing*: don't give an Oscar to this snuff movie," *The Guardian*, 23 February 2014, accessed 27 August 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/feb/23/act-of-killing-dont-give-oscar-snuff-movie-indonesia

[4] Jonah Weiner, "The Weird Genius of *The Act of Killing*," *The New Yorker*, 15 July 2013, accessed 7 September 2014, http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-weird-genius-of-the-act-of-killing

[5] Ariel Heryanto, *State Terrorism and Political Identity in Indonesia: Fatally Belonging* (London: Routledge, 2006), 5

Heryanto writes, "to the question of where they had learned the history of the 1965 events, 90 percent responded 'film'. As there was only one film on the subject, there is no ambiguity as to which film they were referring to."[6] Indeed, the film was compulsory yearly viewing until Suharto's resignation in 1998, and it should be noted that even after the superficial changes that came with this resignation, little changed in the national treatment of the genocide.

So, it is in this climate, in which a government-sponsored slasher movie serves to keep the past at arm's length and the present in the grip of those who would cling to power, that Oppenheimer has made his film. What started as a documentary on the survivors of the genocide became one about the many civilian killers, often living on the same street as the survivors, after the filmmakers encountered endless obstacles posed by the army. While they were prevented from filming the accounts of the survivors, the army were happy to allow, and even assist with, access to the men who participated in the killings, who were in turn more than willing to provide their own versions of events, boasting about every horrific detail, often accompanying these accounts with physical gestures and re-enactments. The survivors' responses to these interviews, as Oppenheimer describes, were encouraging: "You are on to something terribly important. Keep filming the perpetrators, because anybody who sees this will be forced to acknowledge the rotten heart of the regime the killers have built."[7] From this premise Oppenheimer went on to offer the killers the opportunity to create film scenes, in whatever style they wanted, that would give him an insight into their roles in the massacres and into their lives since 1965. As he put it to them, "You want to show me what you've done. So go ahead, in any way you wish. I will also film you and your fellow death-squad veterans discussing what you want to show and, just as importantly, what you want to leave out. In this way, we will be able to document what this means to your society, and what it means to you."[8] This, as might be expected, is where the film gains its controversy, but also its radical access to a subject previously kept so deftly veiled.

What results is a documentary about the making of a film that was never intended to exist (something the participants knew all along, contrary to accusations made by some critics; "they were told from the outset that there's no other film, […] we asked them to create scenes – scenes – about the killings"[9]), but more profoundly it is a documentary about the narratives such a film would comprise of. That is, the boastful and celebratory narratives that created a space in which the murders could be committed and in which the killers could then live, apparently untouched by the horror of their crimes. But in the process of making the documentary the killers found, to varying degrees, that such spaces are strangely fragile and that the overwhelming reality of their actions is kept at bay only by a thin smokescreen. This exploration of evil and the veils that keep its workings intact,

---

[6] Ariel Heryanto, "Screening the 1965 Violence," in *Killer Images: Documentary Film, Memory and the Performance of Violence*, ed. Joram Ten Brink and Joshua Oppenheimer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 224-240, 225

[7] Joshua Oppenheimer, "*The Act of Killing* has helped Indonesia reassess its past and present," *The Guardian*, 25 February 2014, accessed 30 August 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/feb/25/the-act-of-killing-indonesia-past-present-1965-genocide

[8] Ibid.

[9] Nick Bradshaw, "Build my gallows high: Joshua Oppenheimer on *The Act of Killing*," *Sight & Sound*, 15 April 2014, accessed 6 September 2014, http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/interviews/build-my-gallows-high-joshua-oppenheimer-act-killing

conducted somewhat unwittingly by the evildoers themselves, is the true subject of the film.

In turn, we, as audience members, are presented with something that challenges our very notions of good and evil, or perhaps more importantly, our notions of how we deal with good and evil. We are faced with people who have committed crimes of such brutality that we struggle to comprehend them, but who seemingly live in a state of total impunity. Even when the main protagonist, Anwar Congo, begins to experience something approaching remorse for his actions, he is still so deeply saturated with the lie of impunity that he never quite reaches an unmistakable point of contrition. What can we do but, as one reviewer described, "settle into helpless numbness"?[10] Do we take Zizek's strange praise for the film at face value when he describes it as "maybe one of the most morally depressing films that I've seen",[11] or is there a possibility of hope precisely in these depths of horror? If we are horrified, to our very core, then what do we *do* with this horror? In this paper, using the insights of a Bahá'í theological anthropology, I will suggest that if we see not "monsters" but humans, and beyond this, *ourselves*, on the screen, then there is a possibility of overcoming the numbness and depression we might otherwise sink into. If, instead of asking how people can do these things, we ask ourselves how *we* can do these things. In its 1985 statement *The Promise of World Peace*, the Universal House of Justice, the international governing body of the Bahá'í Faith, wrote,

> Indeed, so much have aggression and conflict come to characterise our social, economic and religious systems, that many have succumbed to the view that such behaviour is intrinsic to human nature and therefore ineradicable.
>
> With the entrenchment of this view, a paralysing contradiction has developed in human affairs. On the one hand, people of all nations proclaim not only their readiness but their longing for peace and harmony, for an end to the harrowing apprehensions tormenting their daily lives. On the other, uncritical assent is given to the proposition that human beings are incorrigibly selfish and aggressive and thus incapable of erecting a social system at once progressive and peaceful, dynamic and harmonious, a system giving free play to individual creativity and initiative but based on co-operation and reciprocity.[12]

Are we to be paralysed by the distortions of humanity we see on the screen and in our daily lives, or are we to see hope at every level? Indeed, as Paulo Freire writes, "unhopeful educators contradict their practise. They are men and women without *address*, and without a destination. They are lost in history."[13] Inasmuch as we all seek in some sense to learn and grow, and inasmuch as our "influence educateth the world of being",[14] we are all educators, lost in hopelessness or progressing in clarity. How can we teach of genocide without teaching how to see it with hope?

---

[10] Nicolas Rapold, "Toronto 2012 Diary: *The Act of Killing*," *Film Comment*, 9 September 2012, accessed 7 September 2014, http://www.filmcomment.com/entry/toronto-the-act-of-killing-joshua-oppenheimer

[11] Slavoj Zizek, "It's the End of the World as We Know It" (paper presented at the Nuit Blanche Symposium, Toronto, 29 September 2012), accessed 16 August 2014, http://vimeo.com/86759949

[12] The Universal House of Justice, *The Promise of World Peace* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1985), 2-3

[13] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Heart* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 107

[14] Bahá'u'lláh, *Writings of Bahá'u'lláh: A Compilation* (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2001), 516

Amongst the strongly voiced criticisms the film has received, alongside the overwhelming international praise, one of the main points that has troubled critics has been the film's lack of factual historicism, focusing as it does primarily on the narratives described by the genocidaires. Jennifer Merin's remarks exemplify this criticism: "This film isn't a study about the genocide. It does not report on or investigate any incidents, nor does it focus on facts. Instead, it frames its subject in a circuitous, impressionistic way, as a sort of surreal fantasy. As a filmmaker's conceit."[15] However, as Oppenheimer has made clear, his intention was never to make what we tend to think of as historical documentary: "*The Act of Killing* is not a documentary about a genocide 50 years ago. […] The film is not a historical narrative."[16] Indeed, it is precisely the *ahistoricism* of the film that I see as its greatest strength, or to put it differently, it is the way that it thus documents a timeless history of the genocides great and small we are all capable of in the present. In this sense it does expose the historical events that allowed the genocide and the subsequent impunity to have come to be, by exposing the processes of imagination, justification and emotion that gave them grounding in the minds and lives of the perpetrators – the "genocidal imaginary".[17] It is not simply about "the genocide", but rather about violence, and the human capacity for it, with the very form of the film showing a possible way of addressing this capacity and turning it from evil towards good. So, it is by seeing history embodied in the timeless form of the human being, at the heart of history, that we find in this film the hope Freire speaks of.

With this in mind we begin the paper by examining the place evil plays in a Bahá'í spiritual anthropology, drawing also on Pseudo-Dionysius' *The Divine Names* for its treatment of evil and relating these principles to the representations of humanity we see in the film. We move on to explore the dehumanisation suffered by perpetrators of evil in their dehumanisation of others, with particular reference to the disordered systems of value we witness in the film. From here we explore the way in which the film's method functions to face the killers with the fragile nature of their justifications, by drawing them out into the view of the camera and the audience and breaching the illusory divide of public and private language. In turn I suggest how the film must face us, the audience, with a reflection of ourselves, so that our response might be immediate and driven by love, rather than deferred to a hypothetical meeting with a distant evil. Finally I conclude by proposing an approach to forgiveness that neither merely forgets nor clings to blame, but in which it is the return of the wrongdoer to a full humanity that acts as the greatest punishment and the greatest mercy – that is, the greatest justice.

---

[15] Jennifer Merin, "A Genocide Exploitation Film," *About Entertainment*, 6 July 2014, accessed 28 August 2014, http://documentaries.about.com/od/revie2/fr/The-Act-Of-Killing-Movie-Review-2013.htm

[16] Oppenheimer, "Reassess"

[17] Stuart Klawans, "The Executioner's Song," *Film Comment*, July 2013, accessed 7 September 2014, http://www.filmcomment.com/article/the-executioners-song

A Theological Anthropology of Evil: Humanity

> When your Lord said to the angels: "I am placing on the earth one that shall rule as My deputy," they replied: "Will You put there one that will do evil and shed blood, when we have for so long sung Your praises and sanctified Your name?" He said: "I know what you know not."
> – Qur'an 2:30[18]

In response to a question referencing Hannah Arendt's notion of the "banality of evil", Joshua Oppenheimer suggested that *The Act of Killing* takes a subtly different perspective: "You talk about the banality of evil, but what I think the film is really exploring, somehow, is the *humanity* of evil; the involvement of our humanity and morality – not immorality – in the practise of evil."[19] In another interview Oppenheimer remarked that humanity is "not something antithetical to evil. It's not like there is a good part of us – a moral part of us – and an evil part of us. Even inside the individual."[20] It was the first of these comments and another from the same interview, which I will refer to in the final section, on forgiveness, that inspired this dissertation.

Throughout the film we see people who have committed horrific acts of violence, but who also lead seemingly comfortable lives, caring for their families and joking with their friends. If we are to avoid falling into the traps of despair or numbness – of saying either that there is nothing good in these people and that their semblances of humanity are false, or that we can brutalise other human beings and remain entirely untouched – then we must ask ourselves how we can find a radical good veiled in the midst of evil and how evil lurks in the veils of comfort that masquerade as good. In other words we must ask ourselves how good can be found in all things, while at the same time transcending all appearances, and yet also how we can retain a way of identifying and overcoming evil. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Centre of the Covenant and son of Bahá'u'lláh, founder of the Bahá'í Faith, is particularly edifying on this topic, explaining in several instances, "in the creation of God there is no evil; but the acquired capacity has become the cause of the appearance of evil." He goes on in this particular passage to say that evil, then, is something perpetuated by a straining away from our nature, describing how "man begins little by little to accustom himself to poison" until "the natural capacities are thus completely perverted."[21] It is instructive to note that such discussions on evil rapidly lead to a study of evil in human nature, and not simply evil as an abstract force; as we will go on to see, it is in the human that this seemingly abstract force becomes most concentrated

---

[18] Here and elsewhere all Qur'anic passages are taken from the translation of NJ Dawood.
[19] Luke Goodsell, "Interview: Oscar-nominated *Act of Killing* Director on the Humanity of Evil," *Rotten Tomatoes*, 17 January 2014, accessed 18 January 2014, http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_act_of_killing/news/1929435/interview_oscar-nominated_act_of _killing_director_on_the_humanity_of_evil/
[20] Lisa Rainwater, "Behind the Scrim of Humanity: An Interview with Joshua Oppenheimer," *Galo Magazine*, 29 January 2014, accessed 2 September 2014, http://www.galomagazine.com/movies-tv/behind-the-scrim-of-humanity-an-interview-with-joshua-oppenheimer-academy-award-nominee-for-best-documentary-feature-the-act-of-killing/
[21] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2001), 214

and embodied. Indeed, in another text He refers to "the insistent self, the evil promptings of the human heart".[22]

