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BAHÁ'Í REFLECTIONS ON
*THE ACT OF KILLING***

Bernardo Bortolin Kerr

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THE HUMANITY OF EVIL: BAHÁ'Í REFLECTIONS ON *THE ACT OF KILLING*

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Abstract

This article 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 article I draw on the already vast quantity of text written in response to the film, including numerous interviews, articles and essays. I begin the article by looking at the part evil plays in a Bahá'í theological anthropology, with reference to the theory of evil exposed in Pseudo-Dionysius' *The Divine Names* and the many illuminating comments on evil made by Oppenheimer himself. From this section I move on to a study of the ways in which acts of evil are dehumanising, particularly for the perpetrator, who dehumanises himself by the mere intention of harming another. 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 them to recognise 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 which, using the 'mirroring' effect of the film, neither merely forgets nor clings to condemnation, but instead seeks a merciful love that is itself the most just punishment.

Key Words: Bahá'í, Bahá'u'lláh, *The Act of Killing*, evil, forgiveness, hope, genocide, fear, Oppenheimer, justice

Introduction: *The Act of Killing*

In this article I will be exploring *The Act of Killing* – a 2012 documentary directed by Joshua Oppenheimer – as a means of examining the nature of evil and the way in which we respond to it. The study will be grounded in my readings and understandings of the Teachings of the Bahá'í Faith. The first two sections will look at the place of evil in a Bahá'í theological anthropology, drawing also on the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, as well as the ways in which acts of evil dehumanise all involved. In the next two sections I will analyse the way in which the film and its approach act as a sort of mirror, for both the participants onscreen and the viewers offscreen, to see the ways in which they have fallen short of their full humanity. I will conclude with a section on forgiveness and the ways in which it could be a form of justice.

The Act of Killing had its premiere in September 2012 at the Telluride Film Festival.¹ Joshua Oppenheimer has described it as 'a documentary of the imagination', 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'.² The subject of the documentary is ostensibly the Indonesian genocide of 1965-1966, led by General Suharto; the number of people who died is estimated to range between 250,000 and three million. 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'.³ Yet, until *The Act of*

Killing brought it to international attention, this event had not been widely discussed 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’ propagated by the ‘New Order’ regime in the decades since the genocide.⁴ While the killings are not necessarily spoken of entirely openly, everyone is aware of them. Moreover, everyone is aware of the narratives that supposedly justify the killings and they are widely accepted to the extent that they are treated as facts. As a result of such acceptance, these narratives are interwoven with the patterns of daily life – both emotional and, as we will go on to discuss, spiritual life. These narratives of justification are most centrally canonised in the four and a half hour 1984 film *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* (directed by Arifin C. Noer), 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. Of a poll carried out in the secondary schools of Indonesia’s three largest cities in 2000, Heryanto writes:

To the question of where they had learned the history of the 1965 events, ninety percent responded “film”. As there was only one film on the subject, there is no ambiguity as to which film they were referring to.⁵

Oppenheimer’s film started as a documentary on the survivors of the genocide but, after the filmmakers encountered endless obstacles posed by the army, it became one about the many civilian killers, who were often living on the same street as the survivors. While the filmmakers were prevented from filming the accounts of the survivors, the army were happy to facilitate access to the men who participated in the killings, who were in turn more than willing to provide their own versions of events; their accounts included boasting about horrific details, and were often accompanied by 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.’⁶ From this premise Oppenheimer went on to offer the killers the opportunity to create film scenes, in whatever style they wanted, which 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.⁷

This, as might be expected, is where the film derives its controversy, but also its unprecedented and radical access to a subject previously kept so deftly veiled. In the process of making the documentary the killers find, to varying degrees, that such refuges of justification 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, conducted somewhat unwittingly by the evildoers themselves, is the true subject of the film.

