Remembering 1965: Indonesian Cinema and the 'Battle for History'

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Abstract

Using four films to probe the transformations in Indonesia's historical memory, this paper examines how the Indonesian society remembers, interrogates, and comes to terms with one of their nation's most traumatic episodes: the widespread communist purge that followed the failed coup on 30 September 1965. It also demonstrates how they reflect various perspectives on the 1965 killings that are—to an extent—part of the "Battle of History" (van Klinken 2001) in post-Suharto Indonesia, wherein different historiographic traditions introduce new actors, reveal the nuances, and challenge longstanding dominant understandings of 1965.

Keywords: Indonesian Cinema, 1965 Communist Purge, Historical Memory, Cold War

Introduction: The Communist Purge in Indonesia

The communist purge that followed the failed coup of 30 September 1965 is one of the defining events of modern Indonesian history. Although the coup was swiftly quelled by members of the *Tentara Nasional Indonesia* (TNI-Indonesian National Armed Forces), the reprisal led to the torture and death of numerous Indonesians who were members, suspected members, or even mere sympathizers of the Indonesian Communist Party, *Partai Komunis Indonesia* (PKI). Though various scholars have attempted to find out exactly what happened (Roosa 2006; Pohlman 2013; Swift 2010; Hadiz 2010; Mortimer 2006; Kolimon and Campbell-Nelson 2015;

McVey 2006), the purge remains an obscure fragment of Indonesian memory. The New Order employed various political and cultural tools to shape Indonesian historical memory. This massive propaganda campaign helped create generations of Indonesians who are "wholly ignorant" of the anticommunist purge and its implications for Indonesian society (Pamuntjak 2015, par. 7). The same applies to politicians. In 2015, the 50th anniversary of the communist purge, President Joko Widodo refused to issue an official public apology to the victims of the killings and their families (Pamuntjak 2015; Kwok 2016; Palatino 2015).[1]

Even so, with the breakdown of Suharto's New Order in 1998, new accounts of or questions about the 1965 tragedy began to emerge. Vedi Hadiz (2006) looks at the trauma of 1965 as a crucial fragment in the postcolonial grand narrative of the Indonesian nation. He also suggests that the failure to address this juncture in Indonesian history poses a "major impediment" (554) to the country's democratization process. Another scholar (Roosa 2006) traces how events unfolded after the coup and identifies a whole gamut of clashing interpretations and contradicting facts that cast doubt on the New Order's account of the event.

> "Why would a movement that announced itself to the public on October 1 name itself after the previous day?...Why would a movement that claimed it was an effort to prevent a coup against President Sukarno not explicitly declare that he would remain president within this new government?...Why did the movement not kidnap Major General Suharto or prepare to counter the troops under his command?" (Roosa 2006, 62)

Roosa (2006) also points out that the coup, which had many gaps and loopholes in terms of and planning and execution, was not well-organized, a fact that belies a movement's alleged intent and scope. These and related controversies reveal the extent of our knowledge (or lack thereof) about that period. With the changing political and social landscape after 1998, a number of academics and political activists conducted their respective investigations; and two significant conferences were organized

in recent years to consolidate new findings and ascertain the state of scholarship on the anticommunist purge.

One conference in February 2013, "New Perspectives on the 1965 Violence in Indonesia," took place at the Australian National University, and was attended by historians, political scientists, members of nongovernmental organizations, and survivors of the mass murder (Pohlman 2013, 3). New facets of the 1965 violence came to light and inevitably raised more questions. For instance, Yosef Djakababa (2013) discussed the events in Jakarta and the subsequent military propaganda after the coup, and indicated a "power struggle" between anticommunist political leaders and Sukarno's supporters. Djakababa's findings raised questions about the role each political group played in the communist purge. Some scholars explored how the killings were organized and systematically implemented in different parts of Indonesia, and how local issues and factors played a crucial role in the intensification of violence. Others discussed the present efforts of civil society to advance truth-seeking and reconciliation efforts, and the impediments they encounter. Four nongovernment organizations produced comprehensive reports about their activities, missions, accomplishments, and difficulties during their operations.[2]

The second conference, "National Symposium on the 1965 Tragedy," was held in 2016 in Jakarta. The fact that it was done in the country's capital signifies some progress in uncovering the hidden, or other facets of the purge. The presentations and discussions during the event revealed a spectrum of inconsistencies and uncertainties that are absent in written records (Heryanto 2016, par. 2). And while the conference was organized through a collaboration between military officers and their staunch critics, Heryanto (2016) observed a certain level of anxiety, reluctance, and even mistrust among and between the organizers, including members of human rights groups. Heryanto is, without a doubt, correct in pointing out that while it is certainly a good sign that more and more people are probing into the events of 1965, the process of coming to terms with the past remains a long and winding.[3]

These new studies and sources of information have opened the door for more scholars to systematically examine the period. They reveal the complex interplay and contradiction between remembering and forgetting. However, while other authors employed different lenses in their attempts to find the truth about the communist purge, this paper examines four films to look at the complex ways that Indonesian society reminisces, imagines, and represents one of the most difficult conjunctures of their history: the 1965 purge of Indonesia's Communist Party. By looking at these films, the paper charts the different facets of Indonesian historical memory, facets which are ultimately rooted in "the Battle for History" (van Klinken 2001) that emerged after Suharto's rule ended in 1998.

