

Film Review: Riveting ‘The Act of Killing’ Demands to Be Seen

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on August 12, 2013 - 1:13pm

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CHICAGO – We like to think that mass murderers are pure monsters. They don’t have kids. They don’t walk around free. They couldn’t possibly have a moment of joy after causing so much pain. This is, of course, nothing more than a comforting fallacy. And yet film has had a very difficult time of tearing down this façade. Even documentary films often present their killers as pure villains. This is not to say that Joshua Oppenheimer, the director of the mesmerizing “The Act of Killing,” lets his subjects off the hook, but he allows the process of filmmaking and the act of remembering to do the judging for him. This film is jaw-dropping. It’s a must-see.



Rating: **5.0/5.0**

In 1965, there was a failed coup in Indonesia, which led to the formation of murder squads, men who prowled the cities and countryside in search of men, women, and children deemed “Communists.” These squads killed millions of people, and the power structure that put them in place has done nothing to bring them to any sort of justice. They committed genocide and walked away. Many of them are still protected by a government that feels like it could commit similar atrocities any day now. There seems to be a slight turning of the history pages to capture the true horror of what happened then but it’s a gradual, slow process.



[Read Brian Tallerico’s full review of “The Act of Killing” in our reviews section.](#) [10]

As one of the men says in “The Act of Killing,” “*War crimes are defined by the winners.*” It’s a scary statement but not 100% true. Oppenheimer’s film captures men literally in the act of realization of their role in war crimes and how they may not be judged at The Hague but will never sleep a nightmare-free night again.

Many documentarians would have met these men in their element and simply interviewed them, perhaps intercutting their stories with archival footage or expert interviews. “The Act of Killing” has a completely unique approach, one that captivated two of the masters of the form (Errol Morris & Werner Herzog) to such a degree that they agreed to Executive Produce this work. Oppenheimer asked the mass murderers in his film to reenact their crimes for a filmmaking crew. All of the men are obsessed with Hollywood, claiming they used methods from “gangster films” in their killings. They use the camera, makeup, and act of recreation to reach deep into a part of their own history that they don’t seem to fully understand yet. And, importantly, that feels present. The military groups that condoned and even committed some of these crimes are still in power and the filmmakers were so concerned about their own safety that half of the credits that roll at the end merely say “Anonymous.”



[Continue reading for Brian Tallerico’s full “The Act of Killing” review.](#) [10]

“The Act of Killing” was directed by Joshua Oppenheimer and opens in Chicago at the Music Box on Friday, August 16, 2013.



The Act of Killing

Photo credit: Drafthouse Films

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