

The articulation of voices in two film projects about violence – The Act of Killing and Gzim Rewind

Frølund, Lisbeth; Bjerregaard, Mette

Published in:
MedieKultur

DOI:
[10.7146/mediekultur.v30i56.15578](https://doi.org/10.7146/mediekultur.v30i56.15578)

Publication date:
2014

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (APA):
Frølund, L., & Bjerregaard, M. (2014). The articulation of voices in two film projects about violence – The Act of Killing and Gzim Rewind. *MedieKultur*, 30(56), 128-146. <https://doi.org/10.7146/mediekultur.v30i56.15578>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain.
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact rucforsk@kb.dk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

The articulation of voices in two film projects about violence: The Act of Killing and Gzim Rewind

Lisbeth Frølunde and Mette Bjerregaard

MedieKultur 2014, 56, 132-150

Published by SMID | Society of Media researchers In Denmark | www.smid.dk

The online version of this text can be found open access at www.mediekultur.dk

*This paper explores two experimental documentary films that present memories of acts of mass violence: **The Act of Killing** (Denmark, 2012, director Joshua Oppenheimer) about the Indonesian anti-Communist purge in the 1960s and **Gzim Rewind** (Sweden, 2011, director Knutte Wester) about the fate of a boy who fled from Kosovo in the 1990s.*

*Using dialogic theory (Bakhtin, 1981; Phillips, 2011), we analyse the voices that are articulated about past violent events in the films. The focus is on how different voices interrelate in the filmic presentation of mass violence, including victims and killers. Primarily, the analysis focuses on **The Act of Killing** and its reception by an Indonesian audience. The discussion concerns how these kinds of film projects open up very different voices and how this diversity potentially contributes to new understandings of the past, thereby fuelling social and political change.*

Introduction

In this paper, we are interested in the representation of the past through film documentaries. We explore two very different examples of documentary films, which we see as complex and collaborative social projects revolving around film. *The Act of Killing* (abbreviated TAoK) (Denmark, 2012, director Joshua Oppenheimer with co-directors Christine Cynn and Indonesian “Anonymous”) is about a group of men involved in the killing of Communists

in Indonesia in the 1960s. They re-enact killings for the camera and collaborate on the film production. Their collaboration on the film is an integral aspect of the cinematic approach. *Gzim Rewind* (Sweden, 2011, director Knutte Wester) is about a boy named Gzim, how he and his family flee the violence in Kosovo during the 1990s and how they are repatriated. These two film projects represent multiple perspectives on past violent events and use a reflexive and participatory film documentary approach.¹

Our primary research question is based on our aim of exploring the articulation of meanings, with reference to Laclau & Mouffe's concept of articulation – “any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice” (1985, p. 105). We explore articulation in regards to the creation of multivocal voices or heteroglossia (Bakhtin, 1981), especially the many voices that surround *TAoK* and its reception. The research question applies Bakhtin's dialogic approach: *What voices are constructed and articulated about past violent events presented in contemporary documentary films, as exemplified in The Act of Killing?*

We explore the tensions between the different voices expressed by film participants, film directors and a sample Indonesian audience of *TAoK*. We compare the premises and constructions of *TAoK* with *Gzim Rewind*, although we do not include audience reception of *Gzim Rewind*. The analysis of *Gzim Rewind* focuses only on the film production and intentions of the film director.

Our aim is to consider the implications of a multivocal dialogic understanding of the tensions between competing, different or dissenting voices (Bakhtin, 1981; Phillips, 2011), such as between different film participants in their articulation of violence and between different members of an audience. According to Phillips, our social lives involve dialogues that fluctuate or move between centripetal (unified) and centrifugal (divergent) positions.

In our analysis, we explore the construction and articulation of voices in three ways. First, we highlight a few scenes from *TAoK* in which different voices of dissension are articulated. We present various voices in order to explore understandings of the filmmaking processes, including an online interview with director Joshua Oppenheimer and descriptions of the filmmaking process with a focus on the killers (*TAoK* film participants). Thereafter, we explore the voices that are constructed and articulated by an Indonesian film audience about *TAoK* – in particular, their reactions to how film participants are presented with regard to the film's staged and “funny” scenes, as well as the audience's own concerns about the past and future. This second aspect of audience reception is based on interviews with a sample audience in Indonesia in 2013. Finally, we compare *TAoK* with *Gzim Rewind* in order to explore how acts of violence are represented from the point of view of the victim and the killers. The two films offer different approaches within the range of documentary traditions (Nichols, 2010) for the representation of the film participants and their memories of past violence.

We find that using two films helps us to point out and discuss the perspectives of the victims and the killers as represented on film. Both films show simulated scenes of violence,

but the films focus on one side; either killer or victim. However, *TAoK* represents victims through scenes with re-enacted (staged) killings, where the killers are performing as victims and killers. (Actually, Oppenheimer had initially planned to make a film about victims, but it was difficult to gather the material because victims / survivors were afraid to speak out.) We were also interested in comparing the apparent participation between the film participants and the directors. Common features of *TAoK* and *Gzim Rewind* are that they highlight their own film construction, experiment with aesthetics and work reflexively with film documentary (ibid.). The film participants in both films are shown in contemporary everyday lives. However, the everyday settings are mixed with other kinds of imagery from the past, creating a montage of mediated memory with drawings, family photos, etc. In the case of *TAoK*, there are scenes of re-enacted killings and theatrical scenes reminiscent of Hollywood musicals and film noir genres. The film interweaves story lines and mixes film genres. The audience is thereby urged to construct their own understanding of the film and perhaps question the collaboration between the film directors and participants.