Indonesian Cinema as Historical Memory

To understand historical memory, it is instructive to refer to the work of Paul Riceour's (2004) *Memory, History, Forgetting,* where he explores the dual processes of remembering and forgetting, and how they determine knowledge and perceptions of historical events. For Riceour, history can never be fully independent from the realm of memory precisely because events and experiences are remembered and reconstructed. Alexander Nikiforov (2017, 49) explores the formation of historical memory, which is shaped by the personal experiences as well as by the state's propaganda narratives. Nikiforov cited Maurice Halbwachs (2005) who made a distinction between personal memory, also known as autobiographical memory, and social memory, which pertains to historical memory.

> (1)historical memory is a system of representations about the past that exists in the minds of most members of society; (2) this system of representations is influenced by two factors – the actual experience of participants and witnesses of past events and official history, memorials, media, literature, and so forth; (3) historical memory is selective – it stores only the events that most affected the lives of all the people; (4) events stored in historical memory are symbolic in nature, crystalizing many similar events and embodying the people's concepts of the normative and the heroic (51).

In the case of Indonesia, the historical event concerns the 1965 killings, which has been remembered in a variety of ways in post-1998 Indonesia, including cinema. As powerful cultural and technological media, films depict historical events and help us identify what a society thinks, feels, imagines, and hopes. As a visual medium, films not only present vivid memories of those who produce them but also conjure and engage the memories of the audience.

With this undergirding premise, this paper draws from Robert Rosenstone (2006) and Christina Klein's (2003) approaches towards film as texts, i.e. historical sources. Rosenstone (2006) argues that history and films have an intertwined relationship; films reflect the social and political concerns of their time. They are historical artifacts in that they mirror the ideological preconditions, biases, and judgment of a particular society. In the same way, Indonesian films reveal the historical and political concerns of various segments of Indonesian society. The first film, *G30s PKI* reflects Indonesia under Suharto's New Order (1965–1998) while the last three offer alternative views and new ways of remembering the 1965 massacre. The emergence of these three films was part of the "Battle for History" (van Klinken 2001) that occurred after Suharto's downfall in 1998 and is a significant indication of continuing efforts to recover new information about the past and identify distortions and hidden truths.

The Battle for History: Indonesian Historiography and Cinema in the Post-Suharto Era

To appreciate van Klinken's "Battle for History," one must understand that throughout Suharto's rule, the official version of Indonesia's national history (*sejarah nasional*) declared that all communists were atheists who posed a serious threat to the state. Years of ideological and psychological conditioning during the New Order instilled this idea in many Indonesians. For many who grew up during the New Order, the purge was necessary to ensure the stability of the nation; the killings and imprisonment of communists in 1965 were deemed imperative to defend

the Indonesian state. This justification was partly done through the educational system, since historical discourse and writing were under government purview. Nugroho Notosusanto, the historian par excellence of the New Order, spearheaded the publication and dissemination of state-approved historiography, which became the basis of school textbooks and the curriculum. This version of the national history is characterized by its anticommunist rhetoric and the glorification of the military as the nation's vanguards against its enemies both internal (communists) and external (European colonizers and Malaysia). Monuments, museums, and various iconographies were also erected to institutionalize the national history that the state promoted.

The breakdown of Suharto's rule and the emergence of democratic processes allowed Indonesians to confront what was forgotten or obliterated from their *sejarah nasional* and to challenge the official records of their past (Wiryomartono 2017; Budiawan 2000). Deviating from the top-down national narrative, accounts proliferated from the grassroots and peripheries of Indonesia. Gerry van Klinken identifies four historiographical streams: "orthodox nationalist," "national societal historiographies," "ethno-nationalist historiographies," and "local histories" (2001, 327). "Orthodox nationalist" accounts prevailed while accommodating a new clique of political elites in place of Suharto after the dissolution of the New Order. The influence and authority of the military remain, even as new narratives of history are produced and "national myths" are repeated only in different forms. This "authoritarian nationalist historiography" has perpetuated the dominant role of the military and the state's ideology, *Pancasila* (van Klinken 2001, 327), even as it has shifted away from New Order paradigm to accommodate democratic processes.

The second historiographical stream leans toward leftist historiography, which presents the efforts of "ordinary Indonesians" who call for "justice against an oppressive state" (van Klinken 2001, 333). An example of this historiography is the work of Pramoedya Ananta Toer, one of the most prolific leftist writers in Indonesia who challenged Suharto's authoritarianism and the military's extensive political influence, and offered

the perspectives of ordinary individuals, peripheral groups, and previously excluded or neglected social and political entities.