In *The Act of Killing* we are thus faced with people who admit to 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’?⁸ Do we take Žižek’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’, or is there a possibility of hope precisely in these depths of horror?⁹ If we are horrified, to our very core, then what do we do with this horror? In its 1985 statement *The Promise of World Peace*, the Universal House of Justice, the international governing council of the Bahá’í Faith, highlights precisely this point, asserting that ‘a paralysing contradiction has developed in human affairs’. The people of the world ‘proclaim not only their readiness but their longing for peace and harmony’, while simultaneously, ‘uncritical assent is given to the proposition that human beings are incorrigibly selfish and aggressive’.¹⁰ How can we respond to genocide if we do not learn how to see it with hope? Without hope we deny both the place of an event in time by seeing no future from it and also its timeless meaning by failing to grow from it.

As Oppenheimer has made clear, his intention was never to make a conventional historical documentary: ‘*The Act of Killing* is not a documentary about a genocide 50 years ago. [...] The film is not a historical narrative.’¹¹ 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 documents a *timeless* history of the genocides, great and small, of which we are all capable. In this sense it exposes the historical events that allowed the genocide and the subsequent impunity of the perpetrators to come to be, by exposing the processes of imagination, justification and emotion that gave these crimes grounding in the minds and lives of the perpetrators – what Klawans refers to as the ‘genocidal imaginary’.¹² It is by seeing history embodied in the timeless form of the human being, at the heart of history, the human in the midst of the eruptions of violence that mark the landscape of history, that we find in this film the hope Freire speaks of.

A Theological Anthropology of Evil: Humanity

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.’¹³ In another interview, Oppenheimer offers a crucial insight into the difficult nature of the film, and opens it up to the theological analysis pursued in this article through his suggestion 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.’¹⁴

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 and yet also how we can retain a way of identifying and overcoming evil. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, son of Bahá’u’lláh, founder of the Bahá’í Faith, is particularly edifying on this topic, explaining in several instances throughout His writings that ‘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.’¹⁵

It is perhaps useful at this point to turn to Pseudo-Dionysius, who examines evil in a similar manner, 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.’¹⁶ During the chapter which focuses primarily on this name, he includes a prolonged study of evil, making particular use of the name ‘Being’; he also examines this name 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’, thus a corruption of full Being, and writes that demons, which we might consider as more abstract forms of evil, are ‘evil insofar as they have fallen away from the virtues proper to them.’¹⁷ 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.¹⁸

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.’¹⁹ To put it differently, evil is at all times radically undermined by goodness. If we consider that it must always act *against* something then we can see that its aim is always frustrated by the simple fact that evil and the thing it acts against are inextricably related by the mere fact that they both exist. To fulfill its aim it would have to wipe out its own existence. It is in this sense that Being and Good can be equated. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá puts it, ‘all evils return to nonexistence. Good exists; evil is nonexistent.’²⁰ 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 stagnations of goodness.

Examining this connection between Being and Good more closely we can perhaps say that it is the existence of all things in relation to one another that constitutes their fundamental goodness. In the Bahá’í writings we find the human being as the point at which all contingent things meet in this relationship. 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.’²¹ We are, then, in our purest state, the point in creation at which all things in their imperfection meet and therefore reveal the perfection of all things when their relations are properly ordered. Describing the human being’s position in creation, Bahá’u’lláh says:

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.²²

Therefore, the violences we may speak of as evil – hatred, prejudice and apathy – represent a corruption of our true nature because they rely on baseless divisions rather than properly ordered relations. Despite this corruption falling painfully short of what ‘Abdu’l-Bahá calls our ‘heavenly gift of consciousness’, which offers us true liberation, the more we strain away from this true state the more we fear our return to it.²³ However, once we glimpse the possibility of this true liberation we recognise that we must hasten to it, even if it appears to be an all-consuming terror to begin with. As Bahá’u’lláh puts it, ‘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.’²⁴ All the conditional fears upon which evil relies are thereby overwhelmed by the infinitely greater fear of living in a state of falsehood, distant from God and the likeness He has inscribed within us.