The directors of the two films are trained in the arts – film studies (Oppenheimer)² and the visual arts (Wester). They have been influenced by various participatory traditions in the arts and visual anthropology with respect to creating photography, video, etc., about the everyday lives of people from other cultures.³ In an interview with Nicolas Rapold (2013), Oppenheimer refers to the influence of visual anthropologist Jean Rouch (1917-2004). The recent book edited by Oppenheimer and Brink (2013) illuminates Oppenheimer's theoretical perspectives and aims. Much of Wester's art takes as its theme the lives of orphans and refugees. Wester has made sculptures of *Gzim*, included in his 2013 exhibit "Involuntary Nomads" at Västerbottens Museum, Sweden.⁴

The two films convey personal relationships between the film participants, who recall past violence, and the film directors. The film participants are seen in the films with cameras taking video footage and/or responding to the filmmaking *in situ*. As van Dijck suggests, film apparatus can literally be seen in relation to the individual who deploys it; the camera is part of articulating a sense of connection, such as "*between self and family or between self and the world-at-large*" (2008: 74). Showing the use of and reaction to the camera by film participants, the camera in interaction with others and imagined others, is an important contemporary media reference.

Both film projects have used social media (especially, Facebook) to facilitate a discussion between followers / audience and film directors and for updates on interviews in the mainstream media, etc. The film projects exemplify our contemporary global media discourse and shifting representations of war in a new media ecology (Machin & van Leeuwen, 2007; Hoskins, 2013).

We selected the film projects *TAoK* and *Gzim Rewind* because they touched us personally. We find them exemplary of how voices articulated—or constructed—in documentary films may contribute new understandings of the past. Many other films are also based on individuals relating dark accounts of the past in collaboration with film directors and

offer new perspectives on the past, e.g., *Waltz with Bashir* (Israel, 2008), directed by Ari Folman, and *Enemies of The People* (Cambodia, 2010), co-directed by Teth Sambath and Rob Lemkin.

Theoretical perspectives and analytic notions

This section reviews the theory of dialogue developed by the Russian philosopher and literary critic M.M. Bakhtin (1895-1975) and his concern with dynamics in language and the continuing creation of new understandings and meanings. Following the presentation of our theoretical and analytical ideas, we provide our analysis of *TAoK* and a comparison with *Gzim Rewind*.

In Bakhtin's dialogic theory, meanings are not fixed but open, and there is a perpetual generation of meanings (Bakhtin, 1981). Bakhtin's ideas on language and meaning-making have been key to the development of various poststructuralist, postmodernist and post-foundationalist epistemologies (Phillips, 2011) that stress the partial, contingent nature of any truth, including research "truths" or "truths" on film. The dialogic theoretical perspective is applied widely across contexts to the construction of meaning-making, culture, memory and self as intertwined and "in dialogue" (Phillips, 2011; Hermans, 2004; Emerson, 2012). Furthermore, contemporary media culture is to be understood historically as an ever-evolving renewal or novelization of genres (Bakhtin, 1981), so that any communication or text, such as literature or contemporary film, can be viewed as constitutive of social reality. Dialogic theory is often applied with an ideal of the active cultivation of difference as a positive dynamic for change – sometimes, with the aim of a normative position, as Louise Phillips (2011) discusses. Identifying injustice thereby involves a normative position about something as *right or wrong* from the perspective of democracy (Laclau & Mouffe in Phillips & Jørgensen 2002, p. 187). We return to this normative and political perspective in the discussion.

Heteroglossia

We now move on to clarify how Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia contributes to our analytic approach. Heteroglossia forms a central component in our theoretical framework. Heteroglossia refers to the "operation of meaning in any utterance" (Bakhtin, 1981: 428) and the conditions for the different meanings and multiple voices or viewpoints expressed in a literary text or other artistic work. Bakhtin (1981) privileges heteroglossia and the inter-relatedness (which he also calls inter-animation) of voices that are in continual dialogue within texts, between people, and within individuals and texts. Heteroglossia refers to the use of multiple languages or "glossaries", i.e., sets of signs that can articulate different meanings, since languages are open to change and adaptation (such as, from other sets of signs). Phillips and Jørgensen (2002, p. 151) discuss multivocality and how all utterances draw upon, challenge, and may transform other utterances.

This linguistic diversity co-exists in a state of tension and competition with the dynamics of motion and transformation of meanings in a text. The transformations of text and meaning are an aspect of heteroglossia and part of the “novelization” or renewal of language across genres. As Bakhtin writes:

[L]anguage [of ‘novelized’ genres] renews itself by incorporating extraliterary heteroglossia and the ‘novelistic’ layers of literary language, they become dialogized, permeated with laughter, irony, humor, elements of self-parody and finally – this is the most important thing – the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality... (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 7).

Bakhtin’s view of humor relates to the carnivalesque, the medieval carnival as a sort of burlesque of sacred ceremonies in which the comic, profane, and absurd could liberate dominant understandings (Bakhtin, 1993). This renewal of genres with new ways of using humour, parody, etc., is open to differing interpretations by audiences (see also Frølund, 2013) and, therefore, can be very provocative.

Bakhtin is influential in developing the notion of genre in relation to everyday verbal communication and all human activity that involves language, as Agger (1999) and Gardiner (1992) also point out. From a dialogic perspective, multiple forms of expression and the use of diverse glossaries (heteroglossia) co-exist and compete with tendencies toward centralized, standardised forms of meaning-making (Phillips 2011). A totalitarian society usually entails the cultivation of standardised forms of text and narratives, oppressing or censoring other forms of evolving linguistic expressions (e.g., creating only heroic stories of killing Communists and others in Indonesia during the 1960s and forbidding stories told from other viewpoints).

Our Bakhtinian theoretical perspective has heteroglossia as a central concept, a lens for analysing the voices that are constructed and the tensions *between the different voices* expressed by film participants, film directors, and a sample Indonesian film audience.

