
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Victim Narrative of the 1965-1966 Massacre in Indonesia as A Biopicture

Anastasia Jessica Adinda S.

Ph.D. Student at Doctoral School of Philosophy, University of Szeged, Hungary

Corresponding Author: Anastasia Jessica Adinda S., **E-mail:** anastasiajessica89@gmail.com

| ABSTRACT

This paper examines the victim narrative of the 1965-1966 massacre in Indonesia from the perspective of W.J.T. Mitchell's Biopicture. Biopicture considers an image as if it is a living thing that has the capacity to multiply, transform, and even resurrect. During the New Order era, the victim narrative of the 1965-1966 massacre was silenced by the state. Under the Soeharto presidency, there was no possibility to deliver and discuss the victim narrative of the massacre. Even in the post-reformation era, the victim narrative of the 1965-1966 massacre is often banned by the state. The hypothesis of this research is the victim narrative of the 1965-1966 massacre is a biopicture that can emerge, be born, or resurrect in various media despite being under pressure from government censors.

| KEYWORDS

Biopicture, the 1965-1966 massacre, Indonesia

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

For more than 32 years, the Indonesian state conceals the fact about The 1965-1966 Massacre. The 1965-1966 Massacre in Indonesia is one of the worst massacres in the twentieth century. More than five hundred thousand people were massacred by the army and army-affiliated militias. (Roosa, 2006, 4). The victim narrative of the 1965-1966 massacre was silenced by the authorities even until the post-reformation era (1998) or after the resignation of Soeharto from the presidency. Despite the oppression by the state, the victim narrative of the massacre begins to emerge in many artistic expressions, from literature, painting, theater, film, and video, to music.

This essay examines the victim narrative of the 1965-1966 massacre in Indonesia in the light of W.J.T. Mitchell's Biopicture. W.J.T. Mitchell is a Professor of English Language & Literature and Art History at The University of Chicago. Biopicture highlights the living characters of images in which they can multiply and transform into other media. (Mitchell, 2015, 34). Biopicture is highly related to W.J.T. Mitchell's distinction between image and picture. 'Picture' is material support or physical medium of images, such as paint, stone, metal, and wood, while 'image' is an event or happening rather than an object, which always appears in material support. (Mitchell, 2015, 30). We can easily destroy a picture, but not an image, like in iconoclasm, based on religious or political reasons. However, the images can reappear as a subject matter in other verbal narratives or visual media. (Mitchell, 2015, 32). For example, in the biblical story of the Golden Calf, in which the golden calf idol (the picture) should be destroyed, but then the golden calf's image remains alive and transformed into other media, such as verbal narrative and painting.

The hypothesis of this research is, as a biopicture, the victim narrative of the 1965-1966 massacre can emerge, be born, or resurrect in various media, despite the state's banning of them.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Master and Victim Narrative of the 1965-1966 Massacre in Indonesia

In concealing the fact of the 1965-1966 massacre, the Indonesian state uses many cultural products, like monuments, film, and literature, as means of indoctrination. For example, they use the army-controlled media (Angkatan Bersendjata and Berita Yudha), the book entitled *Tragedi Nasional Percobaan Kup G30S/PKI di Indonesia* (The National Tragedy of the G30S / PKI Attempted Coup in Indonesia), and the film *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* (The Betrayal/ Treachery of Communist's September 30 Movement). (Heryanto, 2014, 78).

Suharto's regime calls themselves New Order, while Sukarno's regime was the Old Order. After the New Order ruler, Indonesia re-oriented itself rather as a pro-western world, while millions of survivors and their relatives lost their civil rights. The state never organized any reconciliation or officially apologized to the victims, even after Suharto fell in 1998. In contemporary post-authoritarian Indonesia, after 1998, New Order's perspectives about left organizations and mass violence remain dominant. Left-wing organizations were depicted as a cruel and bloodthirsty community. Until the present day, the 1965-1966 issues are still not clear, and the state has not acknowledged that they are responsible for the 1965-1966 massacres. (Eickhoff, et.al, 2017, 449).