It is precisely this that we may speak of as the fear of God, as it tolerates none of the worldly, conditional fear that is inseparable from evil and the illusion of comfort. It thus ensures both moral goodness and true contentment, because, unlike any other form of fear, it acts against fear and calls us to dissipate all worldly fears. As Bahá'u'lláh writes, 'he that feareth God shall be afraid of no one except Him'.²⁵ Indeed, such worldly fears are themselves the shadows reminding us of the ephemerality of our worldly comforts, those 'gods of [man's] idle fancies – gods that have inflicted such loss upon, and are responsible for the misery of, their wretched worshippers'.²⁶

As we turn to look more closely at *The Act of Killing*, 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 referring in particular to the moments when we see vulnerability – moments of friendship and humour, but 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 brutality. 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'; thus Anwar Congo appears to be profoundly distressed by the wrong of his acts but, out of worldly fear, he celebrates them so that he will not have to acknowledge his guilt.²⁷

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; 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 man." (*The Act of Killing*)

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 Congo sees no way of truly 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. The killers announce their impunity through celebration and extravagance but, as Bahá'u'lláh says; 'in earthly riches fear is hidden and peril is concealed'.²⁸

A Theological Anthropology of Evil: Dehumanisation

There is a performative, artificial quality to these lived narratives of impunity; 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. Such a process, I suggest, 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', that 'man is the supreme Talisman. Lack of a proper education hath, however, deprived him of that which he doth inherently possess'.²⁹

Paulo Freire opens his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* with an examination of precisely this concept of dehumanisation, asserting that 'both humanisation and dehumanisation are possibilities for a person as an uncompleted being conscious of their incompleteness'.³⁰ He goes

on to describe how under the oppression of an imperfect, conditional conception of freedom, all are dehumanised, noting that the trappings of power are not to be believed. Rather they must instead be seen as the mechanisms that keep intact a corrupted form of freedom, which in fact arises from an unacknowledged ‘fear of freedom’.³¹ True freedom, as Freire argues, demands that it be unconditional – it is freedom from all but God – it demands of us our lives, but rightly so, as it is ‘the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion’.³² 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.’³³ I would suggest that the crucial difference in the dehumanisation of the oppressors is that it is certain, in that they are immediately subject to it, while the dehumanisation of the oppressed is merely intended.

I would also argue that in order to retain their impunity and power the killer must not only dehumanise the human being, but they must at the same time be engaged in a costly practise of forcing a disordered system of value upon the world, in order to deny that, even as an ‘object’, human life is of paramount value. To quote Oppenheimer, ‘the act of killing wasn’t just about killing bodies it was also about killing hope, culture and ideals’.³⁴ At various points in the film we see evidence of a skewed notion of value. I would suggest that material wealth and luxury are not the end goals in the process but rather that they serve a function in the avoidance of examining one’s nature and one’s deviations from spiritual 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 states that ‘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.’³⁵ But could it not be that the fundamental reason is precisely what they killed to *escape*? Ideology is part of the excuse, but is greed truly the original motive that the excuse was constructed to hide? In any case, we see in the various false objectifications and glorifications the way in which such a fear is hidden.

In one scene we see a strange show of both objectification and perverse glorification, which is profoundly 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.’³⁶ Indeed, by forgetting or confusing the difference between a living creature and a stuffed one, the human is rendered merely physical; we become images of humans, whose lives are ended at the point the images are destroyed. It is in this manner, through a confused interplay of objectification and recognition of value, that human lives play their vital role in the fantasy of power.

The Mirroring Image: The Public Reckoning of a Private Language

In an interview for online film magazine *4:3* Oppenheimer remarks that ‘there has been a public-private split in Indonesia for so long’ as a result of the stultifying and silencing effect of the master narrative.³⁷ It is precisely this divide and the resulting fantasy of private language, that has allowed the justifying narratives of the Indonesian genocide to go unchecked for so many decades. 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’.³⁸

With the method of his documentary, by drawing private languages of justification out before a wider audience, Oppenheimer aims towards a reconciliation of these two divided spheres. 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. Adi says:

“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!” (*The Act of Killing*)

Oppenheimer has suggested that this unexpected turn of phrase was an error, 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 – the examination of the artifice will return history to itself.³⁹ The story is currently in contrast to the events due to the concealing narratives of justification, but the film unmask it, facing us into the unimaginable truth the story has been used to escape.