Analysis of the two films

Presentation of The Act of Killing

TAoK was funded by European public service broadcasters, the Danish and Norwegian Film Institutes, the EU Media Program, and various foundations. An international film team worked on *TAoK* for over seven years.⁵ As of 2014, the film has won over 30 awards, including best documentary at the 2014 BAFTA awards (British Academy Film Awards), and was nominated for an Academy Award in 2014.

Oppenheimer previously directed other films about Indonesian history with the aim of instigating change in Indonesia. *TAoK* was made with an explicit aim of exposing a great injustice, genocide (1965-66) during the Suharto dictatorship, and exposing its effects in contemporary Indonesia (Rapold, 2013). It follows the killers (death squad leaders) in North

Sumatra. The director describes the film team's engagement with the killers as "walking this tightrope between repulsion and empathy" (ibid.). The genocide involved the right-wing military, paramilitary groups and civilian mobs, which killed up to a million Indonesians. Many more were imprisoned without trial, injured, disappeared, or raped. The targets were members (and alleged members) of the Communist Party (PKI), including intellectuals and ethnic Chinese, who were brutally killed under the banner of saving Indonesia from Communist ideology (Cribb and Brown, 1995: 102). Oppenheimer's upcoming film, *The Look of Silence*, shows the perspective of the victim / survivor. The film team considered bringing material about survivors into *TAoK* but, as Oppenheimer recounts in an interview with Rapold (2013), opted not to because this would have led to a "classic cinematic schism between the good and the bad".

Since *TAoK* has confessions of crimes by killers who have never been put on trial, it seems surprising that the film has had screenings in Indonesia, is available online, and is not officially banned. Oppenheimer offered the following explanation of the strategy to the authors of this article (personal communication from Oct. 29, 2013):

Our whole strategy for releasing the film in Indonesia has been to avoid getting the film banned because, once it's banned, it's a crime to screen the film at all and, if it's a crime to screen the film, that becomes an excuse for Pancasila Youth, the army, or other thugs to physically attack screenings with impunity. This was the last thing we wanted, since the human rights community in Indonesia more or less requested that we make this film as an intervention in a regime of fear, a way of opening a space for Indonesians to address their most important problems for the first time and without fear.

The release began with 50 screenings in 30 cities, mostly by invitation-only screenings, to exploit a legal loophole in which the censors need not pass a film unless it is screened publicly. By summer, we had 1100 screenings in 118 cities... almost all of these screenings were public. The reason people could screen publicly without provoking a decision by the attorney general's office or the Film Censorship Board (Badan Sensor Film) to ban the film is that we had high-level cultural and political support for the film from Indonesia's leading journalists, news publications, filmmakers, celebrities, intellectuals, and artists – not to mention, the National Human Rights Commission.

The careful strategy of avoiding a ban is based on deep knowledge about Indonesia through their many collaborators. The joint efforts to screen the film also indicate how many Indonesians support the film despite the risks; for instance, the Indonesian interviewees expressed to co-author of this article Mette Bjerregaard a fear of attending screenings and discussing the film. *TAoK* is the result of a collaborative process, including a wide network of supporters who share a hope that the film will be able to promote social change.

The film has provoked a variety of reactions in non-Indonesian audiences, on social media and news media, and among film reviewers, who debate its merits and moral position. For instance, in *The Guardian*, Bjerregaard (2014) wrote on the importance of breaking

the silence about Indonesia's past while Nick Fraser, editor of the BBC's "Storyville" documentary series, called *TAoK* a "snuff movie" and criticized the premise of the film:

Let me be as upfront as I can. I dislike the aesthetic or moral premise of *The Act of Killing*. I find myself deeply opposed to the film. Getting killers to script and restage their murders for the benefit of a cinema or television audience seems a bad idea (Fraser, 2014).

Oppenheimer and collaborators continue to be very active in the debate on the moral and ethical issues raised by the film, including answering Fraser.

Film scenes from TAoK

The montage of scenes and mix of genres within *TAoK* create emotional and visual contrasts. Scenes with re-enactments of killings, showing acts of cruelty and using dark colours, are juxtaposed with musical scenes with dancing and bright colours. The film fluctuates between tragic, absurd, and scary. It can to some extent be described as funny because of the sheer absurdity or vulgarity of some scenes.

The film presents an almost kaleidoscopic mix of multiple voices and contrasting scenes and uses different colours and lighting to create a special, highly stylized or "aesthetic" ambience. Such scenes follow film sequences with detailed re-enactments of murders, such as demonstrations of how wires may efficiently be used to strangle in which the killers comment on their own enactment. Other scenes resemble surreal, flashy Hollywood musicals (or drag shows) in bright pinks and greens in which the songs herald their heroic acts.

The protagonist in *TAoK* Anwar Congo and his friends are portrayed as spending their young lives at the movies and becoming "movie theatre gangsters". One of Anwar's gangster friends, Herman Koto, dresses up in gowns during the musical scenes. They explain that they controlled a black market in tickets while using the cinema as a base of operations for more serious crimes. They hated the Communists for boycotting American films, which were the most popular and profitable. Anwar sometimes seems proud or happy to re-enact murders as if he wants to be known as inventive when it comes to killing methods while, in other scenes, he appears to feel guilty or ashamed.

Interviews with sample Indonesian audience

Watching *TAoK* was an emotional rollercoaster ride for us, the authors, as Western moviegoers. Mette Bjerregaard was disgusted and confused. She laughed at one scene, cried at the next, was shocked and disgusted again. She could not stop wondering how an Indonesian audience would receive this film and what sort of voices might be emerging in Indonesia as a result of *TAoK*. Therefore, Bjerregaard travelled to Yogyakarta, Indonesia in February 2013 to screen *TAoK* at a university (through a contact with a history professor) and to interview a sample of the Indonesian film audience. She also conducted individual interviews via email with sample audiences from Bali and Jakarta that had already seen the film.

