Soul-blindness, Trauma, Reenactment: A Cavellian Reading of *The Act of Killing* and *The Look of Silence*

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Abstract: This article aims to demonstrate how concepts from Stanley Cavell's ethical and epistemological reflections can enhance discussions within trauma and reenactment studies by providing a valuable philosophical framework. A case study is presented through two documentaries by Joshua Oppenheimer, which focus on the Indonesian mass killings of 1955–1966. The article argues that, when considered in relation to film theory issues such as realism, spectatorship, and performance, the unique first-person reenactments in these documentaries can be effectively analyzed using Cavell's Wittgenstein-inspired concepts of aspect-seeing, soul-blindness, and imagination.

Keywords: Stanley Cavell, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Joshua Oppenheimer, aspect-seeing, intersubjectivity

Introduction: A History of Violence

Joshua Oppenheimer's two feature films both focus on the legacy of the mass killings that took place in Indonesia in 1965–1966, but from two different perspectives. While *The Look of Silence* (2014) makes Adi, the brother of a victim, the protagonist of the documentary, following his search for truth, meaning, and reconciliation almost fifty years after the events, *The Act of Killing* (2012), in a significant move that will be the focus of the concluding section of this article, stars one of the executioners, a former "gangster" named Anwar Congo.

Thanks to a few essential captions and fragments of information scattered in interviews, the viewer can reconstruct historical events of disturbing proportions. Following the military coup of 1965, a wave of violence and purges – classified as spontaneous by the authorities but actually carried out on behalf of the army and government by a nebula of paramilitary militias and organized criminal groups – erupted across the vast Indonesian archipelago. In just over three months, we learn, about a million people were exterminated. Officially labeled as "communists," the victims actually included not only members and sympathizers of the Indonesian Communist Party but also landless peasants, intellectuals, unionists, and people of Chinese nationality.

It also emerges that at the time the two films were shot, i.e. about fifteen years after the end of the dictatorship, the country was still far from even beginning to come to terms with its own historical memory. A multitude of figures directly or indirectly involved in the massacres are still shown to occupy top positions in the Indonesian power system. School curricula are still silent about the massacres, while indulging, as we learn in a scene set in a school, in a characterization of the "communists" that is hard not to interpret as outright political propaganda, with content in continuity with that of the regime films produced in the years following the massacres and with what, still in the 2000s, the executioners openly claim about their old victims: that they were cruel torturers, conspirators, atheists, that they had the habit of exchanging wives, etc.

Thus, it is easy to understand why the few "neutral" people interviewed in the films, those who were neither victims nor executioners, maintain an ambiguous and suspicious attitude: the perpetrators are indeed still among them, an integral part of their everyday life scenario; and this is also the condition in which relatives and descendants of the victims live.

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A Cinematic Method: Documentary and Reenactment

Oppenheimer certainly relies on the referential capabilities of the film medium, on that capacity for mechanical and photographic reproduction of reality that has led critics and theorists to describe cinema as a "dramaturgy of nature" (Bazin 1967, 110), as focused on the medium of "physical reality as such" (Panofsky 1959, 31), as "a succession of automatic world projections" (Cavell 1979a, 72). The director exploits the realistic component of cinema in order to intimate to viewers – to quote Primo Levi's famous words – "Meditate that this came about," (Levi 2000, 25) to bear witness to historical events whose appeal might otherwise go unheard. Nonetheless, Oppenheimer's attitude towards documentary referentiality is never simplistic or linear, and this, not only because the relevant facts happened in a now distant past and are therefore materially *impossible* to film.

Some of Oppenheimer's precautions can be defined as epistemological. For example, the director does not try to hide the editing through long takes and invisible transitions; he does not feel that the documentary genre forces him to a dialogue grammar different from the classical one based on the succession of shot and reverse shot. Furthermore, he is not physically present in any shot, perhaps because this would have meant arrogating excessive attention for himself; but neither does he try to hide, to foster the illusion of a documentary that is a gaze from nowhere, and therefore does not expunge from the final cut those moments when a character looks off-camera to speak directly to him or the second operator, or those in which the viewer hears the director's voice intervening in the conversation to ask a question or to reformulate someone's statement more clearly. Although, in short, Oppenheimer does not ostentatiously declare his presence as a director – Cavell, in two brilliant sections of *The World Viewed*, suggested that the compulsion to self-referentiality and to an assertive film style can be read as a form of self-denunciation by the filmmaker and therefore, paradoxically, as an unwitting tribute to the ideals of honesty, sincerity, and cinematic transparency (Cavell 1979a, 126-46)[1] – he does not try to elide it either, nor does he think it possible to do so.