This interpretation of narrative brings to mind Wittgenstein's famous assertion that philosophy ‘leaves everything as it is’.⁴⁰ Evidently he does not mean that it is useless, but that it returns things to themselves through investigation and clarification of the muddled waters of language – it shows ‘the fly the way out of the fly-bottle’.⁴¹ 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. Referencing this theory, Fierke notes:

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.⁴²

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 and address the pain of the perpetrators themselves, particularly Congo, veiled in their narratives and fantasies. As he is 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 criminal, but because it shows that they have not brought happiness. 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.’⁴³ In the exploration of his bizarre and fantastical narratives he recognises that there is a truth and perhaps a ‘way out’ to be found in the pain he has been denied by the ‘master narrative’, embodied in the propaganda film *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI*; that is, in the opposed side of the justifying narrative – that of the oppressed. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes, ‘man is not intended to see through the eyes of another’ 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.⁴⁴ Through what Morris describes as ‘a perverted hall of mirrors’, Congo catches a glimpse of the self he had lost, no longer found in the stories of victory, but ultimately in the face of his victim.⁴⁵ As the fantasies are laid bare before the camera and its implied audience, and their bizarre corruptions stripped away, he

recognises, through the language of a pain he has suppressed, his inextricability from those he has tortured and killed.

As Oppenheimer notes, ‘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’.⁴⁶ It is precisely Congo’s turning towards pain, rather than his comfortable (albeit fragile) notion of impunity, that drives the film, even if in a sense ‘he’s drawn to the pain of it, because that’s the thing he’s trying to deny’.⁴⁷ We see this powerfully illustrated when Congo re-enacts the beheading of a ‘communist’ in a rubber plantation. In this scene he demonstrates a profound urge to bridge the gap between his representations of himself and his representation of his victims. 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; as Elphick notes, ‘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”’.⁴⁸ Once he has beheaded himself, so to speak, we see him sink to the ground, making a terrible choking sound, 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.’

In scenes such as this, when Congo is faced with the terror of his distance from himself and, moreover, from God, we glimpse a reckoning as he glimpses what Oppenheimer describes as a ‘bitter, indigestible, unrepresentable reality that’s beyond words’.⁴⁹ Bahá’u’lláh writes that 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’.⁵⁰ In these moments Congo not only faces the unspeakable fear of God but at the same time he wills himself towards it, in a profound recognition of the way it can address the painful falsehood of his impunity.

The Mirroring Image: The Imperative of the Witness

While the impunity of the gangsters who remain in Medan is called into question through their narratives of justification, Adi 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 Soadun 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 themselves than the communists. He even disputes the sacrosanct truth of the propaganda film; he says “‘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”” (*The Act of Killing*).

His evasions follow a crude form of moral relativism, argued in a tone all too familiarly cynical. But perhaps this familiarity is precisely why he seems so inaccessible; perhaps his distorted logic seems closed off to us because it is a language that has crept into our own reasoning unchecked, less blatantly hateful and less overtly emotional than that of the other killers. Moreover, perhaps his evasions are difficult to challenge because if we are to refute it we must come to the stand, both as witness and defendant. 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.’⁵¹ Oppenheimer’s justification is his own emotion; he looks at himself and asks if he is guilty, impassively answering ‘no’. His narrative is that his practised emotions are

reliable. Perhaps he is the most successful killer because he has deadened his world 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 the audience, especially anyone who would not consider themselves to be implicated. Through cultural signifiers such as 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'.⁵² It is not only America that is reflected, nor even just the Western world, but humanity in any form that has abused stability and comfort as a means of escape rather than a means of engagement. The director reminds us that "your shirt, my shirt, is affordable, [...] because people are making [them] under conditions of fear and oppression".⁵³

'Abdu'l-Bahá declares that 'this is man's uttermost wretchedness: that he should live inert, apathetic, dull, involved only with his own base appetites'.⁵⁴ To distance ourselves from the action on the screen, then, is as delusional as it would be to ignore the screen catching fire! Elsewhere He says, '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.'⁵⁵ 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.'⁵⁶ I would suggest, then, that we inextricably share a common humanity with the killers on the screen.