Third, regional and ethnonationalists problematized the crucial assumptions concerning the Indonesian nation. While the previous two historio-ideological vectors present a national narrative from different foci, regionalist ethnonationalist authors emphasized the relevance of ethnic groups as basic units for national identity. There are many subgroups within this stream, including those that focus on "ethnic identity within a pluralist nation-state to separatism" (van Klinken 2001, 336). Acehnese, Papuan, Maluku, and Riau voices, among others, gained nationwide attention, often corresponding to separatist or autonomous political movements. The fourth post-New Order historiographical trend pertains to micronarratives or local histories, which resemble ethnonationalist writings. The key difference, however, is that local histories do not necessarily oppose or deny the significance of the nation-state. What they offer is a focused, in-depth, and thick-description of local groups (van Klinken 2001, 341).

Some of these alternative histories are expounded in *Beginning to Remember: The Past in the Indonesian Present* (Zurbuchen 2005), a compilation of remarkable essays that feature personal narratives and collective memories. They employ varying sources, including photographs, Malay tales, autobiography, and poetry. They also interrogate the interesting dynamics between personal and collective memories and how both determine our understanding of the past. Some of the articles used art and culture as sites of historical memory. Tristuti Rachmadi (2005) writes a personal account of his experiences during the New Order. He was a widely known Javanese *dalang* or puppet master, who even had a chance to perform for Sukarno. In another essay, Andi Bakti (2005) explores the impacts of the South Sulawesi rebel group led by Qajar Muzakkar. He maintains that the members of the movement perceived their rebellion through the lens of mysticism—of legend, magical transformation, and reincarnation, among others. Katherine McGregor (2005) questions the role of Nugroho Notosusanto as the key intellectual and historical architect of the New Order. She probes the complexities of Nugroho, asserting that

while he pioneered the grand framework of Indonesian national history, he also produced personal works that, in one way or another, cast doubt on and countered the national myth.

Selecting the Four Films

The paper will examine four films that interrogate and reconstruct the different facets of the 1965 mass murder: Arifin Noer's *G30s PKI* (Indonesian Communist Party's September 30th Movement, 1984); Garin Nugroho's *Puisi Tak Terkuburkan* (A Poet, 2000); Riri Riza's *Gie* (2005); and Joshua Oppenheimer, Christie Cynn, and an anonymous Indonesian director's *An Act of Killing* (2012). Each film reflects the different streams of historiography that materialized in the post-Suharto era. More importantly, these films are among the most popular (if not the most popular) and controversial films that directly deal with the 1965 communist purge. Arifin Noer's film received seven nominations at the Indonesian Film Festival in 1985 and was screened yearly in Indonesian schools until the end of the New Order. *Puisi Tak Terkuburkan* was critically acclaimed at the Singapore International Film Festival in 2001 and was named the Best Asian Feature Film at the Locarno International Film Festival. Riri Riza is recognized as one of the most talented young Indonesian filmmakers. For *Gie,* he bagged the Best Film at the 2005 Indonesian Film Festival and was Indonesia's official entry to the 78th Academy Awards for Best Foreign Film. Finally, Oppenheimer's film also gathered worldwide attention and received various international awards as well as criticisms from local audiences.

Arifin Noer's 1984 film, deemed as the New Order's official narrative of the event, provides the standard against which all the other films about the purge are examined. Garin Nugroho's film, *A Poet*, produced immediately after the fall of Suharto in 1998, is one of the pioneering movies on the subject. It captures the initial sentiments and perplexities after Suharto's fall from power and provides a direct and immediate response to the state's version of the 1965 tragedy. Riri Riza's *Gie* offers a way to understand the

communist purge from the vantage point of a young Chinese-Indonesian activist. Finally, Oppenheimer's controversial film represents a key juncture in the (re)construction of Indonesian historical memory and features the views of the perpetrators of the killings themselves.

The story of changes and divergences in historical memory in the four films is not intended to be definitive or exhausive. Other films also deal with the same subject, such as Chris Hilton's *Shadow Play: Indonesia's Year of Living Dangerously* (2003); Rahung Nasution's *Buru, Tanah Air Beta* (Buru, My Homeland, 2016); and Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Look of Silence* (2014). What I present here then is just one possible mapping of the transformations or variations of Indonesian historical memory. The latter three films do reflect trends in Post-New Order historiography. But by no means do they correspond to a monolithic, definitive map or trajectory of shifting historical memories in Indonesia.

G30s PKI: Suharto's Truth Unveiled, Scrutinized and Arbitrated

The failed coup of 1965 led to several crucial events in Indonesia. The military began a nationwide crackdown on (suspected) members of the communist party, including critics of the Indonesian military. Afterwards, General Suharto rose to power, which resulted in Sukarno's downfall and marked the beginning of the New Order (McGregor 2007; Vatikiotis 1998; Wood 2005; Said 1998). During Suharto's regime, the power and influence of the Indonesian military increased exponentially. They took command of key departments in finance, education, and the media. They defended their actions during the September 30 Movement's coup attempt and the eventual execution of (suspected) PKI members and sympathizers.