However, there is a more compelling reason why Oppenheimer cannot base his work on an ideal of complete transparency, a reason that pertains to the specific purposes of his work rather than just to the general characteristics of the film medium or documentary genre. From their introductory captions, *The Act of Killing* and *The Look of Silence* show that they do not propose just to represent and witness facts, but rather, so to speak, *to lift a repression*, to bring to consciousness contents that both individuals and the collective discourse had suppressed, thus producing therapeutic effects at a psychological as well as ethical, civil, and political level. For this reason, Oppenheimer resorts to the performative and narrative method of reenactment, which has been the subject of considerable theoretical treatment inside and outside film studies (see especially Donghi 2024, but also Nichols 2008; Agnew, Lamb and Tomann 2020; Bruzzi 2020) and which, in recent decades, particularly in its first-person variety (see Margulies 2019), has been followed by a now sizable group of directors[2]. Focusing around the staging, the dramatized repetition of past events and experiences by those who had lived them in the first place, Oppenheimer's documentaries aim to be not mirrors of the world, but actions *in* the world and *on* the world, active instruments of meaning construction, ways in which – to freely reference the title of the famous collection of lectures by John Austin – one can "do things with words" (as well as with the body, voice, intention, and everything in human communication that is *performative*).

In both films Oppenheimer structures a hermeneutic circle between performativity and spectatorship that seems to articulate itself in four main steps: 1) the staging by the executioners of past violence and its filmed documentation; 2) the private projection of the footage in front of a restricted audience of people who, as relatives of the victims or as executioners, are directly involved in the events; 3) the documentation of the reaction elicited in the members of this audience, both immediately (through close-ups that capture their facial expressions and body language) and afterwards (the actions they decide to take and the changes in their view of the events); 4) the editing of

all the previous steps within the definitive film, the one addressed to the broader and anonymous audience of people who are not directly involved, i.e., *us*.

Within this basic structure, however, there are two significant asymmetries between the two films. The first is constituted by the degree of elaboration of the staging, of the actual reenactment produced by the executioners during step 1. In *The Look of Silence*, the executioners recount their actions mostly verbally and the performative aspect is limited to physically returning to the crime scenes, as well as their pronounced tendency to mimic, usually in emphatic and detailed ways, the violence committed. In *The Act of Killing*, on the other hand, the executioners, at the director's suggestion, even embark on the project of making a movie about those events, a proper although amateurish feature film with actors, extras, costumes, props, and sets.

The second asymmetry is marked by the protagonists of the second and third steps: while in *The Look of Silence* the viewer to whom the footage with the executioners' statements is shown is the brother of one of the victims, in *The Act of Killing* it is the executioners themselves who view the cinematic reenactment they themselves conceived and performed. Another way to describe this second asymmetry is to state that in *The Look of Silence* the film's protagonist is only the spectator of the reenactment, while in *The Act of Killing* he is both the actor-protagonist and the spectator.

From these two fundamental asymmetries, and particularly from the second, derive the significant differences between the effects produced by the reenactment processes documented in the two films.

Soul-blindness and Otherness: A Philosophical Problem

To fully understand the scope of these differences, however, it is necessary first to bring out what may appear to be the main issue raised by Oppenheimer's cinematic diptych.

At a first level, this issue concerns the psychological and rhetorical automatisms by which the executioners tend to justify their actions: among those interviewed in the two films, there are those who claim to have "merely" followed orders, those who argue that it was necessary to defend "the state," those who protest to not having directly killed any dissident (a justification that, emblematically, is provided both by a humble jailer without glory, who had simply overseen the detention of some victims, and by a prominent military leader who had personally ordered, but not carried out, the killing of tens of thousands of people), and finally those who, having been the material executors, can only resort to the already mentioned propaganda against the "communists". Certain pages from Hannah Arendt's account of the Adolf Eichmann trial come to mind, as well as some of her insights into the intellectual and psychological shallowness, the superficial bad faith that was ingrained in the personality of the persecutor.