It is perhaps useful at this point to turn to Pseudo-Dionysius, who examines evil similarly but with particular reference to the names of God. In *The Divine Names* he discusses the many names derived from scripture, starting with the name "Good", "which the sacred writers have preeminently set apart for the supra-divine God from all other names."[23] During the chapter that mainly focuses on this name he also includes a prolonged study of evil, making particular use of the name "Being", which he looks at in depth in the chapter that follows. By using these two names and identifying Being with Good, he situates evil as a "deficiency of the Good",[24] a corruption of full Being, and writes of demons, which we might consider as more abstract forms of evil, as "evil insofar as they have fallen away from the virtues proper to them."[25] At another point he writes that "evil is not a being; for if it were it would not be totally evil. Nor is it a nonbeing; for nothing is completely a nonbeing, unless it is said to be in the Good in the sense of beyond-being."[26] Perhaps the crux of Dionysius' treatment of evil is that it is evil precisely because it fails to complete even itself – evil is evil *because* it is not absolute: "Nor will evil itself exist if it acts as evil upon itself, and unless it does this then evil is not entirely evil."[27]

To put it differently, God, or Good, "the most manifest of the manifest and the most hidden of the hidden"[28] in the words of Bahá'u'lláh, is a perfect paradox, His presence and His inaccessibility one and the same thing – Himself – because both (and all other attributes of God) are absolute, one by virtue of the other, while evil is partially one and partially the other. In other words, absolute evil does not ultimately exist, because it is ultimately its own nonexistence, and in this sense it is an illusory state that humans are uniquely capable of falling into precisely because we are conscious of non-contingency in a world of contingent things. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá puts it, "all evils return to nonexistence. Good exists; evil is nonexistent."[29] There is no evil in God, because in its absolute fulfilment it *evils* itself out of existence, so to speak, and inasmuch as we can say that evil exists in the human, it is in our failings to fulfil our capacity for good and thus bring it to bear upon the aggressive imperfection of evil. As I will go on to discuss in relation to *The Act of Killing*, evil is manifested when we refuse to examine our notions of good and evil, even of comfort and discomfort, and it perpetuates itself precisely as a mechanism for keeping such fundamental examinations at a distance, fulfilling neither good nor evil.

Following the verse from the Qur'an that opens this section we read that God "taught Adam the names" and that this caused all the angels except Iblis, Satan, to "bow down before Adam" and accept God's wisdom. The word "names" has been taken to mean both the divine names of God and the names of all things, but perhaps between

---

[22] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* (Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1996), 268
[23] Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1987), 71
[24] Ibid, 95
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid, 85
[27] Ibid.
[28] Bahá'u'lláh, *Writings*, 968
[29] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Questions*, 264

these we can understand that God taught Adam – "primordial humanity"[30] – the recognition and love of God "reflected in infinite forms in the reality of all things, […] according to [their] capacity".[31] In this sense, then, the human can be seen as the *barzakh*, to use an Arabic term shared by Islam and the Bahá'í Faith, the isthmus between the Divine and the worldly, between the contingent and the absolute, "the confluence of two seas (*majma' al-bahrayn*) and a *barzakh* ("barrier", "isthmus") between the two realities (*amrayn*)."[32] As 'Abdu'l-Bahá puts it, man "is the end of imperfection and the beginning of perfection. […] Briefly, all the perfections and virtues, and all the vices, are qualities of man."[33] We are, then, the point in creation at which all things in their contingency and imperfection and *therefore* all things in the fullness and perfection of their being in relation are absolutely present at once, *as the human*. "Upon the inmost reality of each and every created thing He hath shed the light of one of His names. […] Upon the reality of man, however, He hath focused the radiance of all of His names, […] and made it a mirror of His own Self."[34] It is in this role that man is in the image of God, the image of the imageless. On this notion, Ricoeur writes that "we should see the image of God not as an imposed mark but as the striking power of human creativity," noting that it is not merely in our subjectivity, our individuality, that we bear this image, as "images of God", but in our inextricable relation to all things: "it is man drawn forward by a progressive expansion of his horizons and oriented towards the vision of God."[35] In reference to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's expositions on theological anthropology, Cole describes such a notion as "a globalist anthropology, in which the unity of humankind is the matrix and *sine qua non* for mature individuation."[36]

What defines the human, we might say, is the capacity to pass through all grades of creation and find in each thing its perfection. Only in "the human spirit, whose mysterious nature inclines it towards transcendence",[37] are all the evils of the world present as their own progressive erasure in fulfilment. But, of course, in this "epic", as Ricoeur calls it, there is necessarily the danger at every step of attaching oneself to a false image of God; that is, a thing in which the paradox of individuality and inextricable relation becomes "broken in two",[38] both rendered imperfect. Relating this explicitly to the language of politics, Peterson reminds us, "apartheid (which means 'apartness') was built on the idea of the irreconcilability of peoples. As such, it contradicts the biblical argument that all humanity is made in the image of God"[39] – not merely because such an ideology disagrees with the biblical description of man, but because it fails to take a

---

[30] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Divine Philosophy* (Boston: Tudor Press, 1918), 177
[31] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Questions*, 295
[32] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, originally printed in Persian in *Star of the West* 5, no. 7 (1914): 110, translated by the Research Department at the Bahá'í World Centre, accessed 19 August 2014, http://bahai-library.com/uhj_research_department_etymologies
[33] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Questions*, 235-236
[34] Bahá'u'lláh, *Writings*, 681
[35] Paul Ricoeur, *History and Truth* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1992), 110-111
[36] Juan R I Cole, "Globalization and Religion in the Thought of 'Abdu'l-Bahá," in *Bahá'í and Globalism*, ed. Margit Warburg, Annika Hvithamar and Morten Warmind (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2005), 55-75, 64
[37] UHJ, *Promise*, 5
[38] Ricoeur, *Truth*, 113
[39] Rodney L Peterson, "A Theology of Forgiveness," in *Forgiveness and Reconciliation*, ed. Raymond G Helmick, S J, and Rodney L Peterson (Pennsylvania: Templeton Foundation Press, 2001), 3-25, 19

complete account of how fundamental apartness is, like evil, its own nonexistence; those who speak in such terms to justify violence fail to understand their own terms fully.

It is precisely this failure to understand, or even examine, one's own terms that we see throughout *The Act of Killing*, and yet by considering the place of evil in an anthropology of "the image of God", we can begin to see how this refusal to understand our own terms thinly veils a fearful recognition of what such an understanding would entail for a life spent without it. As we will go on to see in the following section, it is a corrupt and worldly pedagogy (worldly in the sense of 1 John 2:15-17) that dehumanises us, in its teaching that good can be seen in some things and absolutely not in others, that we can perceive things truthfully by their mere appearances and not in fact by the insight of love, which sees their relation. However, in our inmost essence, before the worldly veils have been taught to us, we are the image of God, shedding light through all things by perceiving only with love – "thy sight is My sight".[40] In this state there is only goodness, but it is grounded on the single condition – which is its own being – that it remain unconditional in a world of conditionality. In other words, the condition that goodness be found in all conditions, or as Bahá'u'lláh writes in His *Hidden Words*: "O Son of Man! Wert thou to speed through the immensity of space and traverse the expanse of heaven, yet thou wouldst find no rest save in submission to Our command and humbleness before Our Face."[41]

So, what this true rest calls for is our lives – lives *fulfilled* in such a giving over to God, and which were therefore never "ours" to begin with, but which nonetheless entail within them, in the contingent nature of all created things, the possibility of imagining otherwise. Our acts of evil, then, arise from the impossible notion, playing itself off in the guise of power, that we can achieve rest in exchange for something less than our lives. We delude ourselves by designating a place for good and a place for evil ("we are good, the communists are evil" or "we are good, the killers are evil"), instead of acknowledging that evil and discomfort are in the worldliness of every created thing and that good and rest for the human are only in the Truth shared by all things. To put it differently, rest and happiness entail a moral, loving treatment of all things. While this is the perfection of our natural state, in that it takes full account of our recognition of the absolute, our "heavenly gift of consciousness",[42] it is also a terrifying prospect to anyone who has turned away from it, its terror proportionate to the distance covered in the attempted escape from it. It is precisely this that we may speak of as the fear of God, as it manifests in a growing fear that we have fallen short of ourselves and which thus draws us back to the object of fear as it spreads, paradoxically diminishing its worldly manifestations as they are each set right in the closing of fearful distances, which are themselves false idols of God. While it requires an experiencing of the saturation of fear it is its resolution in the recognition that absolute fear has no place. As Bahá'u'lláh writes, "he that feareth God shall be afraid of no one except Him".[43]

As we turn to look more closely at *The Act of Killing*, then, it is perhaps useful to take as our starting point the moments at which we most clearly recognise humanity, before we move on to examine the way in which a human becomes a "monster". I am

---

[40] Bahá'u'lláh, *Writings*, 44
[41] Ibid, 43
[42] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* (Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), 258
[43] Bahá'u'lláh, *Writings*, 714

referring in particular to the moments when we see vulnerability – moments of friendship, humour and, perhaps most of all, pain – because it is these that can make sense of the moments of inhumanity, by reminding us of what seems to be absent or at least veiled in such horror. On several occasions Oppenheimer has said of Anwar Congo,

> I lingered on him because somehow I noticed his pain or trauma was involved with the mechanisms of his boasting. Because we're used to looking at people through this sort of bogus moral paradigm of villains and heroes, we assume the boasting points to an absence of morality. But as a non-fiction filmmaker, it's my task to look at the reality that's really there. And they're human. There are no cackling cartoon villains in the world.[44]

Indeed, the cackling of the villain is itself the mask that conceals evil's painful workings, even from the evildoer. I would argue that not only does boasting arise from the vulnerability of guilt, as a means of evading it, but that acts of evil themselves arise from our being born of unconditional love. If we are not shown from a young age the truth of the seeming impossibility that our inescapable openness to the world is in fact our greatest strength – that paradoxically it is our totally vulnerable inextricability from all things that grants us invulnerability – then we find ourselves parodying strength in an imitation of animals not bestowed with the same paradox. We distance ourselves from one thing by designating it as evil, or at least "bad", as the place for unhappiness, because this is the only way we understand how to retain the "good", but in so doing we distort both. In such a state it seems impossible to comprehend that if we can – and we must – recognise the possibility of evil in everything, then it is precisely this that frees us to act upon all things in a continual work of joyful restoration to their proper state of relation. So instead, for every "good" we define a corresponding "evil", for every "God" a "devil", and both are ontologically identical and neither is complete. In actuality, inasmuch as we might speak of a devil, it is precisely as such an incomplete conception of God – a god that asks for only part of our lives. Bahá'u'lláh reminds us, "none have believed in Him except they who, through the power of the Lord of Names, have shattered the idols of their vain imaginings",[45] and in another passage refers to "the gods of [man's] idle fancies – gods that have inflicted such loss upon, and are responsible for the misery of, their wretched worshippers".[46]

It is telling that the scene that inspired Oppenheimer to make the film in the way he did – using re-enactments – is also perhaps the most striking illustration of the above notion. In one of the first scenes we encounter Congo on one of his favoured execution grounds – the roof of a handbag shop – and, after demonstrating with a friend his preferred method of killing by using a wire to strangle his victim, he tells us that he has "tried to forget all this with good music… Dancing… Feeling happy… A little alcohol… A little marijuana… A little… what do you call it? Ecstasy… Once I'd get drunk, I'd 'fly' and feel happy." He dances the cha-cha on the tiles that had once been washed in blood, with the wire hanging around his own neck, and his friend says, "He's a happy

---

[44] Guy Lodge, "Joshua Oppenheimer on what awards really mean for *The Act of Killing*," *Hitfix*, 25 February 2014, accessed 1 September 2014, http://www.hitfix.com/in-contention/joshua-oppenheimer-on-what-awards-really-mean-for-the-act-of-killing#LFjV2573qH6jSi2E.99

[45] Bahá'u'lláh, *Writings*, 652

[46] Ibid, 696

man." In such a grotesque caricature of happiness we certainly see a corruption of humanity, but clear within this distorted image is a profound desperation that he sees no way of addressing. While many of the other genocidaires succeed in giving the impression that their boasts are simple expressions of confidence in their actions, Congo cannot, and with every outrageous celebration he betrays his inescapable pain. I would suggest that he shows what the others merely hide more convincingly; "in earthly riches fear is hidden and peril is concealed".[47]

