

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Roehampton		
Unit of Assessment: 34 - Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management		
Title of case study: Reframing genocide: the role of <i>The Act of Killing</i> in international policy and practice		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2007–2016		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Michael Uwemedimo	Lecturer	February 2005 – August 2016
Period when the claimed impact occurred: August 2013–2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? Y		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>Research produced by Michael Uwemedimo contributed to the genre-defining documentary <i>The Act of Killing</i> (TAoK) (2012). Since 2014, TAoK has gone on to inform the development of innovative methods and approaches to documentary practice internationally, and it is utilised up as an example of what documentary filmmaking can achieve as a genre, whilst also continuing to generate debate internationally. TAoK has, since 2014, informed and influenced international policy debates and societal changes in Indonesia and the US, whilst also reframing critical understanding of the documentary genre, informing both filmmakers and audiences on a global scale. Key indicators of the reach of this impact since 2014 include: the wide range of press coverage of TAoK detailing its impact and formal recognition of genocide in Indonesia, from major outlets such as <i>The New York Times</i> and <i>The Guardian</i>; and the range of institutions and individuals that have recognised the impact of the film, including the Indonesian government's National Human Rights Commission, the International People's Tribunal 1965, the Indonesian government, US Senator Tom Udall, and internationally-renowned filmmakers such as Louis Theroux.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>Michael Uwemedimo (Lecturer in Film, 2005-2016) developed innovative methods and approaches to documentary practice to address an increasing need for films that engage with social and political subjects. The research has exposed, challenged and criticised the social structures and institutions affecting social inclusion, precipitated international reflection on histories of political violence, and developed processes through which affected communities might gain a greater measure of control over their history, agency and representation (R1, R2, R3).</p> <p>As a founding member of the production collective, Vision Machine – together with directors J. Oppenheimer and A. L. Zimmerman – Uwemedimo's research findings and the team's creative applications have fed into an evolving filmmaking practice developed by the collective, culminating in the highly acclaimed film <i>The Act of Killing</i> (TAoK), on which he collaborated in the role of creative producer (R1).</p> <p>Uwemedimo was integral to the development of a new methodology of 'archaeological performance', which focuses on the role of re-enactment in critical explorations of image, memory and historical representation in relation to human rights violations. This process starts with interviews with the relevant participants in the acts of violence, who are afterwards invited to re-enact these moments at the historical locations. This material is afterwards reworked, becoming increasingly fictionalised, and the result is then shown to the participants. The screenings and the participants' reactions are filmed and later incorporated into the film, serving as points of departure for subsequent stylised re-enactments.</p> <p>Uwemedimo's work contributed in particular to the development of a performance-based historiography of political violence that draws extensively on historical re-enactment and genre restaging utilised in the TAoK (R2, R3). TAoK focuses on the perpetrators of the Indonesian</p>		

massacre of 1965-66 in which 100,000 – 500,000 alleged communists and ethnic Chinese were murdered. The film follows the stories that a group of gangsters and ageing genocidaires tell – in particular Anwar Congo, a former member of one of the death squads in 1965-66, rumoured to have personally murdered over 1,000 people – as they recreate their actions for each other and the camera.

Through documenting the re-enactments and subsequent reactions, the film not only allows viewers to contemplate the story of the massacre through the eyes and actions of the perpetrators, but also creates the opportunity for the perpetrators to be faced with visual evidence of their own actions. Through the visual representation of the perpetrators' violence, the film intervenes in Indonesia's history of genocide, challenging the official versions of history sanctioned by the government, and invites contemplation and debate about the events and the performance of political violence.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- R1** *The Act of Killing* (dir. Joshua Oppenheimer, prod. Michael Uwemedimo) (2012). Submitted to REF2014. **R1** functions as both a research output and an example of research put into practice. The quality of **R1** is evidenced by the numerous awards the film has won internationally, including the BAFTA for Best Documentary (2014) and an Academy Award nomination for Best Documentary Feature (2014).
- R2** Uwemedimo, M., Oppenheimer, J. (2007) History and Histrionics: Vision Machine's digital poetics in Marchessault, J & Lord, S. (eds) *Fluid Screens, Expanded Cinema*, pp.177–191. <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442684355-011>. Submitted to REF2014.
- R3** Uwemedimo, M., Oppenheimer, J. (2009) Show of force: a cinema-séance of power and violence in Sumatra's plantation belt, *Critical Quarterly*, 51 (1), pp.84-110. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8705.2009.01851.x>. Submitted to REF2014.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Research produced by Uwemedimo has contributed to the development of innovative methods and approaches to documentary practice, reframing public and professional understanding of the documentary genre to inform debates and influence policy and societal changes on an international scale.