However, there is a difference between the "Final Solution of the Jewish Question" and the facts told by Oppenheimer that perhaps suggests shifting the focus of our attention. Arendt herself, in her classic, noted that in the context of the Eichmann trial, "if it was of small legal relevance, it was of great political interest to know how long it takes an average person to overcome his innate repugnance toward crime, and what exactly happens to him once he has reached that point" (Arendt 1994, 93). However, this question becomes even more interesting in the case of the Indonesian massacres, given that nothing comparable to the bureaucratic and medical proceduralization that characterized the Nazi extermination of the Jewish people took place. This is not a difference in gravity, obviously, but in modality and therefore in implications: such proceduralization, it could be argued and has been argued, could indeed have aided the self-deception of some, allowing them to hide their individual responsibilities behind the infamous "cog theory" (Arendt 1994, 289). Part of the horror evoked by gas chambers lies in the idea of an industrial organization of massacre, yet it is precisely this industrialization that may have constituted a psychic distancing device for its operators, a facilitation in the process of dehumanizing the victims.

The Indonesian massacres, on the contrary, were carried out with bladed weapons or even bare hands. Without going into the details of the tortures, mutilations, and sadistic methods of execution

extensively recounted in the two documentaries, they can be summarized by stating that there was literally no distancing device, neither symbolic nor physical. The two films seem indeed to show a recurring phenomenon: when moving from the instigators and accomplices to the actual perpetrators, the attitude changes, the superficial self-justifications are abandoned in favor of open vindication, even boastful hilarity and seemingly carefree joy. Oppenheimer's executioners narrate and stage their misdeeds laughing exuberantly, emphasizing the details of the dexterity of the killings, showing off enjoying the recollection as much as they had enjoyed the original act.

So, Arendt's question reappears: what happens to a person who "has reached that point"? Is this joyful hilarity itself a distancing device? Is it possible that such individuals have always lacked, or have somehow managed to suppress within themselves, any form of — and the terms in the philosophical tradition have been multiple — empathy, sympathy, *Mitdasein*, respect for the humanity of the other, moral conscience, etc.?

In *The Claim of Reason*, Stanley Cavell wonders at one point if one can imagine individuals who are affected by what he calls "soul-blindness" (Cavell 1979b, 354-380). The section occurs in the context of a philosophical discussion on intersubjectivity and the problem of other minds that tries to develop Wittgenstein's reflections in the *Philosophical Investigations* in a direction not only epistemological and metaphysical, but ethical—albeit ethical in that modified sense that characterizes, for example, the "first" philosophy of Emmanuel Lévinas, with whom Cavell would belatedly discover strong affinities (Cavell 2005, 132-154).

In Chapter XI of Part II of the *Investigations* (Wittgenstein 1958, 193-229), Wittgenstein applied his "grammatical" method (§ 90) to the study of cases, such as Jastrow's famous duck-rabbit, which might seem halfway between seeing and thinking, or between perceiving and interpreting. I suddenly notice the resemblance between two faces, or that a certain stylized duck can also be read as a rabbit; Wittgenstein, as is known, speaks in this regard of a "flashing" and of the "noticing" of an aspect, of "seeing as": seeing the figure as a rabbit, a triangle as an arrow, a face as resembling another, but also, and pertinently to our discussion on cinema and reenactment, a photograph as the object represented in it, or a box as a house in the context of a child's imaginative play of make-believe. The seeming paradox of these cases, in which "nothing has changed in what I *see*, yet everything looks different" (Baker 2004, 279), is resolved in the *Philosophical Investigations* by carefully describing the ways in which our perceptions structurally reconnect to things like our "attitude", "custom and upbringing", the ability to grasp an "internal relationship between [an object] and other objects" (Wittgenstein 1958, II, § 11), that is, in essence, to the main themes of the book: "language games", "forms of life" and "family resemblances". In some of its areas, human perception is dependent on the perspective, holistically embedded in that complex set of socio-cultural practices and natural reactions that Wittgenstein summarizes with the concept of form of life.