The group interview conducted in Yogyakarta and the individual interviews conducted through online media followed the same guidelines.

All interviewees were young (24-40 years old) and well educated. Four out of the ten in the sample audience were from the Chinese ethnic minority in Indonesia and had relatives who were victims of the genocide (a relatively large number of the ethnic Chinese population were caught up in the anti-Communist purge). The interviewees mentioned that the official narrative of the past is “plastered” with sinister anti-Communist bias and fabrications presented as facts. They explained how the Indonesian school system was and still is, to a great extent, characterised by an authoritarian tradition and unidirectional transmissions of information. In general, few Indonesians dare to question the country’s past due to a lack of knowledge as well as a great deal of fear. The confrontation with the film generated anger, frustration, and sleepless nights. Many felt frustrated and betrayed by the political elite. But their frustrations were also about re-enacting (or, the staging) of crimes in *TAoK* and the provocation of seeing their country’s past as a spectacle.

In this article, we highlight three members of the audience (using the pseudonyms Will, Bob, and Sussie) who participated in interviews after seeing *TAoK*. We analyse the voices they articulate and the sorts of tensions that emerge in the dialogue between their multiple voices about *TAoK*. We chose these three members because they offer quite diverse voices and critical perspectives.

- Will (24 years old) studies at the university in Yogyakarta and is surprised about the depictions of the genocide in the 1960s and seems to have little understanding about the historical past.

- Bob (34 years old) is a Ph.D. student at the university in Yogyakarta who has a very critical opinion of the use of theatricality, such as musical scenes in *TAoK*, and he questions the “happy ending” of *TAoK*. Will and Bob participated in the screening and group interview in Yogyakarta.

- Sussie (34 years old) is a Chinese-Indonesian architect from Bali who talks about her memories of a family member who disappeared during the 1960s and discusses how the film contributes hope for the future. Sussie participated in an individual interview via email.

The voice of Will – The theatrical aspect gives some kind of “wrong impression”

Will (24) is not particularly interested in history: “To be honest I only know very little about our history. I don’t study history”. He expressed how the film raised many questions about the standard version of Indonesian history and evoked feelings of frustration. In order to deal with this frustration, he found it helpful to reflect on *TAoK* with others after the screening and during the interview:

When I watch this movie, it makes me want to ask so many questions. Especially, what is the purpose of this movie? But after the discussion here it made me think, okay, maybe it wants

to give us.... information about history and what happened at that time. Now I'm just trying to understand what this movie is all about...

It becomes obvious that *TAoK* competes with and challenges Will's understanding of the purge of Communists in Indonesia because it competes with the standard stories about Indonesia. Furthermore, Will finds the theatricality presented in the film with its mix of staged killing re-enactments and the musical scenes confusing:

I don't really get the point of why there is such a theatrical theme in this film. It arose [sic] my emotions... Why? Does it really have something to do with all the painful things that people at the time felt, when this tragedy happened? Do those theatrical things express all those painful things that people felt at that time? Every time I see those particular scenes, it gives some kind of wrong impression.

Will's impression exemplifies the provocation of *TAoK*. He voices a sort of disconnect, a wrongness about the film montage. Will is questioning the new, painful and tragic version of history, represented through "theatrical things" in the film. It seems wrong to him; yet, *TAoK* stirs his desire to ask more questions.

The voice of Bob – "A Celebration of Killing"?

Bob reacted emotionally to a provocative question from the interviewer about whether the Indonesian audience found any of the film scenes from *TAoK* humorous (for instance when one of the killers, the obese Herman Koto is dressed in a beautiful ball gown)? This question in particular triggered something in Bob, who responded:

An alternative title for the film could be 'A Celebration of Killing'; you know, the entire movie is a celebration of killing; you know, it's so festive. It's a series of festive occasions in which people are celebrating what they did in the past. And what they did in the past was killing other people. So, even the funny parts are a part of celebrating, which is, if that is true, then this is not funny at all... because we are watching people making [sic] funny things to celebrate the act of killings that they have done in the past. And that is not funny for us here who more or less know what was going on here. Maybe, in other countries, like in Denmark since people don't know much about what happened here in the 1960s. And it was not something funny. But, for me, the whole documentary film is about how people are celebrating the killings, of other killings, and that leads us to the banalities [sic] of evil.

Bob voices a critical and sceptical view about the celebratory and festive presentation in the film. He questions the involvement of a foreign film director (with an Indonesian team) and whether the film makes Indonesia's tragic past appear banal. He has concerns that film audiences outside Indonesia might not know much about Indonesia's past, and it provokes him that someone could find *any* aspect of the film humorous.

The film's festive and seemingly comic mix of musical scenes produces tension. Phillips and Jørgensen (2002) argue, based on Bakhtin (1981), that any disagreement in dialogue is a positive dynamic for transformation. Yet, it is questionable whether Bob's provocation is a

positive dynamic that opens up dialogue. The emotional impact is so intense that Bob has attended several screenings but avoids watching specific scenes:

First of all, there are scenes that I don't want to see. Every time I watch the scenes, I close my eyes. Even today. Because I don't want the scenes to be recorded by my brain because, otherwise, I have something in my brain regarding to [sic] that killing in which people do it lightly and with no sense of feeling guilty or anything.

Bob highlighted that he did not understand the film's "happy ending" in which the protagonist Anwar seems to repent his actions. He explained that, since the events of 1965-66 were still unresolved, the happy ending in *TAoK* did not mirror the state of affairs in Indonesia. Bob suggested that Anwar was acting (pretending to feel guilt and remorse) in front of the camera because Anwar is a movie lover and, therefore, aware that most cinema audiences expect a protagonist to undergo a personal development leading to a happy ending:

Since Anwar was young, he wanted to feature in a movie; movies are in his blood; and, all of the [sic] sudden, there is a film crew from abroad giving him a chance for it. Maybe, his guilt is really true, but I think he is acting.