As documented in the impact case study devoted to *TAoK* submitted to REF2014, the film's international release in 2012 and its clandestine circulation on DVD throughout Indonesia in 2012-13 led to an intense and unprecedented debate about the 1965-66 genocide, after 40 years of disavowal and impunity for its perpetrators. In those two years, the film won numerous awards for its combination of formal novelty and political significance, generating extensive global media coverage. This, however, proved to be just the beginning. The film opened new opportunities for debate in Indonesia and on the international stage from 2014 onwards, which led to material changes, including the recognition by the Indonesian government of the 1965-66 massacre and state-promoted open discussion of the event in April 2016. It also led to the creation of an international body, the International People's Tribunal 1965 (IPT), that published an in-depth report on the 1965-66 massacre in July 2016, including evidence of the complicity of the US. The film also played a pivotal role in the 2017 US government's decision to declassify records from the US Embassy in Jakarta between 1964 and 1968, which shed new light on the US's involvement in the massacre.

The release of *TAoK* has been crucial to the opening of public discussion on the 1965-66 massacres in Indonesia. Attempts had already been made to hold the Indonesian government responsible and to challenge the prevailing, state-sponsored narrative. Following a three-year investigation into the events of 1965-66, and just a few days before the official premier of *TAoK* in July 2012, the Indonesian National Commission for Human Rights published a statement declaring the massacre a '*gross human rights violation*' and calling for the punishment of the military officers involved. The government responded to the statement by dismissing it. This scenario changed

with *TAoK*, which the commission acclaimed as ‘essential viewing for us [Indonesians] all’ and described it as the best tool to raise awareness among Indonesian citizens about the 1965-66 massacre and how it influenced today’s society (IMP1). Upon the nomination of *TAoK* for an Academy Award in 2014, there was an immediate reaction on Chinese social media, responding to the little-known facts about the partial targeting of the ethnic Chinese minority in 1965-66, as shown in the film (IMP1). Following the award nomination, the Indonesian president’s spokesperson for foreign affairs, Teuku Faizasyah, attempted to downplay the relevance of the film, comparing the events of 1965-66 to the ‘*history of slavery in the United States, the aboriginals in Australia, the bombings of Vietnam by America*’, while further noting that there ‘*are elements of violations against humanity in many other nations*’. This was the first time that an Indonesian government official recognised the events of 1965-66 as a violation of human rights (IMP1).

TAoK has been recognised as an influencing factor in raising discussion of the 1965-66 events amongst the Indonesian political elite, most notably in a government-organised symposium – National Symposium: Dissecting the 1965 Tragedy, Historical Approach – held in Jakarta in April 2016 (IMP1). This was the first official public discussion about the massacre, the first formal recognition of the massacre, and an important first step in facilitating the conversation about it between victims, their families and the military. The event was attended by 200 people, including cabinet ministers, survivors of the massacre, human-rights activists and members of the Indonesian military. The symposium attracted the attention of the Indonesian public: it was fully covered by Indonesian TV and the hashtags associated with the event became a trending topic on Twitter (IMP1). Following the symposium, President Joko Widodo ordered an official investigation into the location of the victims’ mass graves, although no action has been taken to date.

The importance of *TAoK* in drawing both international attention to the genocide and disrupting the national silence on the subject in Indonesia, was also recognised in the final report published on 20 July 2016 by the IPT (IMP2). *TAoK* directly influenced the creation of this institution, which was established after discussions between Oppenheimer and human rights activists, following the screening of *TAoK* in the Hague in 2013. The importance of the film in the creation of the IPT was recognised in the 2016 report: ‘*these [crimes against humanity] have mostly escaped international attention and are silenced in Indonesia itself. Joshua Oppenheimer’s 2012 film, The Act of Killing, helped to disrupt the international silence*’ (IMP2). The report defined the events of 1965-66 as a genocide. This was the first legal institution to achieve this conclusion for Indonesia. The report concluded that Indonesia’s mass killings and systematic sexual violence of 1965-66 were crimes against humanity and that the State of Indonesia is responsible for and guilty of these crimes, with the complicity of the US, UK and Australia.

The complicity of other countries – a topic raised by *TAoK* – has also been addressed in the international media, with journalists calling for a greater reassessment of and self-reflection on the responsibilities of each country. In February 2014, *TAoK* was screened at the Library of Congress to an audience composed of senators, members of Congress and their staff. Following the screening, US Senator Tom Udall – who facilitated the event – stated that ‘*The United States government should be totally transparent on what it did and what it knew at the time, and they should be disclosing what happened here*’ (IMP1). On 10 December 2014 – and again in 2015 – the senator introduced the ***Sense of the Senate Resolution Regarding Indonesia***, urging Indonesia’s new government to recognise the crimes of 1965-66, and the US government to recognise their role in the massacre and to release relevant classified documents (IMP1; IMP3). The release of *TAoK* and Udall’s resolution alongside the activism of human rights advocates and institutions increasingly pressured the Obama administration to declassify the American records relating to the massacre. In April 2016, in an in-depth interview for *The Atlantic*, President Obama stated that ‘*[...] we have history in Iran, we have history in Indonesia and Central America. So we have to be mindful of our history when we start talking about intervening [...]*’ (IMP1). This was the first governmental recognition of the US’s involvement in Indonesia. On 17 October 2017, 30,000 pages of declassified records from the US Embassy in Jakarta between 1964 and 1968 were made available to the public. The files provide evidence of how the US Embassy kept track of the mass killings and worked to undermine labour movements in the country’s transition to a military

dictatorship. The findings in these documents were explored in detail in the main US news outlets, such as *The New York Times* (IMP1). *TAoK* was the catalyst for this entire process, as noted in an article in *Voice of America*, the largest U.S. international broadcaster, published on 18 October 2017: *'it is hard to overstate the impact of the documentaries [such as] The Act of Killing and the Look of Silence on the renewed conversation over Indonesia's mid-century anti-Communist purge. For a long time the issue was verboten, even though so many families were personally impacted by it'* (IMP1).