In the chapter in question, Wittgenstein does not explicitly describe the knowledge of other minds as a form of "seeing as", but in the rest of the book passages that draw this connection can be found. In § 420, for example, Wittgenstein suggests that the hypothetical case of someone who, through effort and imagination, managed to decondition themselves from their natural reactions to such an extent that they managed to "see a living human being as an automaton," to see him simply as a body without psyche, would be analogous to that of "seeing one figure as a limiting case or variant of another." Similarly, in § IV of Part II, Wittgenstein says that I do not "believe" that what I have in front of me is a human being, that "I am not of the *opinion* that he has a soul"; rather, Wittgenstein continues, it is correct to say that "my attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul". This and other passages lead to the idea that intersubjectivity does not have a strictly cognitive base, that we treat other human beings as having a personal life, a psychic life, not so much because logical inferences have been made about their inner life from the observation of their external appearances; from a strictly cognitive point of view, in fact, such inferences are ultimately groundless, they could not withstand the stubborn objections of radical epistemological skepticism. Treating, seeing others

as beings endowed with a psychic life, therefore, depends on reactions and attitudes that are rooted in our natural history and cultural habits. "The human body — Wittgenstein famously writes—is the best picture of the human soul" (II § IV), and yet to those who persist in asking "why?" (why treat this being as a human being?) one can only respond as in § 217: "If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: 'This is simply what I do'."

In *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell picks up and develops this Wittgensteinian connection between mechanisms of intersubjectivity and noticing an aspect. Three implications seem to interest him in particular. The connection between aspect seeing and imagination allows him to define imagination as the "capacity for making connections, seeing or realizing possibilities" (Cavell 1979b, 353), and to affirm that there is always an imaginative dimension in the apprehension of the other's subjectivity: "Imagination is called for, faced with the other, when I have to take the facts in, realize the significance of what is going on, make the behavior real for myself, [...] for example, see his blink as a wince" (354). The second implication of the connection between intersubjectivity and seeing an aspect derives from the perspectival nature of the perceptions involved: "What is implied is that it is essential to knowing that something is human that we sometimes experience it as such, and sometimes do not, or fail to" (379). Our perception of the humanity of the other, of the existence of a psychic life with which we come into contact through their behaviors, instead of a mere body that can eventually be disposed of at will, is something intrinsically mobile and fragile, subject to our attitudes and conditioning, and therefore exposed to the risk of what elsewhere Cavell has defined as "failure to acknowledge" (Cavell 1969, 243), or even, in his famous essay on Shakespeare's *King Lear*, as "avoidance" (246-325). A third and final implication stems from Wittgenstein's hypothesis that there can be something like "aspect-blindness", or "human beings lacking in the capacity to see something *as something*" (Wittgenstein 1958, II, § XI). This hypothesis translates for Cavell into the possibility of soul-blindness, the blindness to the human aspect that was introduced above and that can now be explored.

Cavell's discussion focuses on the example of American slavery. Of the plantation slaveholder of the Southern states, it has often been said, and they themselves have said, that they did not see the slaves as human beings, but as objects or beasts of burden. Cavell contests this reading through an alternative description based on Wittgensteinian vocabulary. "What he [the slaveholder] really believes — Cavell begins — is not that slaves are not human beings, but that some human beings are slaves [...] this man *sees* certain human beings *as* slaves" (Cavell 1979b, 375, my emphasis). The slaveholder is not exhibiting an inability to see something in his slaves, to notice, for example, their human aspect. What, then, is he failing to grasp? Cavell continues:

> What he is missing is not something about slaves exactly, and not exactly about human beings. He is rather missing something about himself, or rather something about his connection with these people, his internal relation with them, so to speak. When he wants to be served at table by a black hand, he would not be satisfied to be served by a black paw. When he rapes a slave or takes her as a concubine, he does not feel that he has, by that fact itself, embraced sodomy. When he tips a black taxi driver (something he never does with a white driver) it does not occur to him that he might more appropriately have patted the creature fondly on the side of the neck. He does not go to great lengths either to convert his horses to Christianity or to prevent their getting wind of it. Everything in his relation to his slaves shows that he treats them as more or less human – his humiliations of them, his disappointments, his jealousies, his fears, his punishments, his attachments... (Cavell 1979b, 376).