In justifying the military's actions, the Suharto regime employed various propaganda tools (Henry 2014; Pohlman 2014), including the educational system and textbook production. One such textbook described the events of 1965 as follows: "After evaluating the situation at that time, the Commander of KOSTRAD [Suharto] quickly reached the conclusion that: the kidnapping and murders directed against the high officers of the

Army constituted part of an effort to seize the power of the government" (quoted in Wood 2005, 133). Here, it is evident that the Suharto regime used the abduction of the military officials as evidence of a movement bent on toppling the government. It is also clear that the text glorifies Suharto as the only person who realized and understood the motives behind the PKI's alleged actions.

Apart from textbooks, the Indonesian military (*Tentara Nasional Indonesia*, TNI, or the Indonesian National Armed Forces) sponsored Arifin Noer's film, *G30s PKI,* which came out in 1984. It proved to be one of the most potent propaganda tools. For more than a decade, television stations and schools were required to run this film to celebrate the military's triumph over the coup and to commemorate the death of the seven military officials. It was based on the official account of the communist purge during the New Order, which was primarily written by Nugroho Notosusanto, the New Order's most influential author of *sejarah nasional.* The film relies mostly on TNI accounts and includes authentic footage, voice recordings, and photographs.

G30s PKI opens with a shot of the *Pancasila Sakti* (Sacred Pancasila) Monument in Lubang Buaya.[4] Erected by Suharto in 1981, the monument commemorates the death of the military officials during the failed coup. Scenes depict ferocity and violence, magnify the heroism of the seven army generals killed in the coup, and establish Suharto's role in averting the coup. Slow, regular drum beats accompany the images and scenes, and help generate an atmosphere of discomfort, anxiety, and fear. The film is meant to convey nationalistic sentiments, to show how the nation was threatened, and to justify the killings as a necessary response.

More importantly, *G30s PKI* demonizes the PKI, and features a sequence narrating the events leading to the arrest of its members, whose terror and brutality pervade the film. The audience sees how homes were gruesomely attacked, and how dead bodies were dragged and haphazardly buried in shallow pits. PKI members are also shown killing Indonesian Muslims in prayer. These scenes of bloody fights, torture, and frames

highlighting darkness culminate in the horrifying depictions of the killings of the generals.

In explaining how violence was deeply attached to the official record of the communist purge, Michael Wood (2005, 29) maintains that the film depicted the coup as a direct threat to Indonesia's political, social, and national security. In this way, *G30s PKI* affirms the government line. Arifin Noer's film justified the killings and crimes against numerous individuals (communist or not; innocent or otherwise), which were deemed necessary to protect Indonesia.

The regular screening of the film helped engineer the historical memory of an entire generation of Indonesians, particularly young students who were obliged to watch it every year. The process created a lucid image of Suharto's regime vis-à-vis the communists, who were portrayed as an evil threat to the *Pancasila*, the national ideology. Indonesians were thus deprived of alternative accounts of the events. And they had very little knowledge of how suspected communists were treated and executed. With the fall of Suharto, however, their understanding of the purge began to be challenged.

Garin Nugroho's *Puisi Tak Terkuburkan* (A Poet): Reminiscing Indonesia's Past behind Prison Bars

One of the most acclaimed Indonesian films in the post-Suharto period is Garin Nugroho's *A Poet*, considered as a forerunner among Indonesian films that "reinterpret the wounds of history" (Nugroho 2000). Known internationally, it bagged the Silver Leopard Video Award at the Locarno International Film Festival in 2000 and the Best Film Award at the 2001 Singapore International Film Festival. Contrary to the official discourse of the Suharto era which highlighted military valor and the necessity of eliminating communists, Garin Nugroho's film shifts the perspective and focuses on the vantage point of those imprisoned and suspected of communism. The film advances a facet of historical memory that was previously deemed as either too dark or too sinister.

A Poet concentrates on Ibrahim Kadir, a *didong* (a traditional Islamic performance incorporating dance, singing, and poetry) practitioner from Takengon in Sumatra. He is accused of being a member of the PKI and jailed for almost one month without being informed of the charges against him. In a captivating opening scene, Kadir leads a *didong* group and speaks how he himself is unsure about his own future, having witnessed the grief of those who are mere hours away from death. Kadir dramatically recalls how he saw the bodies that were still twitching, corpses piling up, and heads being cut off.

The film also foregrounds the other prisoners, many of whom were later killed. They shared their worst nightmares, hidden dreams, and happy memories outside the prison as they fearfully waited for their names to be called—and when their names are announced, they never return. In one scene, a police hits one of the prisoners at the background while the camera focuses on the reaction of one man who has his back turned. In one of the earlier scenes, the camera slowly pans to each of the prisoners as they sleep uncomfortably, coughing and looking helpless and distraught.