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.'⁵⁷ 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.⁵⁸

If we are to respond to the horrors we see onscreen then we must begin immediately, in our own hearts and homes. These horrors are not confined to a distant land, their workings bud and bloom from the human being.

Conclusion: The Act of Forgiveness

In the writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, we find the passage, 'If some one commits an error and wrong toward you, you must instantly forgive him', and in another text, '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.'⁵⁹ A reading made with a worldly imagination drains our hope of reconciling these expressions, reducing them falsely to mere 'contradiction' and failing to searching for the ineffable Truth they reveal for those who would seek it, but instead for the opportunity to dismiss both teachings and remain untouched by them. However, as Shoghi Effendi describes, 'We must take the teachings as a great, balanced whole, not seek out and oppose to each other two strong statements that have different meanings; somewhere in between there are links uniting the two.'⁶⁰ And the Universal House of Justice likewise states, 'In attempting to understand the Writings, therefore, one must first realise that there is and can be no real contradiction in them, and in light of this we can confidently seek the unity of meaning which they contain.'⁶¹ I would suggest, in the light of this guidance, that in God both forgiveness and punishment are fulfilled ineffably and at once in the heart of the evildoer, not by us as individuals, or even as communities, but by God. It strikes me, then, that our task as individuals is to seek every

person's return to full human nature, rather than a stunted corruption of it. Indeed, it is only by this means that we remain free of the same trap they have fallen into, that of seeing goals and outcomes in worldly terms. 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.⁶²

If we question how this love might be just we must ask ourselves if we merely tolerate our own immoralities and those of the people we love, or if we seek their rectification. If we do not, or if we have convinced ourselves that our immoralities are acceptable and to be retained through justification, then is this love or apathy? When we consider these inextricable notions of love and justice, while not the only possible reading, it appears to me that love is not merely a gentle term of endearment and it is certainly not the 'kindness' of simply ignoring certain traits of another. Rather, love continually seeks the good at the true heart of all traits, without ignoring and without seeking mere faults, and thus pushes them beyond their worldly 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.

Looking at the penultimate scene of *The Act of Killing*, we see the distance between our often stunted notions of forgiveness, which are almost useless in such circumstances, and the form of forgiveness I would suggest the film truly offers. In this scene we encounter Congo in 'paradise', surrounded by dancing girls, as dead 'communists' place a medal around his neck in gratitude for sending them to heaven. He thus reaches even into the afterlife to bend the image of his victims into conformity with his narrative of justification; Congo finds his narrative inevitably evaporating with each image he creates. Each time Oppenheimer gives Congo the means to express his justifications an examination must take place and a reconciliation must be forged between the 'happiness' they support and the fear they hide. As Klawans writes: 'By seeking to understand, this newfangled documentary of the genocidal imagination has succeeded, albeit on one lone murderer among many, in exacting revenge.'⁶³

In 'paradise', then, Congo makes his last stand. He stands there 'forgiven' in the most meaningless way so that he will not have to seek God's forgiveness, which, with the absolute sacrifice it entails, does justice in a way no mere human forgiveness or punishment can. It is not merely 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 and a return to humanity, and never a mere tolerance of them. 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?

In the interview that inspired this article Oppenheimer mentions an occasion on which an audience member told him he could see that Oppenheimer had forgiven Anwar Congo. In response 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.'⁶⁴ I might further suggest that forgiveness is also to show the evildoer the human beyond the actions. By doing so we regain both the call to address evil in ourselves and the hope that it can always be overcome. It is not by insisting that we cannot be like the killers that we somehow escape their evil, but by showing forth the shared heart of humanity.