The slaveholder, in short, is not affected by soul-blindness (Cavell leaves open the more general question of whether anyone can ever really be soul-blind, even though he seems inclined to a negative answer). The slaveholder is not structurally incapable of grasping, from a perceptual or cognitive point of view, the human aspect of the people who are the object of his abuse or lack of consideration. What characterizes him is rather a self-ignorance, an ignorance of his own position, which originates, if we keep in mind the passage cited just above (the first of the three "implica-

tions"), in a lack of imagination: he does not know how to see his "connection with these people, his internal relation with them".

The American philosopher adds:

> So what is this about 'not human beings'? […] What do we imagine that he [the slaveholder] wants and sees and feels in saying it? […] He means, and can mean, nothing definite. [...] He means, indefinitely, that there are *kinds* of humans [...] He need not deny the supremacy of justice; he may be eloquent on the subject. He need deny only that certain others are to be acknowledged as falling within its realm. It could be said that what he denies is that the slave is 'other', i.e. other to his one. They are as it were *merely* other; not simply separate, but different (Cavell 1979b, 376-377).

What happens, Hannah Arendt asked, to a person who "has reached that point"? A piece of the answer may be offered to us by this Cavellian reinterpretation of Wittgenstein's concepts. It happens that a reciprocity is broken, that the face of the other, of Levinasian memory, is ignored, pushed outside that circle of moral consideration that here Cavell calls "justice" but which, far from being for him the place of a universally legislating reason, is rather conceived as the outcome of an exercise of imagination, as the ability to look perspectivally at oneself and others in such a way as to grasp that "complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing" which Wittgenstein calls "family resemblances" (Wittgenstein 1958, § 66-67). That the self-justifications of the Eichmanns, the Indonesian executioners, and the slaveholders are so dull and indefinite should not surprise us, if we agree with Cavell, because the ethical failure that characterizes them can indeed be described as a failure of imagination, a failure in the exercise, on one's own perceptions, of that capacity for perspective shift that is inherent to our form of life.

A final step in *The Claim of Reason* also shows us what solution Cavell envisages for such a condition:

> But should he [the slaveholder] cede, or they [the slaves] find, the power to acknowledge *him*, to see him as other to their one, power to see his experience as he sees it, then he would see himself though their eyes, and they would know that they had seen themselves through his, and he would number his days (Cavell 1979b, 377).

This solution is left here in a state of allusive indefiniteness: Cavell seems to think of devices that allow the re-establishment of reciprocity through the exercise of the imaginative art of perspective change, but he does not give us an example. He gives such examples elsewhere, in his writings on theater (Cavell 1987), cinema (Cavell 1981; 1996), and what he would later define as 'moral perfectionism (Cavell 1990). For our part, however, we can return to Joshua Oppenheimer to show how his method of reenactment was precisely one of these devices.

Conclusion: The Act of Killing

The effects of the reenactment in *The Look of Silence*, in which actors and spectators do not coincide, are shown to be ambivalent. After watching the footage in which his brother's assassins reenact their deeds, Adi chooses to track them down to share his experience with them, but he finds himself up against the proverbial wall of indifference, what Cavell would call avoidance of acknowledgment. They are now too old, or too encrusted in the status of untouchable, to understand the scope of their actions. Some threaten him, others recycle the old self-justifications full of bad faith; the daughter of one of them asks his forgiveness, but the impression is that she does so also for fear that Adi might be seeking revenge — and in any case, there would be very little that she could do or say on behalf of her father. Thus, if Adi seems to emerge from the events narrated having reached some measure of balance, a sense of pacification, the same cannot be said of his elderly mother, who, still in the last scene of the film, calls upon the spirit of her lost son and, decades later, cannot come to terms with his disappearance.

