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THE LOOK OF SILENCE, A LOUD ENTRY IN 2016 OSCAR CONTEST

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The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences has just announced the nominees for the 2016 Academy Awards and, as many expect, Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Look of Silence* is among the five films nominated in the Best Documentary Feature category. This is the second film by the Copenhagen-based American director to be nominated for Oscar; the first being *The Act of Killing* in 2014.

Both *The Look* and *The Act* revisit the anti-communist genocide in Indonesia that took place between 1965 and 1966, when between half a million to one million actual and perceived members of the Communist Party were slaughtered. The genocide was a turning point in Indonesia's history, ending the administration of the leftist-leaning populist President Soekarno, the nation's founding father and first president, and ushering in the Western-backed General Soeharto, who would hold the office of president for the next 31 years. In terms of Cold War geopolitics, the demise of the three million strong Communist Party of Indonesia, then the third largest in the world after the communist parties in China and the Soviet Union, was a major triumph for the Western Bloc.

The Look of Silence is a companion piece to *The Act of Killing*, but relates the genocide from an opposite angle. While *The Act* recounts the genocide from the point of view of the perpetrators, *The Look* trails a man whose brother had been accused of being a Communist and subsequently slaughtered back in 1966. *The Act* was widely acclaimed and won awards in a number of film festivals, but failed to snatch the biggest prize of all – the Oscar. Winning an Oscar would have accorded it visibility beyond the film and the intellectual circles. For reasons that were entirely political, I had hoped *The Act* had won. The Soeharto government had practically whitewashed history and imposed silence on the Communists genocide. Recognition by Hollywood might go a long way toward breaking the silence even further in Indonesia.

Many commentaries extolled *The Act* for its unusual narrating style – Oppenheimer had let the killers staged their own cinematic reenactment of the butchery, thus essentially a film inside a film – and for practically getting the perpetrators to self-incriminate on record. Admittedly, I was not among the fans. I thought *The Act* lacked thematic coherence. At one point in the film, the killers, who were Hollywood film aficionados back in the 1960s, reenact a torture-filled interrogation scene in the style of American

gangsters, complete with suits and fedoras. While the double meaning of the word “act” in the title – as deed and staged performance – has hinted at the interplay between fact and fantasy, the film is not exactly a meditation on this juxtaposition.

By comparison, *The Look of Silence* has a much more modest focus. It follows a man, an optician by the name of Adi Rukun, as he learns about the individuals involved in the killing of his brother Ramli, the gory details of the execution, and especially as he confronts the executors. Adi was born two years after the genocide, but has lived all his life with its consequences – both psychological, as the murder of Ramli left a deep trauma on his parents, and political, because decades of anti-communist stance by the Indonesian state has left families like Adi’s stigmatized.

The Look’s modest objective, unpretentious in delivery, is precisely its strength. It allows Oppenheimer plenty of space to dwell on the emotions of everyone involved – on “the look” of their faces as Adi confronts his brother’s executors, as his parents relive the past by recounting the moment Ramli was taken into custody by a paramilitary group, as the butchers sit face to face with Adi, or as their daughter and wife learn that their loved one had been a sadistic murderer. The look on their faces is anything but silence. Or, it is a different kind of silence, one that is most deafening.

Close-up shots are copious in the film and Oppenheimer’s camera lingers long enough after some of the perpetrators became defensive and abruptly ended the conversation with Adi. This setup intrigues the audience – as good documentary films do – to ask: What happens after the camera switches off?

Its modest focus gives *The Look of Silence* a thematic unity that *The Act of Killing* lacks. When it does not try to do too much, *The Look* gives so much more.

It offers a few hints about the way forward, if reconciliation between the victims and the perpetrators is to be attempted. One is that bitterness from having a loved one slaughtered in the clash of ideology is profound and persistent. Adi’s aging mother does not seem to remember her or her husband’s accurate age, but can recall clearly the day her son Ramli was taken away, after being tortured.

The second is that civilians’ involvement in the genocide was extensive. In *The Look* we learn that an uncle of Adi’s used to work as guard for the paramilitary organization that detained, interrogated and executed people suspected of Communist ties. The extent of civilian involvement poses a challenge to attempts by victims and their families to seek justice and redress. No doubt the Indonesian army played a big role in mobilizing paramilitary organizations and in flaming anti-communist sentiments. But to blame the genocide solely at the feet of the army, or to characterize it in dichotomous terms as a conflict between the army and the Communist Party, is both reductive and unproductive.

Lastly, *The Look* also hints, perhaps unintentionally, that gender might point to an opening in the attempt for reconciliation. While the perpetrators and their sons reacted defensively to Adi confronting them about complicity in the genocide, the daughter and wife of two executors are visibly troubled by proofs of their complicity and especially sadistic conducts. While the men reacted with threats against Adi, ending the exchanges

abruptly, the women apologized on behalf of their now seemingly senile father and deceased husband. There appears to be hope that women on both sides of divide might just be the bridge toward reconciliation.

For all this, *The Look of Silence* deserves the highest recognition in the film industry. I had wished *The Act* won an Oscar for political reason, now I hope *The Look* wins because it deserves an Oscar.

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