

The Look of Silence

Last year director Joshua Oppenheimer shocked the film world with "The Act of Killing," a chilling and searing exposé of how the Indonesia military regime brutally repressed leftist elements in an anti-communist bloodbath in 1965-66. Oppenheimer, long an observer of Indonesia's grim past, told his story through the shocking testimony of the victors, representatives of the militia and thugs who murdered legions simply because of their leftist bent, and who recalled their actions with a mixture of glee and obliviousness, even acting out their murders in garish and ghoulish re-creations.

From the beginning of his project, Oppenheimer wanted to offer another perspective on this epochal slaughter, so he crafted "The Look of Silence," highlighting the personal search of one Indonesian to find the methods and motivations of the killers of his older brother in the province of Aceh in northern Sumatra.

Oppenheimer found Adi Rukun, a forty-something optometrist, a mild-mannered, earnest man long haunted by the brutal death of his older brother Ramli, who was killed in the 1965 massacre for his political views. Within his community, he seeks out both the perpetrators and survivors of that period, quietly quizzing them about their role in the events. Among the survivors, the most telling is Adi's long-suffering mother, Rohani, who can still recall too vividly what happened to her eldest son. One family member, an uncle, was a prison guard who can only say he was completely unaware of what happened to prisoners he sent off to be killed.

The tone of "The Look of Silence" is set at the very beginning of the film, a cold opening showing Adi's grave face viewing Oppenheimer's video footage of the Aceh killers from 2004, showing two wizened fellows, death squad leaders, returning to the scene of their crimes and happily providing grotesque details of their acts to the curious foreigner. Adi is scouting the footage to find his brother's murderers, people from his own town who still live among him and his family.

Adi's interviews, unassuming, almost gentle, are memorable, even if they cannot really plumb the depths of the horrors. One toothless old commandant--after getting an eye exam from him--is still proud of his eliminating the "communists" his superiors told him to dispatch. Another veteran killer, now with dementia, still remembers his deeds, much to the consternation of his daughter, sitting beside him and wincing with embarrassed smiles as his tale is revealed. From the earlier 2004 video, we see those two almost comic figures looking to find the exact site near a river where they killed dozens. Their testimony (very explicit as to how they killed) allows Adi to finally track down one killer of his brother and question him about any regrets or sense of responsibility he might have.

Oppenheimer has said that "The Look of Silence," is "...a poem about a silence borne of terror—a poem not only about the necessity of breaking that silence, but also about the trauma that comes when silence is broken."

There is a large cultural gap in viewing Oppenheimer's films. A century and one-half ago, we had our own epic slaughter with our Civil War, countrymen killing countrymen. Still, our society has never experienced a fratricide where one-half million people perished in less than a year for the flimsiest of reasons: they were "politically

unclean." In "The Look of Silence," Adi's unrelieved placidity may seem alien to us, inconceivable almost from the standpoint of emotional Westerners more used to acting out. What is, however, still understandable is his seeking the truth about his troubled family history and, just as importantly, closing the circle on that past's pain. That is what this film does.

(The film, now in theaters, runs 98 minutes and is rated "R" for stark descriptions about, if not actual depictions of, the country's violence).

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