Quite different is the case of *The Act of Killing*, in which the elderly ex-gangster Anwar Congo is both the creator and performer of the reenactment, and its spectator and recipient. At the beginning of the procedure, Anwar appears to us like all the others: he recounts the facts carefree, boasts of the ingenuity with which he had devised new methods of murder, etc. At times, he admits to having sometimes dreamed of his own victims, of having been haunted by the thought of those to whom he had not "closed the eyes", but in saying this he appears completely detached, devoid of any emotional reaction. However, things gradually change over the course of the cinematic reenactment, over the production, by the executioners, of the film within the film, and this, despite its amateurish nature, despite the grotesque lack of realism in the costumes, the settings, the acting.

The gestalt shift seems to occur through a three-phase process. In the first, having found himself for the first time acting in the role of a victim of torture, Anwar has an unexpected reaction: his body is suddenly seized by an uncontrollable feeling of terror, and he is forced to interrupt the shooting. His performance, the actorial make-believe, has allowed him to imagine himself, to feel like one of the victims, to understand how the victims feels looked at by the executioners and the way, in turn, they look at them. The second phase is triggered when Anwar himself asks to be able to watch the footage of that scene, as if driven by the curiosity to understand what really happened to him. "Did the people I tortured feel like I felt here?", he asks in front of the monitor and, for the first time in tears, he begins to confess to the camera his dismay at what he had done "to so many people". Finding himself in the role of the spectator allows him to let settle the awareness of the perspectival inversion he had experienced in a chaotic and visceral way during the performance, to go through a moment of that "catharsis" that Cavell, playing on a reversal of Aristotelian concept, describes on one occasion as intended "not to purge us of pity and terror, but to make us capable of feeling them again" (Cavell 1969, 319).

The third phase takes place when Anwar — we are now in the very last scene of *The Act of Killing* — returns to the back room where, as he had serenely told us at the beginning of the film, he had massacred all his victims. For a moment, he tries again to justify himself ("I know it's wrong, but I had to do it"), but it is too late for this attitude, for this way of seeing things: his words are interrupted by a violent and endless bout of retching – unstoppable, deep retching, another physical reaction, this time even more uncontrollable than the previous one. The repressed has now resurfaced: Anwar becomes conscious of his "internal", *visceral* relation with the people he had tortured and killed; he distinctly sees the rabbit-aspect that had until then been hidden from him, in plain sight under his eyes, by the duck-aspect. Now that he has looked at himself from the perspective of the victim, his days as an executioner are numbered, indeed they may have already ended by the moment we see him walk off-camera for the last time. Far from offering us a consolatory ending, however, his uncertain gait, that of a crushed and emptied-out old man, makes us wonder during the end credits whether his human days are also numbered, and under what conditions they can be lived.

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Notes

[1] On documentary in particular, Cavell writes: "The documentary film-maker naturally feels the impulse to make his presence known to his audience, as if to justify his intrusion upon his subject. But this is a guilty impulse, produced, it may be, by the film-maker's denial of the only thing that really matters: that the subject be allowed to reveal itself" (Cavell 1979a, 127).

[2] Besides Oppenheimer, the directors catalogued in Donghi 2024 include: Raed Andoni (*Ghost Hunting*, 2017); Lola Arias (*Teatro de guerra*, 2018); Marco Bellocchio (*Sorelle mai*, 2010); Mike Figgis (*The Battle of Orgreave*, 2001); Ari Folman (*Waltz with* Bashir, 2009); Patricio Guzmán (*Chile, la memoria obstinada*, 1997); Werner Herzog (*Little Dieter Needs to Fly*, 1997; *Wings of Hope*, 1998); Carl Javér (*Rekonstruktion Utøya*, 2018); Abbas Kiarostami (*Close Up*, 1990); Claude Lanzmann (*Shoah* 1985); Irene Lusztig (*Reconstruction*, 2001); Errol Morris (*The Thin Blue Line,* 1988); Guy Maddin (*My Winnipeg*, 2007); Mohsen Makhmalbaf (*Nun va goldun*, 1996); Avi Mograbi (*Z32*, 2008; *Between Fences*, 2016); Rithy Panh (*S-21, la machine de mort Khmère rouge*, 2003; *The Missing Picture*, 2013); Sarah Polley (*Stories We Tell,* 2012); Gianfranco Rosi (*El sicario - Room 164*, 2010), Zhang Yuan (*Sons*, 1996).

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