

At the end of Canto 8, we told you that before you passed through the Gates of Dis, we were taking you on a detour by showing you *The Act of Killing*. The film was added to this course at the suggestion of MyDante team-member Rita Pearson, who believes that it helps bring the reality of sin, especially the sins of violence and of fraud, home to MOOC participants. In the commentary that follows, she shares her experience of passing through Dante's Gates of Dis towards these two sins. In so doing, she models for us a powerful example of contemplative reading:

The film you've just watched is so unlike anything that you or I, typical consumers of media, are usually exposed to. Watching the Director's Cut of *The Act of Killing* is, as Werner Herzog says, like being sucked into a "vortex of fever dreams [that pulls] you deep inside the nightmares of the protagonists."

The first time I watched the film, I too thought that, as Orson Welles once said of *The Trial* it had "the logic of a nightmare." The final shot of Anwar and Herman dancing by the lake is the lush inverse of the frozen lake at the bottom of Dante's *Inferno*, but both operate under that nightmare logic, because both are places where everything is backwards. Murderers are heroes. Truth is a demon that breaks men. In the *Inferno*, the sinners in the bottom of the abyss are absolutely motionless; *The Act of Killing* taught me that sin, or stagnation and myopia and terror, can only be sustained by some form of manic storytelling that turns a person's sense of reality on its head.

The truth is, you've already passed the Gates of Dis and you've already been to the bottom of the *Inferno*. You've seen Hell on Earth.

There are many excellent articles and interviews on the internet that illuminate how Joshua Oppenheimer and his team were able to capture the invisible processes of the human mind on camera. In one such interview, Oppenheimer explains that the camera itself precipitates the revelation. "If I point a camera at you," he says, "you will act out the scripts, the fantasies, the half-remembered, second-hand, third-rate stories that make you how you are [in terms of how] you want to be seen, and those will be hiding some darker insecurities about how you really see yourself or what you fear you really are. When you take a camera and point it at the world, you make clear the fictions that constitute our facts. It's like a prism for looking at the nature of reality."

The parallel to how Dante deals with the souls in Hell is obvious. What's worth noting is that both Dante and Joshua Oppenheimer can reveal inner truths about human nature only because they see "sinners" as humans. In fact, both of them see storytelling, to oneself and to others, as an essential part of what makes human beings human.

I first saw *The Act of Killing* in a packed theatre of the E-street cinema in Washington, D.C., in the summer of 2013. I'll never forget the audience's reaction to the end of the film. Up until the last hour of the film, we had sighed, and gasped, and laughed, especially at Herman. But during the film's final stretch, the otherwise familiar landscape of a city from the developing world, with its crowds and its Western imitation malls and its vibrant people, became a desolate ghost town that Anwar and Adi and Herman wandered through like tormented souls themselves. As is noted in a review on [rogerebert.com](http://rogerebert.com), the last half hour of the film is so heartbreaking and so terrifying that it's nearly unbearable. And when the visual litany of names and unnamed contributors and artists finally rolled up the screen, not one audience member clapped, or coughed, or even whispered. I had never experienced such absolute, unbroken silence with so many other people.

That night left an indelible mark on my understanding of cinema, storytelling, and human nature, especially because I had the good luck to speak to Joshua Oppenheimer, who was present at the screening. (If the film affected you as much as it did me, I'd recommend the following [VICE interview](#), which covers many of the same topics he discussed with us that night.) As soon as the lights turned on and we audience members had recovered our voices, one of the first things we asked him for was an explanation of that terrible scene in which Anwar, who is standing on same the roof where he once did the cha-cha for the camera, retches uncontrollably. I remember wanting—needing—words. I couldn't stand to look at that scene in silence.

Joshua Oppenheimer reminded us that in the scene in which Pancasila Youth reenacts a village massacre, with their families and neighbors playing the roles of victims, one of the female actresses faints. All of the commotion you see around her, he said, are attempts to exorcise the ghosts of victims of the genocide that her neighbors believed were possessing her body. He added that in that terrible scene on the roof, Anwar was also being possessed by something that had been haunting him for the entire film.

Up on the roof, Anwar, who is dressed in a bright yellow jacket, avoids looking at the camera. "This is where we tortured and killed the people we captured," he says. He pauses. Now, he shifts slightly, and staring straight ahead, he adds, "I know it was wrong—but I had to do it." He's silent again. He moves away from the camera, but after only a few steps, he doubles over. Then he's retching, sometimes pausing, sometimes trying to speak, and then doubling over again. He can no longer swallow his words, Joshua explained to us. "His body's rejecting them."

It's irony at its purest; juxtaposed against Anwar's words is Anwar's body, which is telling a very different story. At the end of the film—and because of the film—Anwar finds himself unable to expel the demons he can no longer contain.

Despite reading and hearing many brilliant explanations of that scene, despite re-watching the entire film many times, and despite writing about the film, I keep finding myself in the same position after the credits

roll. That scene still silences me. I don't feel comfortable putting words to it, although it obviously speaks for itself. Anwar finally understands what he did to another human being, and his words—his rationalizations—fall apart. He knows that he's sinned. Right?

That explanation is valid and well-reasoned, but I also share the opinion of Errol Morris, who in a [VICE interview](#) exclaims with a fair bit of enthusiasm that we can't really know what's going on in Anwar's mind. "Is it true recognition?," Morris asks. Or is it still a performance for the camera and for himself?

I seriously doubt that the point of analyzing the film is to be able pick a side, to conclude that it's genuine or that it's semblance. And honestly, the only conclusion I've reached is that I'm terrified of whatever is coursing through Anwar as he retches. Joshua Oppenheimer said that he filmed Anwar for 8 years, and during those 8 years, Anwar was able to live with his words. What words do I live with that are eating me alive?

For further reading on *The Act of Killing*, I'd recommend:

1. [An article from the Columbia Journalism Review](#)
2. [An interview via Democracy Now](#)
3. [A follow-up on the developments in Indonesia since \*The Act of Killing\*, written by Joshua Oppenheimer](#)
4. [An interview in which Joshua Oppenheimer discusses global oppression and apathy:](#)
5. [An article about \*The Look of Silence\*, the companion piece to \*The Act of Killing\*](#)

The final guide in Canto 8 left you with two seemingly disparate points. The first was that violence, given the cruelty of humans and of the world, makes sense. The second was that the part of you that you identify with is not strong enough to resist the weight of guilt that is unavoidable, given the interconnected state of the world. This feeling of ambivalence and self-doubt is the situation in which Dante and Virgil find themselves as they await the divine emissary. Notably, the two aforementioned stances are in fact the difference in mindset between a sinner and the pilgrim when each stands in front of the Gates; the first ("I must harm others") more or less summarizes the impersonal viewpoint held by all of the sinners in the circles of the Lion, whereas the second ("I can't help participating in practices and social structures that harm others, but I don't want to") captures the inevitable realization that anyone seriously pursuing self-awareness will eventually confront. But despite how polemically different these perspectives are, each speaks to the same overwhelming feeling of futility all people must feel when they're confronted with the reality of violence that permeates human culture, both in its history and in its present reality.

That feeling of futility is so overwhelming that it will eventually prove unsustainable. Anyone, sinner or pilgrim, who remains outside of the Gates will, like Filippo, be consumed by that recognition.