At the end of the film Congo returns to this location, showing very different emotions. He tries to explain why he killed so many people, but with his feeble justifications comes an almost indescribable sound. The sound is guttural and follows his words through his mouth, but as we watch him retch it seems almost as if his entire body, his entire being even, is working to produce it. While some question the sincerity of his contrition, I would suggest that if we also question the sincerity of his happiness then we must note the change in what he is trying to convince himself and the audience of. Does it begin to open him up to a vulnerability in which he must address his actions? Does it begin to return him to that ineffable recognition with which we are born; that we are both individuals and the body of humanity, born "even as one soul, to walk with the same feet, eat with the same mouth and dwell in the same land"?[48] As Oppenheimer has said, "we had a sense that those moments of trauma would take the journey into a place that's beyond words"[49] – into the heart of humanity. Moreover, does it remind us to care even for this man, "someone suffers and so you empathise – the exact relationship Anwar must deny to go on"?[50] To quote the director once more, "the aim of all art is [to] invite and encourage or force viewers to confront the most painful, mysterious, difficult, strange and unimaginable aspects of who we are".[51]

[47] Ibid, 516
[48] Ibid, 47
[49] Jeremy Elphick, "Joshua Oppenheimer Discusses *The Act of Killing*," *4:3*, 2 May 2014, accessed 30 August 2014, http://fourthreefilm.com/2014/05/interview-joshua-oppenheimer/
[50] Jesse Klein, "*The Act of Killing*." *Hammer to Nail*, 19 July 2013, accessed 27 September 2014, http://www.hammertonail.com/reviews/the-act-of-killing-film-review/
[51] Elphick, "Discusses"

A Theological Anthropology of Evil: Dehumanisation

> Power is not a finite entity which is to be "seized" and "jealously guarded"; it constitutes a limitless capacity to transform that resides in the human race as a body. [52]
> – The Universal House of Justice

The above quotation is part of a letter from the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of Iran, written to remind them that their persecution under a corrupt regime, which wears the mask of religious righteousness, is merely the desperate disguise of worldly fear and that true power is in drawing forth the fullness of humanity. The oppressors' false power evidences a clinging to man-made order, defending the vestiges of comfort, rather than an administration that governs in submission to God's will, under which all things must be fully accounted for, with the goal of elevating the human spirit, not oppressing it. Similarly, we see in the Indonesian killers, paramilitary men and government officials continuous attempts to define and maintain an opposition so that they themselves need not be called into question, despite the way their continuing crimes simply increase the distance they must ultimately cover when such a reckoning inevitably arrives. To construct this distance they engineer a disordered system of value, in which their impunity holds priority over all else, delaying the inevitable and making themselves into perverse placeholders for God, before Whom all things meet in the present. As Oppenheimer and Uwemedimo put it, referring to one of the first killers Oppenheimer filmed, these narratives of opposition, these lived performances revealed in re-enactments, are "strangely tensed, he seems neither to be referring to a particular past, nor to an actual present […] not so much, 'this is what we did' nor 'this is what we are doing', as '*this is what is done*'".[53] There is a continual performance of the *act* of killing, a continual *show* of force, in order to keep its reality at bay. King notes a resemblance to post-traumatic stress disorder, as these stagings of experience reveal a "disconnection between past and present, and between the self as actor in the midst of a drama and the self as observer. […] In none of these modes are the subjects fully occupying the present moment."[54]

As I described in the previous section, such a disconnection represents the way in which worldly fear has been misused as a means of distancing us from the unimaginable fear of God, which calls for our lives. By playing out imaginary narratives of good and evil we preserve ourselves from the moral demand entailed in the full understanding of both good and evil in recognition of God – that good must be found in all things and that this is itself the victory over evil, which holds its ground in the shadows of that which we refuse to love. In other words, in such narratives we call something absolutely evil so that we will not be called to conquer evil. As Oppenheimer puts it, "you have to be acting in a

---

[52] UHJ, "To the Bahá'ís of Iran," 2 March 2013, accessed 6 September 2014, http://universalhouseofjustice.bahai.org/involvement-life-society/20130302_001

[53] Joshua Oppenheimer and Michael Uwemedimo, "Show of Force: A Cinema-Séance of Power and Violence in Sumatra's Plantation Belt," in *Killer Images*, 287-310, 294

[54] Homay King, "Born Free? Repetition and Fantasy in *The Act of Killing*," *Film Quarterly* 67, no. 2 (2013): 30-36, 32

blind spot of self-ignorance in the moment. A kind of blindness"[55] – saying elsewhere, "the act of killing is always some kind of act […] because otherwise you couldn't do it"[56] – it "always involves some kind of distancing from what you are doing".[57] Not only is it a distancing from the physical act of killing, but moreover it is a distancing from the act of distancing – a sort of *mise en abyme*. To put it differently, the physical act of killing is part of a process of convincing ourselves of the lie that we can be comfortable and happy on worldly terms, rather than God's terms, and thus it becomes part of our terms. Such a process starts long before the killing itself, in our most basic education, or lack thereof – the education to *deny* our divine foundation. Bahá'u'lláh writes, evoking the principle of "the image of God", "man is the supreme Talisman. Lack of a proper education hath, however, deprived him of that which he doth inherently possess."[58] So, the acts of oppression, in the performative sense of the word "acts" and in the usual sense, which we see in *The Act of Killing*, are mechanisms that most assuredly dehumanise the killers in their desperate attempts to dehumanise their victims, so as to maintain their own incomplete conceptions of being.

Paulo Freire opens his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* with an examination of precisely this concept of dehumanisation: "both humanisation and dehumanisation are possibilities for a person as an uncompleted being conscious of their incompletion. But while both humanisation and dehumanisation are real alternatives, only the first is the people's vocation."[59] He thus acknowledges that humanisation is the work of those who would not seek to exalt themselves over others, by enforcing illusory dichotomies, which themselves constitute the acts of oppression and can seep into and be committed by every branch of society. It should be noted, then, that such people as would seek to humanise must not see themselves merely as the oppressed side of two opposed forces, accepting the oppressor's divisive view of reality, but must rather recognise that in the oppression of an imperfect, conditional conception of freedom, all are dehumanised. Without such a recognition, "their perceptions of themselves as opposites of the oppressor does not yet signify engagement in a struggle to overcome the contradiction; the one pole aspires not to liberation, but to identification with its opposite pole".[60] Therefore, it must be understood that the trappings of power are not to be believed and must instead be seen as the mechanisms that keep intact a corrupted form of freedom, which in fact arises from a "fear of freedom"[61] that has not been fully faced, just as we construct oppositions to escape the fear of God. True freedom demands of us our lives, but rightly so, as it is "the

---

[55] Errol Morris, "*The Act of Killing* Essay: How Indonesia's mass killings could have slowed the Vietnam War," *Slate*, 10 July 2013, accessed 4 September 2014, http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/history/2013/07/the_act_of_killing_essay_how_indonesia_s_mass_killings_could_have_slowed.html

[56] Cathrin Schaer, "*The Act of Killing*: Re-Staging War Crimes with Indonesian Gangsters," *Spiegel*, 12 February 2013, accessed 7 September 2014, http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/the-act-of-killing-reenacting-war-crimes-with-indonesian-gangsters-a-882970.html

[57] Stephen Applebaum, "Indonesia's killing fields revisited in Joshua Oppenheimer's documentary," *The Australian*, 13 April 2013, accessed 3 September 2014, http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/the-killing-fields-revisited-in-joshua-oppenheimers-documentary/story-fn9n8gph-1226617607946?nk=9c231eb6df6f13b29277b0b398727307#

[58] Bahá'u'lláh, *Writings*, 787

[59] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1993), 25

[60] Ibid, 27-28

[61] Ibid, 28

indispensable condition for the quest for human completion".[62] By distancing themselves from such freedom, then, through all the means of man-made value, the oppressors dehumanise not only those they cast in the role of the opposition, but moreover, themselves, in that they must fully delude themselves for their false freedom to function. In this sense, "dehumanisation, which marks not only those whose humanity has been stolen, but also (though in a different way) those who have stolen it, is a *distortion* of the vocation of becoming more fully human".[63] I would suggest that the crucial difference in the dehumanisation of the oppressor is that it is certain, in that they are immediately subject to it, while the dehumanisation of the oppressed is merely intended. Some pages later Freire cites Fromm on sadism, a trait the Indonesian killers, for the most part, readily identify in themselves:

> The pleasure in complete domination over another person (or other animate creature) is the very essence of the sadistic drive. Another way of formulating the same thought is to say that the aim of sadism is to transform a man into a thing, something animate into something inanimate, since by complete and absolute control the living loses one essential quality of life – freedom.[64]

And through this deluded struggle to reduce a human life to something it can never be, the oppressor retains his own cheapened, distorted freedom – the freedom of Indonesia's *preman*, or gangsters, who assert their total freedom so often merely by reminding us, and themselves, that their title comes from the English "free man" (an etymology that is itself not entirely accurate).

As Rithy Pahn remarks in an interview with Oppenheimer, "the more I treated this subject, the more I became convinced that you cannot destroy humanity, you can't destroy a human being without leaving some trace of that human life", going on to say, "to have an effective genocide machine, it's very difficult to kill a human being. But if you take away the identity of that human being, if you dehumanise that human being, it's much easier for that machine to work effectively."[65] I would argue that not only must the human be reduced falsely to a "thing", thus veiled by an image of him, but that the killer must be engaged in a costly practise of forcing a disordered system of value upon the world. To quote Oppenheimer, "the act of killing wasn't just about killing bodies it was also about killing hope, culture and ideals".[66] At various points in the film we see evidences of a skewed notion of value, which I would argue does not simply take material consumption as its priority, but uses material consumption to serve the priority of impunity, of not examining one's nature and one's deviations from nature. At one point Anwar Congo remarks, "we'd do anything for money… just to buy nice clothes", but could it not be that this too functions as a mechanism to avoid seeing his true motivation – a fear too unimaginable to acknowledge? Oppenheimer remarks,

---

[62] Ibid, 29
[63] Ibid, 26
[64] Erich Fromm, *The Heart of Man: Its Genius for Good and Evil* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 32, as quoted in Freire, *Oppressed*, 41
[65] Joshua Oppenheimer, "Perpetrators' Testimony and the Restoration of Humanity: *S21*, Rithy Pahn," in *Killer Images*, 243-255, 249
[66] Sophie Monks Kaufman, "Joshua Oppenheimer on *The Act of Killing*," *Grolsch Film Works*, accessed 3 September 2014, http://grolschfilmworks.com/ca/features/joshua-oppenheimer-on-the-act-of-killing

"everybody I filmed, I think, actually killed for opportunism, for power, for money, and for the chance to eliminate their enemies. […] All of them killed for the same reason and have then used ideology to justify it."[67] But could it not be that the fundamental reason is precisely what they killed to escape? Ideology is part of the excuse, but is it necessarily the original motive? In any case, we see in the various false objectifications and glorifications the way in which such a fear is hidden.