Bob's doubts created a silence in the group interview and led to speculations in the group about the guilty conscience of the protagonist (Anwar). Was it merely an act, a shoddy tribute to Anwar's beloved Hollywood, the same way that he drew inspiration from James Dean, John Wayne, Victor Mature, and Marlon Brando when it came to murder technique and wardrobe?

Discussion among the Indonesian interviewees presented many viewpoints about theatricality - how the fictionalised or dramatized elements in *TAoK* blend. Will and Bob were both confused about the theatricality in the *TAoK* since a documentary film is, in their (perhaps) more traditional genre expectation, defined as an objective portrait of reality. Consequently, it becomes extremely confusing for them that the reflexive filmic framework in *TAoK* does not present one unified or standard "truth". Their confusion of the representation of fiction versus nonfiction can be seen as the basis for their criticism of *TAoK*. Bob has much more knowledge of history than Will and was concerned about how the film only shows a "tip of the iceberg" because it lacks an economic perspective and does not depict the involvement of foreign powers during the conflict in the 1960s. Therefore, Bob is more critical; and, although he also respected the effort in making the film, he found it hard to understand *TAoK* as a film that aims to portray reality in Indonesia.

The voice of Sussie – TAoK provides hope for the future

Sussie challenged the criticism of *TAoK* by Will and Bob. She viewed Anwar's guilt and remorse as authentic, and this affected her deeply:

I never thought I could think of forgiving ... but when I saw Anwar vomiting in the end of the film [...] Weird as it may sound, but there and then I forgave him. I can forgive him with that personal development, him and so many other killers.

TAoK offers her new perspectives on the lives and minds of the killers – especially, Anwar, who in a bizarre way come across as understandable and forgivable. Sussie explains her empathy and understanding of the killers: “They are also like me, have feelings, have thoughts [...] that’s why I feel this film is so important”.

In a tension with this forgiveness, Sussie defines Indonesian society as corrupt, controlled, and without any freedom of expression. She echoed concerns about corruption, harassment, and intimidation by state authorities and paramilitary organisations voiced in the group interview. Sussie basically stopped being an active citizen in 2007: “It’s heart-breaking to follow the news, [which is] why I stopped reading [the] newspaper in 2007. It’s so frustrating; I just ‘zoom in’ to my daily life ... only then [do] I see democracy and humanity in reality.” She has tried to distance herself from the Indonesian public sphere, as she does not want to be part of it anymore. Only in her personal life, surrounded with her family and friends, does she recognise humanity in her life.

On a more positive note about the future, Sussie is certain that *TAoK* has the power to promote human rights and appeal to a higher international forum. She sees a need for pressure on the Indonesian government to help redefine history (through reconciliation) and to bring back hope and trust: “I do hope, though, that Joshua goes very far, wide, and high with *TAoK* to get more international attention. Then, perhaps, [the] Indonesian government can show how serious they are about human rights in the country”.

Analytic points about TAoK

The film blurs the usual “good versus evil” narrative, as Oppenheimer intended (see Rapold, 2013; Oppenheimer & Brink, 2013), with the awareness that cinema is a powerful way to communicate an understanding of violence that offers solidarity with even the worst villains. A film audience gets the chance to reflect on the killings and the interpersonal and sociocultural tensions among voices (Baxter, 2011; Emerson, 2012). An audience struggles with competing voices, especially about Anwar’s guilt and remorse in relation to his killings. Was Anwar simply used as a killing machine? Is he capable of repentance for his past? To what extent is it an act? Who is responsible for the killings in 1960s Indonesia?

A dialogic perspective includes a view on all humans as complex, contrasting, and unfinalizable (see Frølund, 2012b), and this also applies to Anwar as a person and to questions about the social norms for justice and the ideals of reconciliation. The compositional montage of the film, such as the various re-enactments of killings interwoven with scenes in which the participants in the film comment on the re-enactments, creates an uneasy unity. The montage compels competing, contrasting voices for the audience, who struggle to make meanings about the representation of killing.

Even those Indonesians who criticised the re-enactments of killings as a ‘film within the film’ (such as Will and Bob), due to the theatrical scenes, considered *TAoK* to be groundbreaking and important. They hoped that it would inspire Indonesia to break the silence and give birth to new voices in Indonesia. A majority of the interviewees saw Anwar as authentically remorseful, and his display of humanity seemed to them to create hope for the future. On the whole, their understanding was that Anwar acted on impulses that “made sense” in his everyday life, which, in turn, allowed them to understand and to forgive him.

However, the interviewees discussed justice and how forgiveness had to go hand-in-hand with reconciliation. Many of them were concerned with how gangster capitalism, corruption, censorship, and other social ills plague Indonesia today. Therefore, there is a great deal of tension between the voices of forgiveness, hope, and despair. Reconciliation is not in the interest of the upper rungs of Indonesian society, the members of which seek to avoid discussing past atrocities or providing justice to the victims. Yet, there is hope for the future, thanks to *TAoK*, as expressed by Sussie.

Comparison with *Gzim Rewind*

We offer a brief comparison of *TAoK* with the shorter film *Gzim Rewind*. The analysis of *Gzim Rewind* does not include audience reaction. It discusses how the tensions *between the different voices* expressed by the participants in the film and the film director are articulated, so that they offer less contrast within the film, and it also provides grounds for discussing how past acts of violence are articulated from the perspectives of the *victim*. The comparative analysis of the two films elucidates how differently voices can be articulated in documentary films about past violence.