Unlike *G30s PKI, A Poet* rejects the representation, if not aesthetics, of violence, eschewing the direct portrayal of torture, suffering, and murder. Kadir narrates his story, with only a plain black background behind him, a technique that compels the audience to focus on him and his words. The whole film was shot inside the dark and compact space of two prison cells and the guard's foyer, the cramped setting giving a sense of helplessness and the lack of freedom. Nugroho's cinematography and production design reject a blatant portrayal of cruelty, focusing instead on its effects: pain, suffering, and death. The refusal to blatantly depict violence dovetails with the film's ideological thrust: present the (suspected) communists as victims, not enemies of the state; provide an alternative perspective to the New Order's official depiction of the communists; and portray them simply as human beings shoved into brutal and harsh conditions, stripped of their rights and freedoms like many innocent Indonesians. The film shows how the communist purge also affected the lives of their families—their parents, their children, and their spouses. In one scene, a father laments his

separation from his family. He weeps while remembering his child and his wife, who incidentally are on the other side of the prison cell. All the man can do was to peek through a small hole and look at his wife while she feeds her baby. He cries, "my beloved child, you are the flame in my heart, I imagine your future, your fate, as I calm my thoughts."

It is also significant that the film is set in Aceh and has many Acehnese characters, like Ibrahim Kadir, to offer a regional perspective on 1965. The choice of Aceh serves a political purpose and hews to the film's aesthetic: many in the audience would have imbibed anticommunist ideology, and the film, by presenting the victims as victims, asks viewers to transcend their animosity towards alleged radicals and separatists and sympathize with the Acehnese as human beings. To help enhance this sympathy, the film presents the Acehnese as fellow Indonesians, deploying local chants and percussion instruments that create an Indonesian "feel" to the film, as well as a sense of familiarity, community, and brotherhood between the victims and the audience.

In this respect, *A Poet* does not focus on the ideological clash of nationalism versus communism but simply highlights how violence and militarism kill individuals and destroy families, no more no less. In doing so, the film undercuts the ideological basis of the New Order, which had been premised on a pro-Indonesia-vs-communist axis. Furthermore, as a critical reading of Indonesia's history and politics that highlights the story of the marginalized (Kurniawan 2015), *A Poet* is a critique of Indonesian politics and its roots in violence. The fall of the Berlin Wall, as well as the political stirrings in former authoritarian regimes, had inspired Nugroho to examine political developments within Indonesia. According to him, like a "domino effect," countries with diverse cultures and societies and a long history of trauma under dictatorial rule would find themselves dealing with their past and traumas in order to establish reconciliation. In Indonesia, this is particularly complex as he maintains that the country's contemporary social ills (economic inequality, religious divisions, and ethnic violence, among others) are rooted in the violence of 1965 and onwards (Nugroho 2000).

Riri Riza's *Gie*: The Stories Beyond Jakarta

Providing another vantage point of the September 30th Movement is Riri Riza's *Gie.* First screened in 2005, the film is based on the life story of Soe-Hok Gie, who witnessed the dramatic turn of events against the PKI, and whose childhood best friend, a member thereof, was killed during anticommunist operations. Gie was born in 1942 in Jakarta and died in 1969, at a very young age of 26. Gie was part of the Chinese-Indonesian minority, and his story focuses on their struggles, anxieties, and agencies during the purge and the years thereafter. Using Gie's vast records and journals, *Gie* reconstructs his views of Indonesian politics and society. Like Garin Nugroho's film, *Gie* veers away from the macronational narrative and puts forward instead an account of an individual. In this way, *Gie* is a variant of an ethnonationalist historiography, which reveals a less-known, if not long-hidden (records wise) dimension in Indonesia's national history.

After the collapse of the New Order, various authors explored the plight of the Chinese in the country's history. For instance, Jess Melvin (2013) wrote about anti-Chinese violence in Aceh from 1965 to 1966. Although the majority of the victims of the 1965 tragedy were, in fact, non-Chinese Indonesians (Cribb and Coppel 2009, 448), Melvin argues that the Chinese themselves were also targeted, as does Charles Coppel (1983) in an earlier study. Coppel wrote that biases against the Chinese in Aceh eventually led to a massive dislocation and purging that affected tens of thousands.

Others, however, contest the extent or even the occurrence of the attack against the Chinese. In another article, Cribb and Coppel (2009) assert that it is actually an exaggeration to claim that the Chinese were targeted, simply because of the huge gap between the number of victims from the Chinese and the non-Chinese communities. Leo Suryadinata (1976) also argues that the New Order's broad policy towards the Chinese was, in fact, one of assimilation. Discussing how Indonesian political leaders understood the economic power of the Chinese, Suryadinata (1976) shows that the Indonesian government sought to utilize Chinese capital and skills while assimilating the Chinese minority. These assimilation policies ranged

from changing Chinese names to opening up legal channels for naturalization (Suryadinata 1976, 787). The New Order also prohibited them from establishing their own organizations and associations; closed down their schools; and urged them to adopt non-Chinese-sounding names (Suryadinata 2008). All done under the pretext of unifying the Indonesian nation under the banner of *Pancasila*.