Two characters in whom we most easily recognise this materialism are Yapto Soerjosoemarno, the leader of the killers' paramilitary group, Pancasila Youth, and Haji Anif, another Pancasila leader and businessman. As Oppenheimer says, "we use Yapto the paramilitary leader's objectification of women in the grossest way, for example, when he says to the golf caddy, 'you have a mole on your pussy'. Dehumanisation becomes endemic to the entire moral vacuum founded on a celebration of genocide. Everyone is treated as an object."[68] That is, everyone *including* the perpetrators, who sink "lower than the animal",[69] precisely because, as with every human faculty, the inclination towards abasement is also driven by a striving for the absolute, albeit a frustrated one. While Soerjosoemarno exemplifies the objectification of other humans, especially women, Anif almost caricatures the glorification of inanimate objects, guiding us through his mansion, pausing to pick up carved crystal animals and inform us that they are "very, very limited". We wonder if he is using the word to refer to their scarcity or their true value. In another scene we see a slightly less blatant show of objectification, which is, however, more telling of the role such materialism plays in dehumanisation, when Rahmat Shah shows Soerjosoemarno his collection of dead animals, taxidermied for the public. Oppenheimer explains, "it is one of the biggest tourist attractions in the city of Medan, and what they neglect to tell you in every brochure is that all of the wildlife in the gallery is dead. So this treating of human beings as objects that we see as misogyny becomes an important allegory for the moral and cultural vacuum in which the Indonesian kleptocratic elite live."[70] Indeed, by forgetting or confusing the difference between a living creature and a stuffed one, the human is rendered merely physical; he becomes an image of a human, the life of which is ended at the point the image is destroyed. It is in this manner that human lives play their vital role in the fantasy of power – as the scapegoat of greatest value. Such objectification is not merely allegory, it becomes the supreme talisman of corrupted human nature, the highest symbol of disordered value and the most desperate grasp in an inevitably failing drive for power. 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes such a perverse and violent clinging to material definitions of life: "This matter of the struggle for existence is the fountainhead of all calamities and is the supreme affliction."[71]

Wittgenstein famously wrote, "the human body is the best picture of the human soul",[72] and as Cavell notes, "not […] primarily because it represents the soul but because it expresses it. The body is the field of expression of the soul. The body is *of* the soul; it is

---

[67] Rainwater, "Scrim"
[68] Irene Lusztig, "The Fever Dream of Documentary: A Conversation with Joshua Oppenheimer," *Film Quarterly* 67, no. 2 (2013): 50-56, 55
[69] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, 309
[70] Lusztig, "Fever," 55-56
[71] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections*, 316
[72] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell & Mott, Ltd, 1972), 178

the soul's; a human soul *has* a human body."[73] If we relate this to the notion of the "image of God", then we might say that the human body, when its expression of the soul is perfectly unclouded, is the best picture of ever-present Reality. In this sense, then, the human is not truly killed in physical death, as the *meaning* of the human – God – remains. The act of killing must continue, never quite fulfilled. Cavell sees Wittgenstein's remark as "an attempt to replace or reinterpret [the] fragments of [the] myth"[74] of the body as a veil that separates us, "the fantasy of private language", explaining,

> Something *is* veiled – the mind, by itself. But the idea of the body plays its role. In the fantasy of it as veiling, it is what comes between my mind and the other's, it is the thing that separates us. The truth here is that we *are* separate, but not necessarily *separated*. […] If something separates us, comes between us, that can only be a particular aspect or stance of the mind itself, a particular *way* in which we relate. […] Call this our history. It is our present.[75]

Made in the image of God, our thoughts, veiled by their manifestation, are ultimately God's, the paradox muddied and distorted in our desperate attempts to force a rift between others and ourselves in order to preserve our constructed images of reality. But, while in the illusion of division the body plays its role of veil, just as all things do (the "70,000 veils of light and darkness between God and creation" described in a well known hadith), Bahá'u'lláh reminds us that we ultimately hide nothing: "O heedless ones! Think not the secrets of hearts are hidden, nay, know ye of a certainty that in clear characters they are engraved and are openly manifest in the holy Presence."[76]

---

[73] Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 356
[74] Ibid, 376
[75] Ibid, 377
[76] Bahá'u'lláh, *Writings*, 61

The Mirroring Image: Language and Reckoning

O Son of Being! Bring thyself to account each day ere thou art summoned to a reckoning; for death, unheralded, shall come upon thee and thou shalt be called to give account for thy deeds.[77]
– Bahá'u'lláh

From the Bahá'í World Centre's 2005 statement, *One Common Faith*: "Consumer culture, today's inheritor by default of materialism's gospel of human betterment, is unembarrassed by the ephemeral nature of the goals that inspire it. […] Its most obvious casualty has been language. Tendencies once universally castigated as moral failings mutate into necessities of social progress."[78] As we have noted, this grasping for material ephemerality is driven by the illusory separation of our fundamental paradox of being, and all the dichotomies that follow. Such divisions are themselves our attempts to construct an imaginable notion of value, so as to avoid the unimaginable task of finding it in everything; this division is the first step we take away from God. We then form justifications for our actions, which are themselves mechanisms in the process of clinging to worldly value. As the Bahá'í World Centre notes, we can see immediately in such a corruption of value the casualty of language, in which the paradox of separation and relation is split so that words retain only a degraded meaning based on images rather than actual use. One such split, which has been referred to in numerous instances in relation to *The Act of Killing*, is the split between public and private life. It is precisely this fantasy of private language, and the private language of worldly fantasy, that has allowed the justifying narratives of the Indonesian genocide to go unchecked for so many decades. As Oppenheimer remarks, "there has been a public-private split in Indonesia for so long. […] I think if you keep silent for so long, particularly if you're terrorised into silence for so long – your imagination withers because you've stopped thinking about the things that are dangerous to think about."[79] Our imaginations become tools of impunity and avoidance, rather than exploratory faculties for bringing us closer to our full nature. To quote Ricoeur, "this dichotomy between man's private and public life, which makes madness of both, is the very antithesis of an anthropology which starts with a meditation on the image of God". [80]

Zizek has written on precisely this separation of public and private realms in relation to *The Act of Killing*, arguing that the film shows, not so much that private space is being encroached upon, "with our exposure to the media, culture of public confessions and instruments of digital control", but that it is "the public space proper that is disappearing".[81] While I find this a striking way of describing the desperate attempt to engineer a reality in which things are ordered towards one's own worldly desires, rather than the ultimate desire for the Good, I would suggest that it is both of these, but

---

[77] Bahá'u'lláh, *Writings*, 43
[78] Bahá'í World Centre, *One Common Faith* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 2005), 10
[79] Elphick, "Discusses"
[80] Ricoeur, *Truth*, 113
[81] Slavoj Zizek, "Slavoj Zizek on *The Act of Killing* and the modern trend of 'privatising public space'," *New Statesman*, 12 July 2013, accessed 6 September 2014, http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2013/07/slavoj-zizek-act-killing-and-modern-trend-privatising-public-space

moreover, that it is the struggle to maintain a separation between public and private that characterises the materialist enterprise. He argues, "self-interested egotism is not the brutal fact of our societies but its ideology," citing Hegel's vision of "the spiritual kingdom of animals" in which we sacrifice our selves publicly, "fanatically devoted to [our] task of multiplying [our] wealth, ready to neglect [our] health and happiness […] in order to satisfy our private needs". Such a description is persuasive and useful, but I think it necessary to add, we work like animals, not simply in public "to satisfy our private needs", but in public *and* in private to sustain an impossible escape from God in our wayward construction of reality. While Ricoeur is right in a profound sense to say that "what causes division among men are their private realms of possession",[82] I think it also worth noting that what causes division is the sense that, when we move between whatever realms we might imagine, the rules change, particularly the rule that we do not define the rules. Rather, God, within us, defines the rule of love in all circumstances – "He, verily, ruleth over all created things and standeth supreme above all besides Him."[83]

Zizek refers to a poll conducted by the Chinese government's newspaper, which "asked a large sample of young people what they would do if they were to see a fallen elderly person: '87 per cent of young people would not help… People will only help when a camera was present.'" This is a powerful illustration of the way in which our distance from one another is made to take priority over our relations with the things and people we encounter in daily life. It is appropriate to acknowledge the role of the security camera as the image of the omniscient eye of God, reduced to an object of worldly disorder masquerading as order. While it often strengthens the division of the public and the private, it is also important to note that the camera breaks the illusion of isolation, at least to a certain extent, in its signification of an eye that is both objective and subjective. If, rather than render such an eye as an image in the form of the camera, we could recognise that its true form is that of God's sight in our hearts – the ever-present recognition of our drawing near or straining away from Him, from our humanity – then the reparation of the schism would be underway.

With the method of his documentary, by drawing private languages of justification out before a wider audience, Oppenheimer aims towards such a reconciliation. One of the lines from the film that most strikes me, with its strangeness reflecting the strangeness of the film's mechanisms, is spoken by Adi Zulkadry in his attempt to point out to the other participants the danger their re-enactments pose for the fantasies they have constructed: "Look, if we succeed in making this film it will disprove all the propaganda about the communists being cruel and show that we were cruel! […] The whole story will be reversed. Not 180 degrees… *360 degrees*!" His hand gestures go back and forth. "If we succeed with this scene!" He goes on to say, "I believe even God has secrets," distorting the principle of God's absolute mystery in absolute presence and further sustaining the private language myth. But it is the emphasised comment in the above quotation that I find particularly interesting and which stuck with me most profoundly after my first viewing of the film. Oppenheimer has suggested that this unexpected turn of phrase was an error,[84] and it has been excised from all trailers for the film, but I would suggest it shows an insight that the film will return history to the truth –

---

[82] Ricoeur, *Truth*, 115
[83] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gems of Divine Mysteries* (Aeterna Publishing, 2010), 11
[84] Bradshaw, "Gallows"

the examination of the artifice will return history to itself. The story is 180 degrees now, but the film unmasks it, facing us into the unimaginable truth the story has been used to escape.

Such a take on narrative brings to mind Wittgenstein's famous assertion that philosophy "leaves everything as it is".[85] Evidently he does not mean that it is useless, but that it returns things to themselves through investigation and clarification of the muddied waters of language – it shows "the fly the way out of the fly-bottle".[86] He is, of course, also famous for his theory of private language, which is essentially that there is no private language in the sense we tend to imagine it, that our terms are necessarily shared. He makes much use of the usual notions of pain as a sensation considered private to show that language makes sense of our experiences because it gains meaning through public use. Indeed, I would suggest that pain is the illusion of separation, increased by the strengthening of the illusion, either by the sufferer or by the one inflicting pain. The suffering inflicted by an oppressor, then, is primarily in the strengthening of the sense that suffering can be encountered in certain conditions and not others, and is, therefore, not shared by all human beings in relation to each other. Thus it becomes a means of division, as pain is given the role of isolating, and such a role is sustained through the attempt to drain certain experiences of hope. With a space designated for pain, then, the oppressor can cast his opposition into such a space and work to maintain its status, as a mechanism in his own illusion of happiness and freedom. It is precisely in recognition of the nature of this fantasy of power that 'Abdu'l-Bahá described His 40 years in prison as "exceeding joy," not only because in all circumstances He "dwelleth in continual delight",[87] but because in the midst of exactly such a symbol of the bonds of oppression He was capable of showing to the oppressor the utter powerlessness of his machinery before the love of God.

However, it must be noted that, as Fierke points out,

> To speak publicly of suffering involves a recognition that human beings do not stand apart from the world, as isolated creatures looking in, but are rather always already a part of a conceptual community. Far from existing beyond speech, as is often assumed, pain, no less than any other experience, is part of our grammar for acting in the world.[88]

She cites Das: "Pain, in this rendering, is not that inexpressible something that destroys communication or marks an exit from one's existence in language."[89] As Cavell in turn notes, expanding on the points Das makes, "if the study of a society requires a study of its pain, then so far as there is an absence of languages of pain in the social sciences, […] social science participates in the silence, and so it extends the violence it studies".[90] While

---

[85] Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, 49
[86] Ibid, 103
[87] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections*, 252
[88] Karin Fierke, *Critical Approaches to International Security* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 140
[89] Veena Das, "Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain," in *Social Suffering*, ed. Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das and Margaret Lock (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 67-91, 70, as quoted in Fierke, *Critical*, 140
[90] Stanley Cavell, "Comments on Veena Das's Essay: 'Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain'," in *Social*, 93-98, 94

Das is referring primarily to the oppressed (in this instance women in Indian society), her insights apply with surprising aptness to the Indonesian killers. Although Oppenheimer made his film in a spirit of loyalty to the victims and survivors of the genocide, and perhaps precisely *because* of this, he found himself using re-enactments to uncover the pain of the perpetrators themselves, particularly Congo, veiled in their narratives and fantasies. I would argue that by ignoring such pain, or by attempting to draw it out vengefully, an examination of the state of Indonesian oppression would "extend the violence it studies", as Cavell describes. Cast in a position of power, for Congo to show suffering is to weaken the structure of value, not only because it suggests that the massacres may have been wrong, but because it shows that they have not brought happiness. But this pain must rise not from a self-interested pain, but from a recognition of the wrong that has been committed, and this recognition can in turn only come from the humanising effects of an unwarranted love and not from the infliction of pain within an inversion of the oppressor's system of value. I will explore this further in the conclusion, but for the remainder of this section I will examine the way in which the film functions in this capacity.

As Oppenheimer notes of Congo, "he's not trying to look good. He's trying to deal with his pain, and he's being listened to for the first time."[91] In the exploration of his bizarre and fantastic narratives he recognises that there is a truth to be found in the pain he has been denied by the master narrative – that is, in the opposed side of the justifying narrative – or we might say in the fact that he has been denied pain and refused the possibility of understanding it, thus perpetuating his pain and that of the many still oppressed. As he says during a make-up session, "for me, that film is the one thing that makes me feel not guilty". In this sense, then, he is defined by the film's dichotomising narrative and, along with all other participants in the dehumanising structure of oppression, conceives of himself, and by extension the world, through the eyes of another – not even another person, but a fractured, disconnected form of himself. 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes, "man is not intended to see through the eyes of another"[92] and it is precisely such inherited conceptions of reality as those we see in *The Act of Killing* that He insists we must investigate and free ourselves from. Through what Morris describes as "a perverted hall of mirrors", relating it to the play within a play in Hamlet, in which "Hamlet asks his actors to 'hold a mirror up to nature'",[93] Congo catches a glimpse of the self he had lost, not in the stories of victory, but ultimately in the face of his victim. As the fantasies are laid bare before the camera and its implied audience and their impossibilities stripped away in their bizarreness, he recognises, through the language of a pain he has suppressed, his inextricability from those he has tortured and killed.