I conclude with the words of The Universal House of Justice and their enunciation that true peace is only in a profoundly rooted consciousness of the oneness of humanity – a goal we can work towards at every moment:

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.⁶⁵

Notes

¹ This article refers primarily to the director's cut of the film. All quotations are from this version. *The Act of Killing*, dir. by Joshua Oppenheimer (Dogwoof Pictures, 2013).

² Joshua Oppenheimer in the booklet for the British DVD release; Nick Fraser, 'The Act of Killing: don't give an Oscar to this snuff movie,' *The Guardian*, 23 February 2014 <<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/feb/23/act-of-killing-dont-give-oscar-snuff-movie-indonesia>> [accessed 27 August 2014]

³ Jonah Weiner, 'The Weird Genius of *The Act of Killing*,' *The New Yorker*, 15 July 2013 <<http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-weird-genius-of-the-act-of-killing>> [accessed 7 September 2014].

⁴ Ariel Heryanto, *State Terrorism and Political Identity in Indonesia: Fatally Belonging* (London: Routledge, 2006), p.5.

⁵ 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), pp.224-240 (p.225).

⁶ Joshua Oppenheimer, 'The Act of Killing has helped Indonesia reassess its past and present,' *The Guardian*, 25 February 2014 <<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/feb/25/the-act-of-killing-indonesia-past-present-1965-genocide>> [accessed 30 August 2014].

⁷ Oppenheimer, 'Reassess'.

⁸ Nicolas Rapold, 'Toronto 2012 Diary: *The Act of Killing*,' *Film Comment*, 9 September 2012 <<http://www.filmcomment.com/entry/toronto-the-act-of-killing-joshua-oppenheimer>> [accessed 7 September 2014].

⁹ Slavoj Žižek, 'It's the End of the World as We Know It' (paper presented at the Nuit Blanche Symposium, Toronto, 29 September 2012) <<http://vimeo.com/86759949>> [accessed 16 August 2014].

¹⁰ The Universal House of Justice, *The Promise of World Peace* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1985), pp.2-3

¹¹ Oppenheimer, 'Reassess'.

¹² Stuart Klawns, 'The Executioner's Song,' *Film Comment*, July 2013. <<http://www.filmcomment.com/article/the-executioners-song>> [accessed 7 September 2014].

¹³ Luke Goodsell, 'Interview: Oscar-nominated Act of Killing Director on the Humanity of Evil,' *Rotten Tomatoes*, 17 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/> [accessed 18 January 2014].

¹⁴ Lisa Rainwater, 'Behind the Scrim of Humanity: An Interview with Joshua Oppenheimer,' *Galo Magazine*, 29 January 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/>> [accessed 2 September 2014].

¹⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2001), p.214.

¹⁶ Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1987), p.71.

¹⁷ Pseudo-Dionysius, *Complete*, p.95.