Gzim Rewind is about a 9-year-old Kosovo Albanian boy named Gzim (Gzim Dervishi), who met the director Wester in 2003 while Gzim was living with his family at an asylum centre in a town in northern Sweden after fleeing the Balkan war and the mass violence against civilians from the Serbian and Kosovo Albanian militia and other forces during the 1990s.⁶

The film is the result of a seven-year-long creative project for Wester with visits to Gzim and his family after their “repatriation” to Kosovo. Wester has had financial support from Scandinavian grants for artists and new media as well as help from collaborators, including assistant editors and musicians. It has been shown at documentary and arts-oriented film festivals (2011) and on Swedish public television.

The points of view of the *victim* of violence and the director become rather unified and move toward a common understanding of tragedy, in *Gzim Rewind*. The film has scenes that juxtapose multiple story threads. We see how Gzim ages and adapts to living in different geographical, linguistic, and cultural contexts. The film itself is composed as a “rewind” from the time of editing (2010) backwards to Gzim at 9 years of age (2003) and his early childhood through re-created flashbacks of the Balkan war during which Gzim witnessed genocide. The mix of footage includes live-action footage showing everyday scenes in a

“home movie” genre, shot by both Wester and Gzim, and animation sequences created by Wester and a machinima animator in collaboration with Gzim (see Frølund, 2012a).

Wester visits Kosovo twice, after Gzim is back in Kosovo. The film alternates between scenes showing Gzim at 9, 11, and 16 years of age. The Kosovo scenes show Gzim trying to stay warm in his house (with his family), playing football, tending sheep, and visiting bombed-out buildings, including a school. One scene shows the teenager Gzim with human bones at a grave of massacre victims. The voiceover narration by film director Wester explains the temporal shifts, so that the film itself makes it clear that Wester is visiting Kosovo.

The mixture of scenes from Kosovo with scenes from Sweden (from 2003) provides a sense of the tragedy of an interrupted childhood.⁷ A central scene shows Gzim at age 9, telling Wester that the family has to leave Sweden. Gzim appears to be in shock – yet, he asks Wester to film – and Gzim then breaks down emotionally in front of the camera. In interviews with Lisbeth Frølund, film director Wester explained that he developed the idea of making a film about Gzim on the day Gzim’s family was refused asylum in Sweden – in part, because Gzim asked him to film it. As Wester explained:

I think he [Gzim] comes to me, because he also wants me to film; I think that, somewhere, even though he is only 9 years old, that he had this idea that, if he’s talking to me and to this camera, maybe, he could be talking to the world.

The child Gzim seems bright, talkative, and creative; whether clowning with the camera or crying in front of it, the teenager mostly retains a stony face and seems quiet.

Analytic points on Gzim Rewind

It is a film that can elicit a great deal of empathy with the victim, the protagonist Gzim, in comparison with the mixed feelings toward the killers in *TAoK*. The voices of Gzim and Wester blend, overlap and inter-animate (interweave) in the film. The film does not urge an audience to challenge the “good versus evil” dichotomy as *TAoK* does. When the teenager Gzim presents mass graves to Wester and to the camera, we (the authors as audience) find it authentic (not acting), and we feel empathy.

The film does not have the humorous potential or theatricality of *TAoK*. It is tragic and sad, although there are scenes in which Gzim displays happiness. Gzim appears very aware of acting and being on camera; he is seen using the camera, performing songs for it, and talking directly to it and to Wester. We (the authors) are left with a feeling that we need to reflect on our share of the problem; after all, we live in Scandinavia, which looks like paradise compared to Kosovo. The film leaves us with a nagging guilt, a sense of not taking responsibility, and not helping the civilian victims who come to Scandinavia as young asylum seekers. The film thereby constructs and articulates voices about being a victim and opens up reflections on justice with respect to asylum politics and reconciliation after genocide.

Summary of analysis

The summary focuses on the dialogic concept of heteroglossia and how voices are constructed and articulated in the two documentary films and through the films main participants. We review the expressions of hope articulated by the *TAoK* audience, and that we, the authours, find in *TAoK* and *Gzim Rewind*.

Both films make the cinematic process explicit for an audience – for instance, by showing how the camera is used. The protagonists of the films show an awareness of the camera and perform for it. *Gzim* (in *Gzim Rewind*) is often seen using the camera, performing songs for it, and talking directly to it. Anwar (in *TAoK*) has a similar awareness of the camera, and he is shown watching and discussing previous scenes (such as murder re-enactments), including comments on his use of props, clothing, etc. The two films show a reflexive awareness of the camera as a means of opening up the multiple stories that are created in the close collaboration between the film directors and the film participants.

The sample audience of *TAoK* offered multiple interpretations and emotional responses. Most expressed a form of gratitude toward the film team who dared to enter their society and awaken memories that provoked them to reflect on their nation's bloody past. They expressed hope as well as the frustration of dealing with corruption and the abuse of power in present-day Indonesia. They wanted to look forward, to have a prospect of more justice and less censorship; yet, they expressed fear and concerns about the future.

The analysis shows how provocative it was for the Indonesian *TAoK* audience to be presented with new voices and perspectives about the past. The ideal, in a Bakhtinian dialogic sense, is to allow for diversity; to open up differences and thereby counter the tendencies of standardisation (and totalitarianism). Control, such as direct censorship, obviously has an impact on creating centralistic, universal interpretations and the homogenous production and interpretation regimes, because it forbids heterogeneity. Hopefully, stories of war told in multiple ways can articulate multiple voices, allow differences among the voices to emerge, and even activate hope and reconciliation.

Discussion and conclusion

The two film projects are discussed from the position that they *potentially* offer audiences new, multiple, and even contrasting and competing stories about the past. The films are part of a complex process of reflection on culturally dominant understandings and meanings that are taken for granted. Critical voices that raise questions about the dominant social discourses may lead to a possibility, although no guarantee, for social change. Perhaps, critical voices lead to greater hope (as Sussie articulates about *TAoK*) for opposing those social practices that have been constructed in the dominant discourses.