Gie is thus significant because it offers a perspective from those which the New Order's *sejarah nasional* considers as threats to the state's ideology of *Pancasila* (Anggraeni 2013): the Chinese community. By showing Gie's experiences, *Gie* can be read as a critique of the assimilationist policy of the Suharto regime vis-à-vis the ethnic Chinese community; the film foregrounds their neglected voices by letting one of their own—Gie—speak. In this respect, the film attempts to recognize, if not reintegrate, a different facet of Chinese-Indonesian society into the larger narrative of the Indonesian nation. In many ways, the film runs parallel to post-1998 historiography on the Chinese in Indonesia (Suryadinata 2004; Hoon 2006; Setijadi-Dunn and Barker 2010; Turner and Allen 2007), which sought to recognize and nuance their role and representation in Indonesian history.

Another way Gie critiques Chinese-Indonesian assimilation is evident in how Gie himself criticized the Chinese-Indonesians who had assimilated into the New Order. The friends with whom Gie spends much time discussing the problems of Indonesia also moved on with their own lives. Gie sees how student activists like him eventually become a part of the New Order bureaucracy. He realizes how they themselves forgot about their ideals and grew corrupt as well.

The assimiliation of Chinese-Indonesians is also belied by Gie's disaffection with the New Order. Gie becomes disgruntled when Suharto's government turns out to be just another dictatorial regime. He speaks fervently against its corruption and oppression. He attends various student rallies and political debates and discussions, and is critical of student leaders who acted for their own personal gain rather than the good of the students. Gie is a vigorous and passionate character who fearlessly points out mistakes and

fights for his rights. In one scene, he antagonizes his teacher and argues that he deserves a better grade, saying that the teacher is merely favoring another student because they are related. The scene invokes a clear opposition to specific practices in Indonesian society, such as nepotism.

As a student who witnessed the clash of ideologies between communism and nationalism, Gie maintains his distance from both. This ideological distance can be interpreted as a sign of the Chinese-Indonesian's assimilation. Commenting on Han, Gie's anticommunist friend, Kusno (2012, 140–41) writes that "Han indicates the problem of bring[ing] the Chinese and the political together. Gie on the other hand is able to separate the two worlds. In portraying social change through the contrast of Gie and Han, Riza represents the image of an ideal youth who poses as a 'universal' Indonesian subject who carries no ethnic and regional identities."

However, Kusno's 'universal subject' need not necessarily imply the erasure of the Chinese-Indonesian experience, especially in light of much scholarship on the topic after 1998. Universality and particularity need not be complete opposites locked in a zero-sum game. One can support the Indonesian nation without supporting the New Order or the communists. That Gie himself can criticize the New Order dismantles the binary between state nationalism and anticommunism. More importantly, the film interrogates the link between ethnicity and nationalism, showing that nationalism incudes, and can be admirably practiced by, the Chinese community in Indonesia. As Riri Riza notes, the film aims to "arouse many people with the story of a young man that is continuously in search of a way to remain honest and consistently reject any effort to draw or persuade him to enter a particular circle. He believes in truth and humanity that must be defended" (quoted in Kusno 2012, 135–36).

For all his criticisms against the New Order, Gie, however, was not a member of the Indonesian communist party. Indeed, it is not surprising then that he was not targeted and incarcetrated by the Indonesian military. But even if Gie was not a PKI member, he witnessed and experienced the

impact of the communist purge. And *Gie* aims to rehabilitate the image of the victims of 1965. Han, Gie's childhood friend who turned out to be a member of PKI, is arrested and eventually killed. Before Han's death, Gie discusses the objectives of the PKI with him. Han says he joined the organization simply because he wanted a better life for himself and the poorer members of Indonesian society. This reveals another face of the PKI: some of the members were merely ordinary people whose simple ambition was to build a better life, not to spread violence across the country. Needless to say, this portrayal runs counter to the demonization by the New Order.

By showing Han's and Gie's trajectories, the film presents the diversity of the Chinese-Indonesian's relationship to nationalist ideology as well as the ugly truths and the sacrifices and losses along the way.[5] These ambivalences entail in turn a nuancing of historical memory of the 1965 massacre and the Suharto regime: that it was not simply about communists versus the Indonesian military. It is also about the complexity of the Indonesian nation and the different roles of the Chinese-Indonesians therein, some of whom resisted by joining the communist party; others assimilated, and still others, like Gie, maintained their distance from both the PKI and the New Order. Indeed, the Chinese community in Indonesia is a political diverse group (Suryadinata 2008, 2–3) divided along ideological, cultural and economic lines.