Oppenheimer has spoken and written extensively on his theory of filmmaking, summarising it in an interview on *The Act of Killing*: "The core of non-fiction filmmaking is that somehow you are creating a reality with your characters the moment you film them. You are never a passive observer documenting 'what's there'."[94] In other

---

[91] Lodge, "Awards"
[92] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, 293
[93] Morris, "Vietnam"
[94] Pamela Cohn, "Joshua Oppenheimer," *BOMB Magazine*, 18 December 2012, accessed 5 September 2014, http://bombmagazine.org/article/6992/

words, the documentary documents the event it creates, and is itself an event. He expands on this notion in Lisa Rainwater's excellent interview with him:

> I see cinema as a medium – a prism – for making manifest the stories we tell ourselves, the second-hand, third-rate, half-remembered fantasies and stories by which we know ourselves… by which we make our reality. If only because the moment you begin to film anybody, they start showing how they want to be seen and then, underneath that, how they really see themselves. And in that sense, the camera is a way of intervening in reality to make visible all of these stories that are passed down.[95]

Paraphrasing a Peter Weiss quotation read out by Rainwater, he remarks that the aim is, like Wittgenstein's philosophy, "ultimately to *find a way out*" of these dehumanising narratives. Nick Fraser has criticised the approach of the film, likening it to "[going] to rural Argentina in the 1950s, rounding up a bunch of ageing Nazis and getting them to make a film entitled 'We Love Killing Jews'".[96] However, as Oppenheimer points out in his response to Fraser, citing Jeffrey Winters, a Northwestern University professor of Indonesian politics, who commented on Fraser's article online, the crucial difference and the necessitating factor for the film's method arises from the status of the genocidaires, not as "*hiding* and *fearful* Nazis", but as mass-murderers living in a state of celebratory impunity. It is for this reason that it becomes, not necessarily the only possible method, but a method far more suitable for these circumstances than the ones Fraser describes. "What Mr. Fraser fails to appreciate is that the film captures the surreal *normalcy* of all of this. You would have to imagine a Germany in 2014 in which the Nazis won to find anything remotely close to what Oppenheimer renders on film about today's Indonesia"[97] – and it is by capturing this "surreal normalcy" that we and the killers are faced with the contortions and distortions involved in impunity. For this purpose, "a forensic documentary would have been superfluous, since the murderers did not hide their crimes half a century ago and do not deny them today".[98]

It is not surprising to note, then, "at the beginning many of these men had different goals. The general goal at first was to glorify what they did", but that, at least in Congo's case, "somehow around his nightmares, a second and very unconscious but almost physical motive comes out: to get in touch with his brokenness, the part of him that died from killing people".[99] There is a tension in Congo between these goals, as Oppenheimer notes in another interview: "Anwar says at one point he's trying to make a beautiful family movie about mass killing. He realises at some point that the portrait cannot be at once beautiful and true. Anwar, and I think this is telling, decides to continue painting a true portrait, not a beautiful portrait."[100] I might add, given this use of classical

---

[95] Rainwater, "Scrim"
[96] Fraser, "Snuff"
[97] Jeffrey Winters in a comment on Fraser, "Snuff"
[98] Klawans, "Song"
[99] Nicolas Rapold, "Interview: Joshua Oppenheimer," *Film Comment*, 15 July 2013, accessed 6 September 2014, http://www.filmcomment.com/entry/interview-joshua-oppenheimer-the-act-of-killing
[100] Blair McClendon, "Joshua Oppenheimer and *The Act of Killing*," *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, 14 August 2013, accessed 4 September 2014, http://lareviewofbooks.org/interview/joshua-oppenheimer-and-the-act-of-killing#

theological language, that in Congo's search for truth through his narratives, there *is* something beautiful, but it is not the beauty he is accustomed to. Indeed, it is precisely his turning towards pain, rather than his comfortable notion of beauty, that drives the film, even if in a certain sense "he's drawn to the pain of it, because that's the thing he's trying to deny"[101] – this in itself simply evidences the tension and distance more poignantly both to the audience and to Congo. We see this particularly when he watches back the scenes he has made. "It was a very simple and telling thing that happened. He watched that footage and looked very disturbed. But he doesn't admit what he did was bad – he's never been forced to do that. Instead, he lies to himself and to me about what's bothering him: he starts changing his clothes, changing his acting, adjusting the genre."[102] And yet, through this he must inevitably seek the true source of his discomfort.

I will close this section by looking at two very striking moments: the scene in which Congo describes the beheading of a "communist" in a rubber plantation and, once again, the final rooftop scene. In both scenes he demonstrates a profound urge to bridge the gap between his representations of himself and his representation of his victims. In Arendt's description of Eichmann, she describes how, aside from boasting, "a more specific, and also more decisive, flaw […] was his almost total inability ever to look at anything from the other fellow's point of view".[103] In Rapold's interview with Oppenheimer the interviewer describes his sense of the killers' minds as "claustrophobic". Indeed, this is precisely what characterises their boasting and inhumanity, so when we see Congo's attempts to occupy the space he has designated as being outside himself – a space he has killed to preserve – we must recognise that a profound change in perspective is taking place. In the first scene of the two I mentioned, Congo re-enacts a beheading in a clearing at night. Before the re-enactment he describes how the eyes of the dead man stared up at him from his disembodied head. We then see him enter a wide-angle shot, one moment hunched and the next upright – "at first, we wonder if he's drunk, then he buckles over and we realise 'oh no, he's re-enacting and he's playing the victim and the killer at the same time'".[104] Once he has beheaded himself, so to speak, we see him sink to the ground, making the same terrible sound we hear on his return to the rooftop, and as he rises to his knees, breathing heavily, we hear his voiceover: "On the way home, I kept thinking, why didn't I close his eyes? […] I'm always gazed at by those eyes that I didn't close. That's what always disturbs me so very much."

To quote Levinas, "the relation to the face is straightaway ethical. The face is what one cannot kill, or at least it is that whose *meaning* consists in saying: 'thou shalt not kill.'"[105] We might add that this is particularly true of the eyes – as he says at another point, "since the Other looks at me, I am responsible for him, without even having *taken* on responsibilities in this regard; his responsibility *is incumbent on me*".[106] Indeed, as Oppenheimer comments, Congo is drawn to re-enacting the victim's role, "because what he sees when he kills is the victim's face, what he knows is how the victim's face

---

[101] Bradshaw, "Gallows"
[102] Lodge, "Awards"
[103] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 43
[104] Elphick, "Discusses"
[105] Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 87
[106] Levinas, *Ethics*, 96

looks".[107] This is the face he kills to distance himself from, but in the space provided by the film's method, he is drawn to cross precisely this distance. In the face of his victim he sees his own face as he most dreads to see it, and yet precisely as he has become, deadened; as one interviewer notes, "he becomes an amalgam of both, essentially".[108] To quote Levinas once more, "in the access to the face there is certainly also an access to the idea of God".[109]

It is for precisely this reason, then, that the execution sites become "places that are of such deep human significance that I want to say almost sacred. The locations bear witness to so much that they become a kind of character."[110] As Walker notes, inasmuch as "history is written by the victors, so too are space and place",[111] but in constructing the execution ground, it must be at once sacrosanct and yet also a place that denies human sanctity and, by extension, the sanctity of the place; it is the denied place in which we kill to construct a god of images and distances. As a result of this tension it becomes, therefore, also the place of reckoning as these distances begin to diminish. Later in her essay, Walker writes, "the most significant achievement of *The Act of Killing* – its essence as a masterpiece – is the establishment of the area in and around Medan *as a crime scene*. […] This film actively remakes this heretofore unmarked terrain as a fatal environment"[112] – now not only for the victims, but also for the artifice they were killed to construct. As Oppenheimer notes, this is particularly true of the above scene – "it's one of the scenes in the film where the space around Anwar is a very real terror"[113] – but it could equally be said of the final scene, on the rooftop, if not more so:

> That space that Anwar was occupying belonged to the dead. It's filled with ghosts. […] The boundaries between Anwar as a person and the political regime have been dissolved. He's holding it all. I could not have had any kind of political ending; it had to solely reflect Anwar's psychological state. […] That space of the dead is his space, he is of that space, because he's also died somehow.[114]

This scene could never be, and could never have been intended to be, the resolution or redemption that some critics have described it as failing to be, but it is the one that perhaps comes closest to representing the "bitter, indigestible, unrepresentable reality that's beyond words"[115] that such a redemption would necessarily be. "He's trying to vomit up the ghosts that haunt him, but nothing comes up, because he is the ghost. He is his past. He will never escape what happened to him."[116] All he can do is take account of all he has done – fully, for the first time – and live accordingly; such a life cannot be captured on camera, only the merest traces of its beginnings, but what we see is Congo's

---

[107] Cohn, "Oppenheimer"
[108] Ibid.
[109] Levinas, *Ethics*, 92
[110] Oppenheimer, "Testimony," 253
[111] Janet Walker, "Referred Pain: *The Act of Killing* and the Production of a Crime Scene," *Film Quarterly* 67, no. 2 (2013): 14-20, 14
[112] Walker, "Referred," 18
[113] Elphick, "Discusses"
[114] Cohn, "Oppenheimer"
[115] Elphick, "Discusses"
[116] "Overview for TheActofKillingfilm," Reddit, 30 August 2014, http://www.reddit.com/user/TheActofKillingfilm

glimpse of the death he has inflicted upon himself. In facing the void he has opened in his attempts to build a palace for himself, he is faced with the mortality of the image he has clung to – "he's choking on the terror that comes when you look at the abyss between yourself and your image of yourself".[117] In such a reckoning, "they that live in error shall be seized with such fear and trembling, and shall be filled with such consternation, as nothing can exceed".[118]

[117] Bradshaw, "Gallows"
[118] Bahá'u'lláh, *Writings*, 738-739

The Mirroring Image: The Imperative of the Witness

> The allotted function of art is not, as is often assumed, to put across ideas, to propagate thoughts, to serve as an example. The aim of art is to prepare a person for death, to plough and harrow his soul, rendering it capable of turning to good.[119]
> – Andrei Tarkovsky

In the paragraph that precedes the above quotation, Tarkovsky writes, "the meaning of religious truth is *hope*".[120] Religious truth is not merely a description of reality, but a *life* of hope, of love. Having seen in the previous section how we might find at least the possibility of humanity at the heart of the apparent wilderness of the killers' fantastical narratives of justification, by the very fact of their being opened to our access, we might ask ourselves how we can respond to what we have found. As Rapold says, "in terms of getting into the mind-set of Anwar and the others, I'm still trying to figure out what we *do* with that understanding then". Oppenheimer's response is concise, but calls for something profound: "if we can understand the mind of the people who kill and the mind of the people who profit from killing, and the mind of the people who keep killing alive, and who continue to celebrate extermination, we can recognise it. We can see it when it comes to our own societies."[121] I would suggest, moreover, that if we seek to understand the thought processes, including the unravelling that takes place as we near the heart they are constructed to hide, then we can recognise them in ourselves and start to align ourselves with that heart.

While the impunity of the gangsters who remain in Medan is called into question through their narratives of justification, Zulkadry, who relocated to Jakarta at some point after the massacres, is a character who remains strangely inaccessible. Unlike the others he has no narrative of justification; indeed, at one point he argues with Soaduon Siregar, the journalist, over the meaning of the word "cruel", asserting that it means the same as "sadistic" and that both words more aptly describe the genocidaires than the communists. He even disputes the sacrosanct truth of the propaganda film: "I think it's a lie… Even turtles can climb fallen trees. It's easy to make the communists look bad after we killed them", while Congo hushes him, saying they "shouldn't say bad things about that film to outsiders". His evasions are seemingly sophisticated, arguing the crudest form of moral relativism in a tone all too familiarly cynical. But perhaps this familiarity is precisely why he seems so inaccessible; his distorted logic seems closed off to us because it is a language subtle enough to creep into our own reasoning unchecked. Oppenheimer describes his reaction to Zulkadry's arrival by aeroplane, wearing a t-shirt bearing the word "Apathetic" in large letters: "I was astonished. It was this sort of comfortable cynicism that I felt like I might see in a late middle-aged neighbour of my dad in suburban Maryland. It felt so familiarly American."[122] His justification is his own

---

[119] Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 43
[120] Ibid.
[121] Rapold, "Interview"
[122] Colleen Glenn, "Director Joshua Oppenheimer discusses *The Act of Killing*," *Charleston City Paper*, 15 January 2014, accessed 19 September 2014, http://www.charlestoncitypaper.com/charleston/director-joshua-oppenheimer-discusses-the-act-of-killing/Content?oid=4846144

emotion; he looks at himself and asks if he is guilty, impassively answering "no". His narrative is that his images of emotion are reliable. Perhaps he is the most successful killer because he has deadened the world around him in a way that is almost imperceptible.