One of the reasons for *TAoK*'s profound impact is to be found in its innovative methodology, which has influenced creative documentary practice and criticism by reframing critical expectations and understanding of the documentary genre. *TAoK*'s innovative method has been widely recognised within the profession, as evidenced by the extensive critical appraisal of the film, the large number of festivals and community events it has been screened at both nationally and internationally, and the numerous prizes it has been awarded. *TAoK* has been shown at over a hundred film festivals, screened in more than a hundred cities, and distributed in over fifteen countries (R1). Since August 2013, *TAoK* was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature (2014), won the BAFTA for best documentary (2014) and the European Film Award, among 22 other awards. *TAoK* has continued to have a significant impact on critical and popular understandings of the documentary film genre. In 2014, *TAoK* ranked 19th in the BFI's 50 Greatest Documentaries of All Time, a list compiled from the opinions of 340 critics and filmmakers (IMP1). Acclaimed filmmaker Werner Herzog, who was one of the executive producers of *TAoK*, ranked the film as one of the five best documentaries in the world (IMP1). The film was included in *The Guardian*'s Inspiring culture for 2017 list, entitled 'Fight the Power: documentaries to unleash the activist in you' (IMP1). *TAoK* was also included in *The Guardian*'s 2019 ranking of the 100 best films of the twenty-first century, ranking sixteenth (IMP1). Articles on the film published in *The Guardian* since 2014 have generated 4,493 comments and have been shared a total of 21,697 times, a testament to the relevance of the film and its significance for the public.

The innovative methodology behind the *TAoK* has subsequently influenced the practice of renowned documentary filmmakers such as Louis Theroux. He particularly emphasised the film's innovative methodology, stating that *'for me, it opened up a whole new way of telling non-fiction stories, allowing the participants in Indonesian massacres [...] to "direct" re-enactments of their crimes [...] though it deals with events from decades ago, Oppenheimer manages to place The Act of Killing in the present day'* (IMP1). Theroux adopted *TAoK*'s methodology in his *My Scientology Movie* (2015), directed by John Dower, where he used actors and re-enactments to recreate the practices and alleged events within the Church of Scientology, following the information provided by Marty Rathbun, an ex-Scientologist. When defining the methodology for this documentary, Theroux described the *TAoK* as a *'light-bulb moment'*: *'When I saw The Act of Killing, I thought, OK, if the contributors are first-person participants in what took place and they are absolutely on board with bringing the re-enactments to life – because [Indonesian gangster] Anwar Congo owns those re-enactments; you can see how thrilled he is to be co-directing them – if Marty comes on board and believes in the re-enactments and pilots them more than I do, then they could work'* (IMP1). *My Scientology Movie* went on to gross US\$2,200,000 internationally.

Whilst the methodology has influenced filmmakers, the film's approach to impact has also had broad currency. *TAoK* has been recognised as one of the best examples of film impact by the Doc Society, one of the leading non-profit organisations supporting documentary filmmakers globally. In 2014, they launched a key resource for filmmakers, ***The Impact Field Guide & Toolkit***. *TAoK* was chosen as the subject of an impact case study included in the document (IMP4). Besides being quoted as one of the best examples of documentary practice, *TAoK* is specifically referred to as the key example for one of the four impact dynamics defined in the guide, namely *'Changing minds: Mass awareness and understanding - creating a shift in public attitudes'* (IMP5). The toolkit has been used by over 55,000 filmmakers and translated into Spanish, Arabic and Portuguese.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

Impact case study (REF3)

IMP1 Press pack composed of 72 articles covering *TAoK* and its influence in opening the debate about 1965-66 in Indonesia, coverage of the decision of the International People's Tribunal 1965, and impact in the US. 2014-2020.

IMP2 *Final Report of the IPT 1965: Findings and Documents of the International People's Tribunal on Crimes against Humanity Indonesia 1965*. 20 July 2016

IMP3 Senator Tom Udall introducing the Resolution on Reconciliation of Indonesia. December 2014. Video available online at

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fpUOvJKSzR0&feature=youtu.be&ab_channel=SenatorTomUdall

IMP4 Britdoc's (now Doc Society) *TAoK* impact case study. 2014.

IMP5 *The Impact Field Guide & Toolkit*, developed by the Doc Society. 2014.