Oppenheimer's *An Act of Killing*: Screening the Perpetuators

In the 2012 film, *An Act of Killing*, Joshua Oppenheimer and two codirectors portray the communist purge of 1965 by featuring the recollections of the perpetrators themselves. This is a direct riposte to those who deny the killings, including state leaders. "Not one of the five Presidents who has ruled since Suharto's fall in 1998 has made dealing with the past a priority" (Pohlman 2016, 60). Veering away from the focus of the three other films in this study, *An Act of Killing* concentrates on the *premans*, the members of the gangs hired by the Indonesian military to

help them exterminate communists in the country. At the center of the narrative is Anwar Congo—an old man recruited to identify and kill (suspected) communists in North Sumatra. He and his gang also extorted money from many Chinese who wanted to be spared from the genocide. Anwar is said to have killed around 1,000 individuals. In the film, Anwar vividly recounts his activities during the purge—for example, how they used various means of torture, from beatings to strangulation using wires. The cavalier way he demonstrates the killings contrasts with the brutality of their content. Anwar wears brightly colored clothes; rides a funky, yellow, jeep-type car; exudes a good-natured smile; and appears to be charming and affable (a stark contrast to his revelations concerning his actions during the purge). By laughing and lightly recalling the events, Anwar trivializes the communist purge, though it can be argued that this casualness highlights even further his cruelty and the brutality of the regime he had participated in.

An Act of Killing depicts the perpetuators in a spectrum of images. There is the repentant or penitent killer, Anwar's friend, who, years after the purge, seems to feel remorse for his actions. In one scene, Anwar's friend is in a seemingly lugubrious state and says that the Chinese were not the cruel ones; the killers were. The second image of the perpetrator is the proud and unabashed one, exemplified by Anwar himself. Throughout the film, Anwar repeatedly brags about his skills and the killings he committed. In one scene, the Islamic call to prayer sounds from the nearby *masjid* (mosque). Anwar then blurts out that the *muezzin* (the one announcing the prayer) was a communist and that if he had been assigned to him during the purge, he, Anwar would have killed him. Lacking remorse, he believes his actions were justified, frequently asserting that what they did was to defend Pancasila and the Indonesian nation.

Interestingly, the third image is that of the perpetrator who pretends to have no idea or to have forgottten about the atrocities. This is seen in the journalist who works in the building where Anwar and his friends had executed people at night. The journalist claims that he had no idea that such things were happening just above his office. Anwar counters that he

is lying because everyone knows—it is an open secret, he says. The fourth and final representation of the killers is that of the schizophrenic—the image of the killer who has a constantly shifting attitude towards the purge. He is at times remorseful and at other times proud of his actions. Anwar Congo also captures this fourth representation. He is depicted as a proud preman and killer, but towards the end, when he returns to the rooftop where he killed many people, he appears nauseous—hinting at the possibility that he, too, eventually feels rueful after all.

These portrayals embody various responses to the events of 1965—ignorance, complicity, and denial—many of which are echoed by orthodox nationalist proponents, who remain adamant and proud of the policies implemented by the Suharto government (Pohlman 2016). The current Indonesian government recognized the crimes committed yet has refused to provide an official public apology (Kwok 2016; Lala 2015).

Though not exactly a film that came out of local Indonesian efforts (although Oppenheimer collaborated with an unnamed Indonesian film director), *An Act of Killing* is part of the growing trend in Indonesian historiography that focuses on the unique and individual stories of the non-elite (Anggraeni 2013; Budiman 1999; Zurbuchen 2005). Like most local histories, the film presents the everyday life of the common people during the tragedy. Like Anwar, they were not involved in policy making or in grand strategic military planning. They were mostly concerned with their means of income (whether or not they will be able to sell movie tickets). In this way, the film challenges the Suharto government's nationalist justification for anticommunism, and by extension the killings, in the name of *Pancasila*.

The film also shows the present-day activities of the members of *Pemuda Pancasila* (Pancasila Youth), a paramilitary organization formed in 1959 that supported Suharto's New Order, served as death squads during the 1965 tragedy, and extorted money from Indonesian Chinese. In one scene, the local members of Pemuda Pancasila are organizing an event and soliciting money from shop owners, who are mostly Indonesian Chinese. One Chinese-Indonesian businessman surrenders an envelope

of money to a Pemuda member, who demands more. That the Pemuda Pancasila still operates indicates that Indonesian society has not come to terms with its traumatic past. Indeed, those who committed grave crimes were never punished for their actions, and they gained positions of influence and control in Indonesian society. The systematic oppression continues without the threat of communism; and the same ideology, Pancasila, which motivated and shaped the purge, remains a crucial rallying point.