Oppenheimer has said on many occasions that he hopes the film will serve as a mirror not only for Indonesia, but just as importantly, for anyone who would consider themselves not to be implicated. Through the shopping malls and consumerism of Zulkadry's Jakarta in particular, Oppenheimer has created a film in which "we see America through its kind of dark mirror image in the Indonesian killer-aristocracy",[123] and not only America, not even just the Western world, but humanity in any form that has abused stability and comfort as a means of escape rather than the place of engagement. The director reminds Rapold and the reader, "your shirt, my shirt, is affordable, […] because people are making [them] under conditions of fear and oppression".[124] As 'Abdu'l-Bahá declares, "this is man's uttermost wretchedness: that he should live inert, apathetic, dull, involved only with his own base appetites".[125] To distance ourselves from the action on the screen, then, is as delusional as it would be to ignore the screen catching fire! As He says elsewhere, "the reality of man is his thought"[126] – we *think* the world and every interaction with it is an interaction in thought. This is not to suggest a division between subject and object, but quite to the contrary; that we are inextricable from the world, to the very core of thought. In God there is no dichotomy, "for from Him and through Him and to Him are all things",[127] and for precisely this reason we are bound to the imperative of making sense of and finding humanity – divinity, even – and *hope* in the horror we see onscreen. Bahá'u'lláh exhorts us, "Let your vision be world-embracing, rather than confined to your own self. The Evil One is he that hindereth the rise and obstructeth the spiritual progress of the children of men."[128] The killers on the screen are part of you.

So, while Oppenheimer's reminders that the very clothes we wear are made of blood and suffering, I would suggest we examine our very thought processes in the mirror of the film. Have we not "pictured a god in the realm of the mind",[129] which we worship with its maintenance through acts of division, in the most subtle and insidious forms? Might we not resemble Anwar with his drink, drugs, dancing and "happiness", even if we use none of these things? What are we doing when we pull paradox apart and call it "balance", or "opposition"? At the very least, the film reminds us to check again. I dare say, *I am the oppressor* the moment I act, or even think, to preserve a sense of comfort and impunity rather than to reach out and open myself to a fuller humanity – a painful (and regular) realisation that I am grateful for precisely because it guides me not only towards morality, but also towards true happiness; indeed, the two are one and the same. These thoughts strike me when I sit on my sofa without good reason, when I define "love" by exclusion, "my beliefs" by fundamental difference from "other beliefs", my

---

[123] Rainwater, "Scrim"
[124] Rapold, "Interview"
[125] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilisation* (Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990), 4
[126] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1951), 17
[127] Romans 11:36. Here and elsewhere all biblical passages are taken from the ESV.
[128] Bahá'u'lláh, *Writings*, 697
[129] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections*, 57

"good" in opposition to another's "pure evil". To quote 'Abdu'l-Bahá, this realisation "should be to such a degree that if he sleep, it should not be for pleasure, but to rest the body in order to do better, to speak better, to explain more beautifully, to serve the servants of God and to prove the truths".[130] And elsewhere, "What is the dust which obscures the mirror [of the heart]? It is attachment to the world, avarice, envy, love of luxury and comfort, haughtiness and self-desire."[131] Watching *The Act of Killing*, we might say that such traits, such stultifications of the natural faculties, are the beginnings of genocide – or rather, as much as they can be in our living rooms, *they are genocide.*

So, as Savi notes, "the prevailing 'passive concept of the moral person' – that is, the concept whereby 'being good means keeping out of trouble' – cannot be accepted".[132] However, I would suggest that we examine even our most apparently righteous notions for traces of such comfort. Perhaps the most powerful implication of Arendt's "banality of evil" is not so much that evil is banal, but that we are prone to it even in our most banal acts and thoughts. To put it concisely, "the trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal".[133] I would suggest that this "normality" can also take the shape of the apparently just, when such "justice" simply becomes another means of preserving a dichotomised vision of good and evil, so that we are not implicated. It is for this reason that Oppenheimer did not include the narratives of the survivors and victims in his film.

> We thought a lot about bringing in some of the material that we had with survivors into this film. The problem is the moment you do that you set up this classic cinematic schism between the good and the bad, and Anwar and his friends immediately become bad against the victims with whom we immediately feel sympathy. And at that point our engagement with Anwar and the other perpetrators changes. We're no longer walking this tightrope between repulsion and empathy. And in imagining how a human being does this, we are aligned psychically and emotionally with the victims, and we're accusing.[134]

Indeed, at precisely this point the accusation becomes false, and merely another mechanism for our own impunity. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes, "All over the world one hears beautiful sayings extolled and noble precepts admired. All men say they love what is good, and hate everything that is evil! […] But all these sayings are but words and we see very few of them carried into the world of action."[135] To quote the review from which I borrowed the use of Tarkovsky's quotation, "we are really *looking directly* at humanity's monstrous ability to compartmentalise. […] Often in life, we as human beings don't actually ever deal with the problem itself. Instead, we deal with the problem of the

---

[130] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá Abbas: Volume I* (Chicago: Bahá'í Publishing Society, 1909), 460
[131] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, 244
[132] Julio Savi, *Unsheathing the Sword of Wisdom: Reflections on Human Rights and Terrorism* (Oxford: George Ronald, 2011), 95
[133] Arendt, *Eichmann*, 253
[134] Rapold, "Interview"
[135] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris*, 79-80

problem. Meaning our actual problem is just the way the problem *makes us feel*."[136] What is needed, then, is to live in a single act of love, "in a state of prayer",[137] because only by this means can we mend the rift between *feeling* the problem and *dealing with it*. In one article the writer describes how after screenings of *The Act of Killing*, the audience would "often ask the director 'but what can we do?' Oppenheimer would say they needn't look as far as Indonesia for the answer but at their own neighbourhood."[138] Elsewhere Oppenheimer describes another response to the film: "Many people asked me 'Are you not getting tired of all this? Don't you want to leave it all and go back home?' But very soon I realised that there is no way to escape from this; there is no home to go to."[139]

[136] Film Crit Hulk, "Film Crit Hulk Smash: *The Act of Killing* and the Real Meaning of Impact," *Badass Digest*, 22 January 2014, accessed 2 September 2014, http://badassdigest.com/2014/01/22/film-crit-hulk-smash-the-act-of-killing-and-the-real-meaning-of-impact/

[137] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, cited in *Star of the West* 8, no. 4 (1917): 41

[138] Prodita Sabarini, "*The Act of Killing* doesn't end," *The Boston Globe*, 29 March 2014, accessed 30 August 2014, http://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2014/03/28/the-act-killing-doesn-end/nDRMCL9ouz04HyON0X21LJ/story.html

[139] Nubia Rojas, "Documentary cinema, memory and reconciliation: An interview with Joshua Oppenheimer, director of *The Act of Killing*," *Glocal Times*, June 2014, accessed 15 August 2014, http://ojs.ub.gu.se/ojs/index.php/gt/article/view/2873

Conclusion: The Act of Forgiveness

> Subdue the citadels of men's hearts with the swords of wisdom and of utterance. They that dispute, as prompted by their desires, are indeed wrapped in a palpable veil. Say: The sword of wisdom is hotter than summer heat, and sharper than blades of steel, if ye do but understand. Draw it forth in My name and through the power of My might, and conquer, then, with it the cities of the hearts of them that have secluded themselves in the stronghold of their corrupt desires.[140]
> – Bahá'u'lláh

The notion of justice in the Old Testament is described with a certain violence, famous as it is for the law of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth", but I would suggest that the image of this has tended to skew its reading, depriving it of its most powerful meaning. Christ of course responds to precisely this law when he exhorts us in Matthew 5:39, "Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." As the "fulfilment of the Law", it must be understood that Christ does not contradict the Old Testament Law, but draws it back to its full meaning of love. However, this law too has been devalued by a false reduction to mere image. As Hillel the Elder famously commented, drawing focus to Leviticus 19: "What is hateful to thee, do not unto thy fellow; this is the whole law. All the rest is a commentary to this law; go and learn it."[141] Christ encapsulates this Law, and broadens it into a continual act, with the Greatest Commandment in Matthew 22:37, simply to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind". In turning to Proverbs 25:21-22 we find a passage that perhaps offers some clarification of the "eye for an eye" law as commentary to the explicit love of the Golden Rule and the Greatest Commandment, which is its full expression, and reconciles it with "turn the other cheek", which is also commentary: "If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat, and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink, for you will heap burning coals on his head, and the LORD will reward you." Of course, it must be emphasised that such a gesture of friendliness must be entirely sincere, without the desire to harm vengefully, or else it fails as an act of love. Jesson comments on the function of such scriptural expressions of justice:

> To make forgiveness the criteria for judgement may then be a way of ensuring that one's sense of justice actually comes into contact with the subversive nature of grace; otherwise one may be left with adult rationality and child-like innocence in separate compartments, never interacting or challenging each other. In other words, it may be a way of ensuring that one contemplate justice and forgiveness together, in the same way that through Christ one might contemplate humanity and divinity in the same place at the same time, and hope that one's notions of each are transformed in the process.[142]

---

[140] Bahá'u'lláh, *Writings*, 576
[141] Translation of Michael Rodkinson.
[142] Stuart Jesson, "Forgiveness and its Reason" (PhD thesis, University of Nottingham, 2010)

We discover a similar approach in the writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, finding in one text, “If some one commits an error and wrong toward you, you must instantly forgive him”,[143] and in another, “If the community and the inheritors of the murdered one were to forgive and return good for evil, the cruel would be continually ill-treating others, and assassinations would continually occur.”[144] A reading made with a worldly imagination drains our hope of reconciling these expressions, reducing them falsely to mere “contradiction” and searching not for the ineffable Truth they reveal for those who would seek it, but instead for the opportunity to remain untouched by them. But these words too must be commentary to the Law of Love – the very *meaning* of the word “God” – in which both forgiveness and punishment are fulfilled not by us as individuals, or even as communities, but by God, in the heart of the evildoer. Our task, then, as individuals is to seek every person’s return to that heart, to full human nature, rather than a stunted corruption of it, which comes about precisely by clinging to a limited image of it. Indeed, it is only by this means that we remain free of the same trap they have fallen into, of seeing goals and outcomes in worldly terms. As Jesson writes, “to forgive is not to exchange a moral scheme that condemns for another that shows mercy, rather it is a change in one's relationship to moral schemes”.[145]

To draw again from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá: “Bahá’u’lláh has clearly said in His Tablets that if you have an enemy, consider him not as an enemy. Do not simply be long-suffering; nay, rather, love him. […] Though he be your murderer, see no enemy. […] Be mindful that you do not consider him as an enemy and simply tolerate him, for that is but stratagem and hypocrisy.”[146] If we turn again to the Golden Rule, regarding this as divine commentary, we must ask ourselves if we merely tolerate our own imperfections and those of the people we love, allowing them to continue inflicting suffering upon us, or if we seek their betterment – and if we do not, or if we have convinced ourselves that our imperfections are acceptable and to be retained through justification, then is this love or apathy? Love, then, is not merely a gentle term of endearment and it is certainly not the “kindness” of simply ignoring certain traits of another. Rather, it continually seeks the good in all traits, without ignoring and without seeking mere faults, and thus pushes them beyond their stagnation, which is their evil. Of course, as with all efforts we make, this can be painful and difficult, and this is the justice of love, exacted not by our vengeance, but by the return to the heart.