- ¹⁸ Pseudo-Dionysius, *Complete*, p.85.
- ¹⁹ Pseudo-Dionysius, *Complete*, p.85.
- ²⁰ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Questions*, p.264.
- ²¹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Questions*, pp.235-236.
- ²² Bahá’u’lláh, *Writings of Bahá’u’lláh: A Compilation*, 2nd rev. edn (New Delhi: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 2001), p.681.
- ²³ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 2nd edn (Illinois: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1982), p.258.
- ²⁴ Bahá’u’lláh, *Writings*, p.45.
- ²⁵ Bahá’u’lláh, *Writings*, p.714.
- ²⁶ Bahá’u’lláh, *Writings*, p.652 and p.696.
- ²⁷ Guy Lodge, ‘Joshua Oppenheimer on what awards really mean for *The Act of Killing*,’ *Hitfix*, 25 February 2014 <<http://www.hitfix.com/in-contention/joshua-oppenheimer-on-what-awards-really-mean-for-the-act-of-killing#LFjV2573qH6jSi2E.99>> [accessed 1 September 2014].
- ²⁸ Bahá’u’lláh, *Writings*, p.516.
- ²⁹ Bahá’u’lláh, *Writings*, p.787.
- ³⁰ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1993), p.25.
- ³¹ Freire, *Oppressed*, p.28.
- ³² Freire, *Oppressed*, p.29.
- ³³ Freire, *Oppressed*, p.26.
- ³⁴ Sophie Monks Kaufman, ‘Joshua Oppenheimer on *The Act of Killing*,’ *Grosch Film Works* <<http://groschfilmworks.com/ca/features/joshua-oppenheimer-on-the-act-of-killing>> [accessed 3 September 2014].
- ³⁵ Rainwater, ‘Scrim’.
- ³⁶ Irene Lusztig, ‘The Fever Dream of Documentary: A Conversation with Joshua Oppenheimer,’ *Film Quarterly* 67, no. 2 (2013): pp.50-56 (pp.55-56).
- ³⁷ Jeremy Elphick, ‘Joshua Oppenheimer Discusses The Act of Killing,’ 4:3, 2 May 2014 <<http://fourthreefilm.com/2014/05/interview-joshua-oppenheimer/>> [accessed 30 August 2014].
- ³⁸ Paul Ricoeur, *History and Truth* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1992), p.113.
- ³⁹ Nick Bradshaw, ‘Build my gallows high: Joshua Oppenheimer on *The Act of Killing*,’ *Sight & Sound*, 15 April 2014 <<http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/interviews/build-my-gallows-high-joshua-oppenheimer-act-killing>> [accessed 6 September 2014].
- ⁴⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell & Mott, Ltd, 1972), p.49.
- ⁴¹ Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, p.103.
- ⁴² Karin Fierke, *Critical Approaches to International Security* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), p.140.
- ⁴³ Lodge, ‘Awards’.
- ⁴⁴ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, p.293.
- ⁴⁵ Errol Morris, ‘The Act of Killing Essay: How Indonesia’s mass killings could have slowed the Vietnam War,’ *Slate*, 10 July 2013 <http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/history/2013/07/the_act_of_killing_essay_how_indonesia_s_mass_killings_could_have_slowed.html> [accessed 4 September 2014].
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- ⁴⁷ Bradshaw, ‘Gallows’.
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- ⁵⁰ Bahá’u’lláh, *Writings*, pp.738-739.
- ⁵¹ Colleen Glenn, ‘Director Joshua Oppenheimer discusses *The Act of Killing*,’ *Charleston City Paper*, 15 January 2014 <<http://www.charlestoncitypaper.com/charleston/director-joshua-oppenheimer-discusses-the-act-of-killing/Content?oid=4846144>> [accessed 19 September 2014].
- ⁵² Rainwater, ‘Scrim’.
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- ⁵⁵ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, p.244.
- ⁵⁶ Bahá’u’lláh, *Writings*, p.697.
- ⁵⁷ Prodipta Sabarini, ‘*The Act of Killing* doesn’t end,’ *The Boston Globe*, 29 March 2014. <<http://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2014/03/28/the-act-killing-doesn-end/nDRMCL9ouz04HyON0X21LJ/story.html>> [accessed 30 August 2014].

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- ⁶⁰ The Universal House of Justice, 'Message to the Conference of the Continental Board of Counsellors', 28 December 2010 <http://universalhouseofjustice.bahai.org/activities-bahai-community/20101228_001> [accessed 30 June 2015].
- ⁶¹ The Universal House of Justice, *Messages from the Universal House of Justice, 1968-1973* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976), p. 38.
- ⁶² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, p.267.
- ⁶³ Klawans, 'Song'.
- ⁶⁴ Goodsell, 'Humanity'.
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Biography

Bernardo Bortolin Kerr is undertaking a PhD in theology and religious studies at the University of Nottingham, UK. He is researching apophatic theology in the Bahá'í Faith and is interested in the effect such a theology has on the functions of language in areas such as ethics, pedagogy, literature and conflict.