We used the dialogic concept of heteroglossia to explore how various voices are articulated and, furthermore, how cinema may challenge stagnant, unified, and standardised versions of history to alter an audience's interpretation of the past. Of course, cinema can tell

all kinds of stories and be used for persuasion, manipulation, and propaganda. A film can encourage an audience to make new meanings about its past and may instigate a process of re-interpretation and reflection. One way is to encourage an audience to question the taken for granted by mixing up the usual relations between articulations, such as using so-called “theatrical things” in *TAoK*. Other ways to provoke new meanings are to show the film production process and staging explicitly, and to encourage debate as an integral aspect of the film distribution strategy. For instance, Will found it helpful to discuss *TAoK* with others after the film screening. Obviously, we cannot know the extent to which any film has helped to reshape an individual’s, a family’s or a nation’s understanding about the past and to build their future (see van Dijck, 2008).

Bob was frustrated by the festive style and what he saw as the “banal” representation of the evil shown in *TAoK*. The humour in the film created a tension in him about the competing and contradictory voices in the film. However, this diversity should not be seen as a problem to be solved, according to Bakhtin, since diversity is the key to development, innovation, and vitality. With this line of thought, the differences, disagreements, and conflicts between voices should not be seen as a barrier but as a positive dynamic, giving rise to mutual learning. However, Bob’s frustration makes the authors question whether some topics are too sensitive – especially, for a foreign director – to represent on film? There is a risk of glamourising “unrepentant butchers”, as Fraser (2014) put it. Relatives of the victims are still living with grief about their loss. How far can a documentary film actually go in the making of new constellations of meanings – what are the limits?

Conclusion: The ends might justify the means

TAoK was made with the intention of articulating voices about the past and initiating social change. Contemporary Indonesia is characterized by its censorship, control, and regulation of the population. Therefore, it is important to question how far to challenge hegemonic closures by articulating utterances opposite to the established public discourse – and who can take on the challenge?

From dialogic and discourse theory perspectives, a deconstruction can show that the entities we take for granted, see as objective and natural and which are, in reality, crafted from contingent elements. The elements could always have been articulated differently (Laclau & Mouffe in Philips & Jørgensen 2002: 186). From this perspective, it becomes interesting to take a look at Bakhtin’s preoccupation with the novel, which stems from a belief that literature produces semiotic energy throughout a dialogue. Thus, the production of texts ideally offers representations of cultural diversity and different viewpoints in a public sphere. Literature and film, therefore, make it possible to represent something outside the discourse of a face-to-face dialogue. A film such as *TAoK*, covering a topic that is considered taboo by the official Indonesia, becomes an important addition to public dialogue because it brings about new and oppositional understandings about the Indonesian past.

A film such as *Gzim Rewind* shows the effects of war by exploring the fate of one child and his family; it thereby opens a small window on war trauma, diaspora, asylum politics, and hopelessness. It contributes hope by the very fact that the story is told. This type of personal story about loss and the relationship between film director and film participants progressing over time is not the usual TV news story.

As far as accomplishing the noble aims and intentions of Oppenheimer, *TAoK* would have had more difficulty reaching an Indonesian film audience just a decade ago. Distribution and dissemination has occurred, in part, via the Internet, a network of underground distributors screening *TAoK* by personal invitation (as Oppenheimer mentions), and social media networks. The film has now been viewed by millions of Indonesians. Government and anti-Communist organisations continue to try to halt this development, but their efforts to censor it have ultimately been futile. *TAoK* has now become freely available for download via the Internet in Indonesia – and this increases its potential impact.

Any author, reader, or viewer always brings in past texts and knowledge of genre conventions and activates familiar signs and symbols in order to interpret a text in a continuous process (Baxter, 2011; Frølund, 2012a; Phillips, 2011). In this vein, Will, Bob, and Sussie can reinterpret *TAoK* continuously. Any encounter with new genres of text challenges understandings of familiar, related, older texts. For instance, Bob seemed to expect a more traditional documentary film – such as, perhaps, *Gzim Rewind* – rather than the theatricality of *TAoK*. These processes of reinterpretation take time and evolve in complex dialogic inter-relationships between texts and people – for example, through discussions of *TAoK* after screenings in Indonesia and via social media.

The opposition to standardisation of stories (such as the Hollywood film model, and its “good versus evil” dichotomy) is also important. One way forward is to create stories with multiple viewpoints that dare to tell stories by killers as well as victims’ stories and use an experimental and aesthetic approach to storytelling. Another way forward is to encourage audiences to engage in multiple interpretations, to provoke their reflective literacy. An audience that is unfamiliar with experimental documentary may benefit greatly from discussions about how and why to break aesthetic genre conventions and standardised divisions of good and evil.

One possibility for creating new visions for the future is through reworking the past in the present – sometimes, by breaking storytelling conventions as a part of challenging the dominant and standardised representations. Inspired by Deleuzian concepts of future memories and cinematic hindsight used by van Dijck (2008), we suggest that hope can emerge from facing the past in the present because future directions evolve out of the past in the present. The cinematic medium (along with other texts in the contemporary media ecology) potentially “re-create” memory for individuals and groups. The re-creation occurs in a complex dialogic process unfolding over time, via various media platforms, and in reflection in cultural, social, and political contexts.

These kinds of film projects deal with ethical dilemmas, such as whose stories are to be told, whose voices are to be silenced, what genres are to be used and how and where to distribute the film. It certainly takes courage to create such films. We have taken a small step toward exploring how voices emerge in reaction to film and the potential for social change, exemplified in these two film projects. In conclusion, we find that these films offer a potential for change through their development of multiple voices and by instigating reflexive processes. They can contribute to new understandings of the past and, thereby, fuel social and political change.