Two of the scenes created by the gangsters in *The Act of Killing*, along with Congo’s response to them when watching them back, illustrate well the distance between our often stunted notions of forgiveness, almost useless in such circumstances, and the form of forgiveness I would suggest the film truly offers. In the first, Congo plays the role of victim, interrogated and eventually strangled by his friend Herman Koto, using a wire – their standard method – which he refers to mockingly as “a medal”. In the second – his attempt to “cleanse himself of the ghosts”[147] of the first – we see Congo at a waterfall, surrounded by dancing girls, as dead “communists” place a medal around his neck in gratitude for sending them to heaven, where we now find them together.

---

[143] ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, 453
[144] ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Questions*, 269
[145] Jesson, “Reason,” 21
[146] ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, 267
[147] Elphick, “Discusses”

In his execution scene we see him experiencing unmistakable pain and trauma. There is none of the melodrama of the other scenes; his flinches are genuine and when Koto begins strangling he does not tense up and shake violently, but rather he goes strangely limp and makes the choking sound we hear on the rooftop – that dreadful signpost of the border, the *barzakh*, at which impunity meets judgement, at which "the past – these awful crimes – [comes] rushing into the present".[148] Because of this loss of control, and therefore failure on the terms of the "family movie" they are attempting to produce, they play out the execution twice. After the first time Congo tells Koto, "I feel like I was dead for a moment…" and Koto encourages him not to "get so into it", not to "think too much about it", while after the second, utterly drained, he says, "I can't do that again". In such a facing of death, the designated place of suffering and evil – that is, the "communist" victim, murdered to retain a distance – has come painfully close, no longer safely occupying the position of an imaginable ideology or ethnicity, but found in the ingrained "bodily memories"[149] of murder, and moreover, in physical mortality. Indeed, when execution has been used as the primary method of maintaining all the distances required for a life of impunity that began long before the killings, it is precisely by facing it with a sincere spirit of search that Congo comes closest to the self he has tried to kill, and thus closest to the "direct punishment from God" he refers to in the fishing scene at the harbour – inflicted by no power other than his inextricable relation to those he has killed – inflicted, therefore, by God.

It is appropriate, then, that after this, his most consecrated divide, has been bridged, he asks to create a "paradise" scene, reaching even into the afterlife to bend the image of the "communist" into conformity with his narrative of justification. Oppenheimer has described his disappointment at this decision, and it does indeed exemplify the tension at play throughout the film between the "beautiful family movie" and the mirroring image of truth, but I would suggest that we acknowledge the way in which, with every image created, Congo finds his narrative inevitably evaporating. In this way, Oppenheimer "consistently helps to create illusions only to debunk them"[150] – precisely by *accepting* them and therefore opening them to unexpected examination. He at once "turns the other cheek", accepting, and takes "an eye for an eye", providing a fitting response, by continually drawing Congo into the examination of his terms of justification. To do otherwise would almost certainly only serve to reinforce their solidity, as they thrive in division. "By seeking to understand, this newfangled documentary of the genocidal imagination has succeeded, albeit on one lone murderer among many, in exacting revenge."[151] It is telling that in "paradise" there is no longer animosity – Congo can no longer justify himself only by the evil of the "communists", but also by their gratitude for freedom from their own evil. As Cavell notes, "there comes a time when the institution of slavery cannot be justified on any ground other than the sheer denial of the slave's humanity",[152] but when the final act of dehumanisation – death – loses its distance from the killer, then the justification must come from the

[148] Ibid.
[149] Oppenheimer, "Testimony," 243
[150] Klawans, "Song"
[151] Ibid.
[152] Cavell, *Claim*, 373

responsibility the killer claims precisely for the *restoration* of humanity, as with the Nazis' "*arbeit macht frei*".

But such a grotesque parody of justification makes a mockery of the words themselves, caricaturing not only the obscenity of human oppression, but also the grace of God, in recognition of Whom work truly does equal freedom and death truly does equal life, all notions transformed unimaginably by this recognition, but never on human terms, and certainly not those defined by an oppressor. In "paradise", then, Congo makes his last stand, taking the place of God, clothed in black, a false god of death. He stands there "forgiven" in the most meaningless way so that he will not have to seek God's forgiveness, with the absolute sacrifice it entails. It is not our forgiveness, then, or even that of the victims, that he should be granted, but through love alone we lead to the forgiveness of God, which is the *taking account of* all wrongs in a return to humanity and never a mere tolerance. Where else could justice be found but in the simultaneous mercy of renewal, and punishment of return to that which we struggled vainly to escape? "If Thou forgivest me not, who is there then to grant pardon, and if Thou hast no mercy upon me who is capable of showing compassion?"[153] Indeed, such forgiveness must be granted to all, as we are all sinners, and if this seems harsh when we consider Congo's torment – as one reviewer writes, "both Arendt and Oppenheimer hold up a mirror – but isn't this too heavy a moral injunction?" [154] – we must remember that it is always proportionate to the distance we have strained away from our hearts, how far *outside God* we have convinced ourselves we can be. "My calamity is My providence, outwardly it is fire and vengeance, but inwardly it is light and mercy. Hasten thereunto that thou mayest become an eternal light and an immortal spirit."[155]

When responding to the horrors we commit, as members of the human race, we must, therefore, be human, and therefore divine, where others have failed. To quote Freire, "this is a radical requirement. [We] cannot enter the struggle as objects in order *later* to become human beings."[156] No justice can be served while we retain the same corrupted, divisive vision of reality as those who work to disguise corruption as goodness, truth and beauty – no matter how well we disguise our own version. It is instructive to note that even the most noble words can be abused in the desperate fight to escape our humanity; the Indonesian national motto is "unity in diversity", the same as the "watchword"[157] of the Bahá'í Faith. But it is precisely on these terms, then, that we meet someone who has strained away from inescapable love, by lovingly showing the obligation of love entailed not only in these words, but in the very fact of being. As I mentioned towards the beginning of this essay, it was two quotations from Oppenheimer that inspired me to write it. The first was on the implication of our humanity in our evildoings, but the second was on forgiveness. Telling the interviewer of the lessons learned in making *The Act of Killing*, he mentions an occasion on which an audience member told him he could see that Oppenheimer has forgiven Anwar Congo. In response

---

[153] The Báb, *Selections from the Writings of the Báb* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978), 182

[154] Saskia Wieringa, "Justification for mass murder? Anwar Congo in *The Act of Killing* and the trial of Eichmann," *Atria Ontmoet*, 3 June 2013, accessed 4 September, http://www.atriaontmoet.nl/blog/justification-mass-murder-anwar-congo-act-killing-and-trial-eichmann

[155] Bahá'u'lláh, *Writings*, 45

[156] Freire, *Oppressed*, 50

[157] Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* (Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991), 42

to his protestations that this is not his role, the viewer reminded him that "by seeing the human being beyond the actions, that *is* forgiveness. That is what forgiveness is."[158] I might add that forgiveness is also to show the evildoer the human beyond the actions.

I conclude with the words of The Universal House of Justice:

> The source of the optimism we feel is a vision transcending the cessation of war and the creation of agencies of international co-operation. Permanent peace among nations is an essential stage, but not, Bahá'u'lláh asserts, the ultimate goal of the social development of humanity. Beyond the initial armistice forced upon the world by the fear of nuclear holocaust, beyond the political peace reluctantly entered into by suspicious rival nations, beyond pragmatic arrangements for security and coexistence, beyond even the many experiments in co-operation which these steps will make possible lies the crowning goal: the unification of all the peoples of the world in one universal family.[159]

[158] Goodsell, "Humanity"
[159] UHJ, *Promise*, 23

Bibliography

‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *‘Abdu’l-Bahá in London*. London: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1987.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Cited in *Star of the West* 8, no. 4 (1917): 41.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *Divine Philosophy*. Boston: Tudor Press, 1918.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Originally printed in Persian in *Star of the West* 5, no. 7 (1914): 110, translated by the Research Department at the Bahá’í World Centre, accessed 19 August 2014, http://bahai-library.com/ uhj_research_department_etymologies.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *Paris Talks*. London: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1951.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*. Illinois: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1996.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *Some Answered Questions*. New Delhi: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 2001.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *Tablets of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Abbas: Volume I*. Chicago: Bahá’í Publishing Society, 1909.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*. Illinois: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1982.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *The Secret of Divine Civilisation*. Illinois: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1990.

The Act of Killing. Directed by Joshua Oppenheimer. 2012; Norway, Denmark, UK: Dogwoof Pictures, 2013. DVD.

Adams, Sam. “Focusing on Killers Doesn’t Make *The Act of Killing* ‘Snuff’.” *Indiewire*, 25 February 2014, accessed 1 September 2014, http://blogs.indiewire.com/criticwire/act-of-killing-joshua-oppenheimer-oscars.

Allais, Lucy. “Wiping the Slate Clean: The Heart of Forgiveness.” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 36, no. 1 (2008): 33-68.

Anderson, Benedict. “Impunity.” In *Killer Images: Documentary Film, Memory and the Performance of Violence*, ed. Joram Ten Brink and Joshua Oppenheimer, 268-286. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.

Applebaum, Stephen. “Indonesia's killing fields revisited in Joshua Oppenheimer's documentary.” *The Australian*, 13 April 2013, accessed 3 September 2014, http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/the-killing-fields-revisited-in-joshua-

oppenheimers-documentary/story-fn9n8gph-1226617607946?nk=9c231eb6df6f13b29277b0b398727307#.

Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. London: Faber and Faber, 1963.

The Báb. *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*. Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978.

Bahá'í World Centre. *One Common Faith*. Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 2005.

Bahá'u'lláh. *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*. Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988.

Bahá'u'lláh. *Gems of Divine Mysteries*. Aeterna Publishing, 2010.

Bahá'u'lláh. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*. Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990.

Bahá'u'lláh. *Prayers and Meditations*. Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1987.

Bahá'u'lláh. *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed After the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988.

Bahá'u'lláh. *The Hidden Words*. Indiana: Special Ideas, 1994.

Bahá'u'lláh. *Writings of Bahá'u'lláh: A Compilation*. New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2001.

Bahá'u'lláh's Teachings on Spiritual Reality, ed. Paul Lample. Florida: Palabra Publications, 1996.

Bradshaw, Nick. "Build my gallows high: Joshua Oppenheimer on *The Act of Killing*." *Sight & Sound*, 15 April 2014, accessed 6 September 2014, http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/interviews/build-my-gallows-high-joshua-oppenheimer-act-killing.

Campbell, Christopher. "Should Documentaries Provide a Platform for the Purely Evil?" *Nonfics*, 9 October 2013, accessed 1 September 2014, http://nonfics.com/documentaries-provide-platform-purely-evil/.

Cavell, Stanley. "Comments on Veena Das's Essay: 'Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain'." In *Social Suffering*, ed. Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das and Margaret Lock, 93-98. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997.

Cavell, Stanley. *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Cohn, Pamela. "Joshua Oppenheimer." *BOMB Magazine*, 18 December 2012, accessed 5 September 2014, http://bombmagazine.org/article/6992/.

Cole, Juan R I. "Globalization and Religion in the Thought of 'Abdu'l-Bahá." In *Bahá'í and Globalism*, ed. Margit Warburg, Annika Hvithamar and Morten Warmind, 55-75. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2005.

Cribb, Robert. "Review: An act of manipulation?" *Inside Indonesia*, April 2013, accessed 29 August 2014, http://www.insideindonesia.org/weekly-articles/review-an-act-of-manipulation.

Crichlow, Warren. "'It's All About Finding the Right Excuse' in Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing*." *Film Quarterly* 67, no. 2 (2013): 37-43.

Derrida, Jacques. *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*. Oxford: Routledge, 2001.

Effendi, Shoghi. *The Advent of Divine Justice*. Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990.

Effendi, Shoghi. *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*. Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991.

Elphick, Jeremy. "Joshua Oppenheimer Discusses *The Act of Killing*." *4:3*, 2 May 2014, accessed 30 August 2014, http://fourthreefilm.com/2014/05/interview-joshua-oppenheimer/.

Fierke, Karin. *Critical Approaches to International Security*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007.

Film Crit Hulk. "Film Crit Hulk Smash: *The Act of Killing* and the Real Meaning of Impact." *Badass Digest*, 22 January 2014, accessed 2 September 2014, http://badassdigest.com/2014/01/22/film-crit-hulk-smash-the-act-of-killing-and-the-real-meaning-of-impact/.

Fraser, Nick. "*The Act of Killing*: don't give an Oscar to this snuff movie." *The Guardian*, 23 February 2014, accessed 27 August 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/feb/23/act-of-killing-dont-give-oscar-snuff-movie-indonesia.