An Act of Killing brought the 1965 massacre out in the open, with the perpetrators themselves attesting to cases of torture and murder. It is generally admirable to expose something hidden in the name of transparency and accountability (the complex motivations behind Anwar's confessions are beyond the scope of this paper). One could argue that this exposure is an attempt to help bring the perpetrators to justice, as many political activists and human rights advocates have done, seeking official state acknowledgement of the crimes committed and the victims of the mass murder and torture. But that very exposé also betrays a certain powerlessness to confront the trauma of 1965. That the perpetrators can speak and laugh so freely in front of the camera about their crimes in 1965 without fear of retribution, attests to a culture of impunity that leaves the perpetrators untouched. It is not a surprise that Mette Bjerregaard observed that those who watched the film felt angry, frustrated, and betrayed by the political elite (2014). One viewer, Bjerregaard writes, was so enraged that the filmmakers were not more critical of the killers and that the film, in fact, celebrates the killings and does not in any way admonish what happened. Indeed, the film allows Indonesians to confront the truth of their past, but it also indicates, amidst perpetrators that speak and laugh freely, their inability to face that very truth, i.e., a failure to indict and bring to justice the perpetrators. One can only hope that the feelings of anger, frustration, and betrayal can later lead to actual justice.

Cinema and the Construction of Historical Memory in Indonesia

Despite ongoing attempts to discuss the 1965 massacre, it remains clear the Indonesian national government continues to be reluctant in confronting the issue. Last April 2016, in an unprecedented event, however, the government did support and organize the symposium that explored the historical narratives about the 1965 tragedy. Around 200 people from the public sector, civil society, academe, and human rights organizations attended the event (Kwok 2016). One may downplay the significance of the event, but discussing 30 September 1965 and its aftermath is a modest step, much more so than the blanket erasure of nonofficial events.

In this paper, I have demonstrated how cinema has become a part of the "Battle for History" (van Klinken 2001) in post-1998 Indonesia and offers different means of interpreting and remembering the historical trauma—the 1965 killings—of modern Indonesian history. Arifin Noer's film was the propaganda par excellence of Suharto and the New Order, which demonized the PKI and justified their deaths as a way to defend the Indonesian nation. After Suharto's downfall in 1998, however, there emerged a "Battle for History" whereby alternative, more nuanced interpretations of the past emerged, a process that is reflected in the three post-1998 films analyzed here. Garin Nugroho's *A Poet* highlighted the humanity of those suspected to be communists and gave it a localized feel by embedding Aceh within the large national narrative and criticizing the violent roots of the New Order. Riri Riza's *Gie* presents a microperspective, centering on the story of one individual whose ethnicity was deemed peripheral to sejara nasional, but whose narrative challenges such history by nuancing the role of Chinese-Indonesians therein. Finally, Oppenheimer's film, *An Act of Killing*, exposes the killings by featuring the perpetrators themselves, but reveals a powerlessness in bringing them to justice.

Each film helps us understand the historical trauma that has scarred the Indonesian nation since 1965, but the process of reconciliation and justice remains long and winding. As long as the state continues to ignore

the calls for truth-seeking and real dialogue, there will be no effective way to bring justice to the victims. The "Battle for History" will persist, and films will remain as platforms for revealing new narratives and new memories recovered from the Indonesian past.

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Notes

1 Amidst controversies surrounding the 50th anniversary of the 1965 anticommunist purge, Indonesian President Joko Widodo refused to issue a public apology to the victims of the massacre and their relatives. In an interview cited by Andy Lala of *VOA News*, Joko remarked, "If you want to ask a question regarding the issue (public apology), ask those who spread the issue. Don't ask me." It is clear that while there is an increasing demand from civil society for the government to acknowledge and confront the human rights abuses in 1965, the state has remained reluctant to officially address the issue.

2 The conference entitled "New Perspectives on the 1965 Violence in Indonesia" was held at the Australian National University in Canberra on 11–13 February 2013. It was well attended by Indonesia specialists and researchers, members of activist and civil society groups, as well as some locals who witnessed the turbulent period in the country's history. One of the highlights of the conference was the discussion of the Indonesian National Commission on Human Rights (2012) that categorically acknowledged the crimes committed in 1965 including killings, rape, and torture, among others.

3 In an unprecedented event, the government supported and organized the symposium entitled "National Symposium: Dissecting the 1965 Tragedy, Historical Approach." Held at the Aryaduta Hotel on 18–19 April 2016, the event was attended by around 200 people from the public, civil society, academe, and human rights organizations (Kwok 2016). The conference was also seen as a first crucial step towards reconciliation and justice.

4 The *Pancasila Sakti Monumen* is a gray slab adorned by a bronze Garuda (mythical bird symbolizing power). The monument is a tourist destination.

[5] In the 1960s, various authors studied the unique role of the ethnic Chinese community in Indonesia. Ruth McVey, Benedict Anderson, and George Kahin pioneered early studies on the economic, political, and socio-cultural role of the Chinese in the newly independent Indonesia. They were subsequently followed by Liu Hong, Leo Suryadinata, Dewi Anggrareni, Tom Hoogervorst, and Charles Coppel.

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