Acknowledgements

Mette Bjerregaard received indispensable support from an anonymous professor at a university in Yogyakarta and from the Indonesian TAoK co-director "Anonymous". Many thanks go to the Indonesian informants who shared very personal thoughts and emotions related to TAoK. Thanks to Joshua Oppenheimer and Signe Byrge Sørensen for their comments and to Knutte Wester for valuable input. The authors are grateful to Louise Phillips and reviewers for comments. Drafts of this article were presented at the CCCS conference 2013 "Cultural Memory", Skopje, and at Örecomm festival 2013 "Memory on Trial", Copenhagen.

References

- Agger, G. (1999). Intertextuality revisited: Dialogues and negotiations in media studies. *Canadian Aesthetics Journal* 4. Retrieved October 8, 2013, from http://www.uqtr.ca/AE/vol_4/gunhild.htm.
- Bakhtin, M.M. (1981 [1930s]). *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson & Michael Holquist). Austin and London: University of Texas Press.
- Bakhtin, M.M. (1984). *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bakhtin, M.M. (1993 [1941, 1965]). *Rabelais and His World* (Trans. Hélène Iswolsky). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Banks, M. (2001). *Visual Methods in Social Research*. London: SAGE.
- Baxter, L.A. (2011). *Voicing Relationships: A Dialogic Perspective*. London & New York: SAGE Publications.
- Bjerregaard, M. (2014, 5 March). What Indonesians really think about The Act of Killing. *The Guardian / Culture*. Retrieved March 21, 2014, from <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/mar/05/act-of-killing-screening-in-indonesia>.
- Collier, M. (2001). Approaches to analysis in visual anthropology. In T. Van Leeuwen & C. Jewitt (Eds.), *Handbook of Visual Analysis* (pp. 35-60). London: Sage Publishers.
- Cribb, R.B. and B. Brown. (1995). *Modern Indonesia: A History since 1945*. London: Longman Publishing Group
- Emerson, C. (2012). The outer word and inner speech: Bakhtin, Vygotsky, and the internalization of language. *Critical Inquiry*, 10(2), 245-264.

Article: The articulation of voices in two film projects about violence

- Fraser, N. (2014, 23 February). The Act of Killing: Don't give an Oscar to this snuff movie. *The Guardian / The Observer*. Retrieved February 24, 2014, from <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/feb/23/act-of-killing-dont-give-oscar-snuff-movie-indonesia>.
- Frølunde, L. (2012a). Animated war: Perspectives on resemiosis and authorship applied to two DIY film projects. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 18(1), 93-103.
- Frølunde, L. (2012b). Dialogical ethics and reflections on unfinalizability: An analysis of dissenting voices in a film contest study. In Phillips, L., Kristiansen, M., Gunnarsson, E., & Vehvilainen, M. (Eds.), *Knowledge and Power in Collaborative Research: A Reflexive Approach* (pp. 171-190). New York and London: Routledge.
- Frølunde, L. (2013). Facing the audience: Dialogic theory and the hybrid animated film. In Ng, J. (ed.), *Understanding Machinima: Filmmaking in Virtual Worlds*. London and New York: Continuum International Publ.
- Gardiner, M. (1992). *The Dialogics of Critique: M.M. Bakhtin and the Theory of Ideology*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Hermans, H.J.M. (2004). Introduction: The dialogical self in a global and digital age. *Identity*, 4(4), 297-320.
- Hoskins, A. (2013). Death of a single medium. *Media, War & Conflict*, 6(1), 3-6.
- Laclau, E. and C., Mouffe (1985). *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso.
- Machin, D. & T. Van Leeuwen (2007). *Global Media Discourse: A Critical Introduction*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Nichols, B. (2010). *Introduction to Documentary Film*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Oppenheimer, J & J.T. Brink (Eds.) (2013). *Killer Images – Documentary Film, Memory and the Performance of Violence*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Phillips, L. (2011). *The Promise of Dialogue: The Dialogic Turn in the Production and Communication of Knowledge*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Phillips, L. & Jørgensen, M. (2002). *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*. London: Sage Publishers.
- Rapold, N. (2013, 15 July). Interview: Joshua Oppenheimer. *filmcomment*. Retrieved November 8, 2013, from <http://www.filmcomment.com/entry/interview-joshua-oppenheimer-the-act-of-killing>.
- van Dijck, J. (2013). *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- van Dijck, J. (2008). Future memories: The construction of cinematic hindsight. *Theory Culture & Society*, 25(3), 71-87.

Notes

- 1 The reflexive and participatory approaches are among the six “modes” or conventions within the documentary film genre, as conceptualized by Bill Nichols (2010): poetic, expository, observational, participatory, reflexive, and performative. The reflexive mode of documentary acknowledges the filmmaker’s presence, perspective, and selectivity in constructing film.
- 2 Oppenheimer is currently artistic director of The Centre for Production and Research of Documentary Film at The University of Westminster, London. He is based in Copenhagen and London.
- 3 Anthropological research methods intended as “participatory” in the sense that “subjects” collaborate and are asked to record own experience can still be questioned in terms of maintaining Western bias and control and making other cultures seem exotic (Banks 2001; Collier 2001).
- 4 “Involuntary Nomads”: <http://knuttewester.se/ofrivilliga-nomader.html>.
- 5 T AoK website: <http://theactofkilling.com>.

Article: The articulation of voices in two film projects about violence

- 6 Trials about war crimes and events in Kosovo in the 1990s are still underway: <http://www.icty.org/sid/3>.
- 7 *Gzim Rewind* film synopsis: www.gzimrewind.com.

Lisbeth Frølund
Associate Professor, PhD
Department of Communication, Business and Information Technologies
Roskilde University
lisbethf@ruc.dk

Mette Bjerregaard
Cand.comm
Copenhagen
mette_bjerregaard@hotmail.com