Fraser, Nick. "We Love Impunity: The Case of *The Act of Killing*." *Film Quarterly* 67, no. 2 (2013): 21-24.

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Heart*. New York: Continuum, 2007.

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum, 1993.

Gantan, Josua. "Indonesia Reacts to *Act of Killing* Academy Nomination." *The Jakarta Globe*, 23 January 2013, accessed 2 September 2014,

http://thejakartaglobe.beritasatu.com/news/indonesia-reacts-to-act-of-killing-academy-nomination/#comment-1214306764.

Glenn, Colleen. "Director Joshua Oppenheimer discusses *The Act of Killing*." *Charleston City Paper*, 15 January 2014, accessed 19 September 2014, http://www.charlestoncitypaper.com/charleston/director-joshua-oppenheimer-discusses-the-act-of-killing/Content?oid=4846144.

Godmilow, Jill. "Killing the Documentary: An Oscar-Nominated Filmmaker Takes Issue with *The Act of Killing*." *Indiewire*, 5 March 2014, accessed 19 August 2014, http://www.indiewire.com/article/killing-the-documentary-an-oscar-nominated-filmmaker-takes-issue-with-the-act-of-killing.

Goodsell, Luke. "Interview: Oscar-nominated *Act of Killing* Director on the Humanity of Evil." *Rotten Tomatoes*, 17 January 2014, accessed 18 January 2014, http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_act_of_ killing/news/1929435/interview_oscar-nominated_act_of _killing_director_on_the_humanity_of_evil/.

Griswold, Charles L. *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Hardy, Mary. *Voice of Protest: An Open Letter to the Iranian Embassy*. London: The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United Kingdom, 1983.

Heryanto, Ariel. "Screening the 1965 Violence." In *Killer Images: Documentary Film, Memory and the Performance of Violence*, ed. Joram Ten Brink and Joshua Oppenheimer, 224-240. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.

Heryanto, Ariel. "The 1965-1966 Killings." *The Newsletter* 61 (2012): 16-17.

Heryanto, Ariel. *State Terrorism and Political Identity in Indonesia: Fatally Belonging*. London: Routledge, 2006.

The Holy Bible. English Standard Version. Illinois: Crossway, 2007.

Jenkins, David. "Joshua Oppenheimer." *Little White Lies*, 27 June 2013, accessed 7 September 2014, http://www.littlewhitelies.co.uk/features/articles/joshua-oppenheimer-24190.

Jesson, Stuart. "Forgiveness and its Reason." PhD thesis, University of Nottingham, 2010.

Kaufman, Sophie Monks. "Joshua Oppenheimer on *The Act of Killing*." *Grolsch Film Works*, accessed 3 September 2014, http://grolschfilmworks.com/ca/features/joshua-oppenheimer-on-the-act-of-killing.

King, Homay. “Born Free? Repetition and Fantasy in *The Act of Killing*.” *Film Quarterly* 67, no. 2 (2013): 30-36.

Klawans, Stuart. “The Executioner’s Song.” *Film Comment*, July 2013, accessed 7 September 2014, http://www.filmcomment.com/article/the-executioners-song.

Klein, Jesse. “*The Act of Killing*.” *Hammer to Nail*, 19 July 2013, accessed 27 September 2014, http://www.hammertonail.com/reviews/the-act-of-killing-film-review/.

Lane, Anthony. “Grim Tidings.” *The New Yorker*, 22 July 2013, accessed 7 September 2014, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/07/22/grim-tidings.

Levinas, Emmanuel. *Ethics and Infinity*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985.

Lodge, Guy. “Joshua Oppenheimer on what awards really mean for *The Act of Killing*.” *Hitfix*, 25 February 2014, accessed 1 September 2014, http://www.hitfix.com/in-contention/joshua-oppenheimer-on-what-awards-really-mean-for-the-act-of-killing#LFjV2573qH6jSi2E.99.

Lowe, Paul. “Picturing the Perpetrator.” In *Picturing Atrocity: Photography in Crisis*, ed.

Geoffrey Batchen, Mick Gidley, Nancy K. Miller, and Jay Prosser, 188-208. London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2012.

Lusztig, Irene. “The Fever Dream of Documentary: A Conversation with Joshua Oppenheimer.” *Film Quarterly* 67, no. 2 (2013): 50-56.

Mayo, Donald. “The Act of Killing: surreal masterpiece or high-minded snuff movie?” 30 January 2013, accessed 29 August 2014, http://donaldfinnaeusmayo.com/2014/01/30/the-act-of-killing-surreal-masterpiece-or-high-minded-snuff-movie/.

McAlinden, Carrie. “True Surrealism: Walter Benjamin and *The Act of Killing*.” *Sight & Sound*, 3 December 2013, accessed 2 September 2014, http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/features/true-surrealism-walter-benjamin-act-killing.

McClendon, Blair. “Joshua Oppenheimer and *The Act of Killing*.” *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, 14 August 2013, accessed 4 September 2014, http://lareviewofbooks.org/interview/joshua-oppenheimer-and-the-act-of-killing#.

Merin, Jennifer. “A Genocide Exploitation Film.” *About Entertainment*, 6 July 2014, accessed 28 August 2014, http://documentaries.about.com/od/revie2/fr/The-Act-Of-Killing-Movie-Review-2013.htm.

Milbank, John. *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon*. London: Routledge, 2004.

Morris, Errol. "*The Act of Killing* Essay: How Indonesia's mass killings could have slowed the Vietnam War." *Slate*, 10 July 2013, accessed 4 September 2014, http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/history/2013/07/the_act_of_killing_essay_how_indonesia_s_mass_killings_could_have_slowed.html.

Murray, Noel. "*Act of Killing* director Joshua Oppenheimer recommends a film just now hitting cinemas." *The Dissolve*, 13 January 2014, accessed 2 September 2014, http://thedissolve.com/features/the-last-great-movie-i-saw/355-act-of-killing-director-joshua-oppenheimer-recomme/.

Nichols, Bill. "Irony, Cruelty, Evil (and a Wink) in *The Act of Killing*." *Film Quarterly* 67, no. 2 (2013): 25-29.

Oppenheimer, Joshua and Uwemedimo, Michael. "Show of Force: A Cinema-Séance of Power and Violence in Sumatra's Plantation Belt." In *Killer Images: Documentary Film, Memory and the Performance of Violence*, ed. Joram Ten Brink and Joshua Oppenheimer, 287-310. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.

Oppenheimer, Joshua. "Perpetrators' Testimony and the Restoration of Humanity: *S21*, Rithy Pahn." In *Killer Images: Documentary Film, Memory and the Performance of Violence*, ed. Joram Ten Brink and Joshua Oppenheimer, 243-255. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.

Oppenheimer, Joshua. "*The Act of Killing* has helped Indonesia reassess its past and present." *The Guardian*, 25 February 2014, accessed 30 August 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/ 2014/feb/25/the-act-of-killing-indonesia-past-present-1965-genocide.

Paramaditha, Intan. "Tracing Frictions in *The Act of Killing*." *Film Quarterly* 67, no. 2 (2013): 44-49.

Peterson, Rodney L. "A Theology of Forgiveness." In *Forgiveness and Reconciliation*, ed. Raymond G Helmick, S J, and Rodney L Peterson, 3-25. .Pennsylvania: Templeton Foundation Press, 2001.

Political Non-Involvement and Obedience to Government, ed. Dr Peter J Khan. Bundoora: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 2006.

Pseudo-Dionysius. *The Complete Works*. New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1987.

The Qur'an. Trans. N. J. Dawood. London: Penguin Books, 2003.

Rainwater, Lisa. "Behind the Scrim of Humanity: An Interview with Joshua Oppenheimer." *Galo Magazine*, 29 January 2014, accessed 2 September 2014, http://www.galomagazine.com/movies-tv/behind-the-scrim-of-humanity-an-interview-

with-joshua-oppenheimer-academy-award-nominee-for-best-documentary-feature-the-act-of-killing/.

Rapold, Nicolas. “Interview: Joshua Oppenheimer.” *Film Comment*, 15 July 2013, accessed 6 September 2014, http://www.filmcomment.com/entry/interview-joshua-oppenheimer-the-act-of-killing.

Rapold, Nicolas. “Toronto 2012 Diary: *The Act of Killing*.” *Film Comment*, 9 September 2012, accessed 7 September 2014, http://www.filmcomment.com/entry/toronto-the-act-of-killing-joshua-oppenheimer.

Rayns, Tony. “Review: *The Act of Killing*.” *Sight & Sound*, 6 December 2013, accessed 2 September 2014, http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/reviews-recommendations/review-act-killing.

Reddit. “Overview for TheActofKillingfilm.” 30 August 2014, http://www.reddit.com/user/TheActof Killingfilm

Ricoeur, Paul. *History and Truth*. Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1992.

Ricoeur, Paul. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

Rojas, Nubia. “Documentary cinema, memory and reconciliation: An interview with Joshua Oppenheimer, director of *The Act of Killing*.” *Glocal Times*, June 2014, accessed 15 August 2014, http://ojs.ub.gu.se/ojs/index.php/gt/article/view/2873.

Sabarini, Prodita. “Joshua Oppenheimer: Facing the monsters in the dark.” *The Jakarta Post*, 3 March 2014, accessed 30 August 2014, http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2014/03/03/joshua-oppenheimer-facing-monsters-dark.html.

Sabarini, Prodita. “*The Act of Killing* doesn’t end.” *The Boston Globe*, 29 March 2014, accessed 30 August 2014, http://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2014/03/28/the-act-killing-doesn-end/nDRMCL9 ouz04HyON0X21LJ/story.html.

Sasono, Eric. “Documentary films and democracy: The Act of Killing and representation of the 1965-66 massacres in the Indonesian public sphere.” (MA dissertation, University of Nottingham, 2013.)

Savi, Julio. *Unsheathing the Sword of Wisdom: Reflections on Human Rights and Terrorism*. Oxford: George Ronald, 2011.

Schaer, Cathrin. “*The Act of Killing*: Re-Staging War Crimes with Indonesian Gangsters.” *Spiegel*, 12 February 2013, accessed 7 September 2014, http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/the-act-of-killing-reenacting-war-crimes-with-indonesian-gangsters-a-882970.html.

Scott, A O. “Mass Murder? Gee, That Was Fun: *Act of Killing* Re-enacts Indonesian Massacres.” *The New York Times*, 18 July 2013, accessed 28 August 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/19/movies/act-of-killing-re-enacts-indonesian-massacres.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1&.

The Talmud. Translation of Michael L Rodkinson. Accessed 2 October 2014, http://www.sacred-texts.com/jud/talmud.htm.

Tarkovsky, Andrei. *Sculpting in Time*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006.

The Universal House of Justice. “To the Bahá’ís of Iran.” 2 March 2013, accessed 6 September 2014, http://universalhouseofjustice.bahai.org/involvement-life-society/20130302_001.

The Universal House of Justice. *The Promise of World Peace*. Haifa: Bahá’í World Centre, 1985.

Volf, Miroslav. “Forgiveness, Reconciliation & Justice: A Christian Contribution to a More Peaceful Social Environment.” In *Forgiveness and Reconciliation*, ed. Raymond G. Helmick, S.J., and Rodney L. Peterson, 27-49. Pennsylvania: Templeton Foundation Press, 2001.

Walker, Janet. “Referred Pain: *The Act of Killing* and the Production of a Crime Scene.” *Film Quarterly* 67, no. 2 (2013): 14-20.

Weiner, Jonah. “The Weird Genius of *The Act of Killing*.” *The New Yorker*, 15 July 2013, accessed 7 September 2014, http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-weird-genius-of-the-act-of-killing.

Wieringa, Saskia. “Justification for mass murder? Anwar Congo in *The Act of Killing* and the trial of Eichmann.” *Atria Ontmoet*, 3 June 2013, accessed 4 September, http://www.atriaontmoet.nl/blog/ justification-mass-murder-anwar-congo-act-killing-and-trial-eichmann.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell & Mott, Ltd, 1972.

Zizek, Slavoj. “It’s the End of the World as We Know It” (paper presented at the Nuit Blanche Symposium, Toronto, 29 September 2012), accessed 16 August 2014, http://vimeo.com/86759949.

Zizek, Slavoj. “Slavoj Zizek on *The Act of Killing* and the modern trend of ‘privatising public space’.” *New Statesman*, 12 July 2013, accessed 6 September 2014, http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2013/07/slavoj-zizek-act-killing-and-modern-trend-privatising-public-space.