In the formal education field, the school system becomes a tool of indoctrination. (Grace Leksana, 2009, 176). In the New Order era, every student was obliged to watch the film "The Treachery of September 30th Movement," which indoctrinates audiences about the cruelty of the communist party that killed several generals. History lessons in school also repeatedly emphasize that PKI/Indonesian Communist Party is a villain because they are a bloodthirsty party, thereby deserve to be suppressed by Indonesians. (Leksana, 2009, 176). After Suharto's resignation as president in May 1998 –The Reformation era- there were greater possibilities to discuss the 1965-1966 violence. Facts about the numbers of victims and the suffering of victims and their relatives begin to be revealed. (Leksana, 2009, 176). However, twenty years after the reformation, the high school books returned to write that the Communist Party was responsible for the October 1st, 1965 incident. There are some new inventions about the 1965-1966 massacres, but the school system's curriculum on history has not significantly changed. (Leksana, 2009, 177). Truth and Reconciliation Commission about the 1965-1966 mass violence was formed two years after Suharto's resignation, but in their working process, they only had little support because the majority of Indonesians were still not well-informed about the violence, except for the indoctrination of New Order Regime. Most people have no adequate knowledge about this massacre from the victim's point of view. (Leksana, 2009, 176).

In reaction to this situation, some artists and survivors manifest their new interpretations of the 1965-1966 massacres in artworks. (Bielecki, 2018, 232). The dominance of master narrative history makes this issue becomes an unresolved problem. The scarcity of the history of 1965-1966 from the victim's point of view can preserve the violent culture. (Cribb, 2002, 554-556). In this case, art can help the victims to break their silence and articulate their voices (Ikhwan, 2019, 10).

Many artists and survivors delivered the victim narrative in many media, including text, graphics, animations, pictures, painting, videos, film, music, and theatre. These artistic works play a role as a social memory about the 1965-1966 tragedy that helps the next generation to build a more comprehensive portrait of the 1965-1966 massacres and pursue justice for the victims.

After the collapse of the New Order regime (1998), several films and other artworks were created by some Indonesian younger generations. They enjoy the power of new media technology and greater freedom of speech, although only a few of them appeared to have an interest in the history of violence. (Heryanto, 2014, 76).

2.2. W.J.T. Mitchell's Biopicture

One of Mitchell's key concepts is Biopicture. Biopicture considers pictures and images as living things. (Mitchell, 2015, 34). Pictures and images can transform, multiply, become extinct, and even resurrect. Images also consist of species and specimens, like biology classification. People tend to see the image as "a type or typical representation rather than as a representation of an individual". For example, smiley face stickers are species, and a particular face is a specimen. We can easily destroy specimens (pictures) but not species (image). (Mitchell, 2015, 33-34).

People can also clone images, for example, in the cloning of living things. (Mitchell, 2005, 12-13). Like Dolly, the sheep, the clone images are not merely a mechanical copy but a biological simulacrum of a living organism. Dolly was a living organism in the literary sense. It has a likeness to its parents. (Mitchell, 2005, 14-15). Dolly, the sheep, is an example of "offending images". Some religious conservatives consider cloning (that is represented by Dolly, the sheep) as an unnatural life form that should be destructed. They believe that life is a 'gift' from God, not created by a human being. Only God can make images because only God possesses the secret of life." (Mitchell, 2005, 15). The possibility of human cloning has re-awakened traditional taboos on image-making, especially on the creation of human life. (Mitchell, 2015, 20). Artificial life-making, like in cloning, the story of Frankenstein, and Cyborg in science fiction, is a violation of the natural law; therefore, they become a target to offend. (Mitchell, 2005, 16).

Iconoclasm is not merely the destruction of images but a "creative destruction". It destroys images and emerges another image. Take The Golden Calf from Old Testament as an example. The second commandment prohibits the making of graven images and idolatry. When Moses asked Aaron about the Golden Calf, Aaron answered that he threw the Israelites' gold jewelry into the fire, and then the calf came out. (Mitchell, 2005, 16). The idol is like a self-created automaton. Although image-making is prohibited by God, the image of the Golden Calf remains reappears as an object in a verbal narrative and also in paintings (for instance, Nicolas Poussin, *The Adoration of the Golden Calf*). (Mitchell, 2005, 31-32).

As living things, images can even resurrect. The old image material is not a fossil but "the reanimation of extinct life". (Mitchell, 2005, 53). For example, the dinosaurs in Steven Spielberg's film emerge as uncanny images from the preservation of dinosaurs' blood and DNA in the bodies of mosquitoes. (Mitchell, 2005, 54). Mitchell calls the dinosaurs' making "Biocybernetic reproduction". Biocybernetic reproduction combines biological engineering and information science to produce an organism. Mitchell has replaced Walter Benjamin's "mechanical reproduction" because, for Mitchell, nowadays, image reproduction is no longer mechanical but biological. The clone, cyborg, and learning machine, an unpredictable and adaptable machines in biocybernetic reproduction, have replaced the figure of a robot, photograph, and film in mechanical reproduction. (Mitchell, 2005,172).

3. Methodology

This study is interdisciplinary research involving philosophy, history, and visual culture, especially to see the capability of the victim narrative of the 1965-1966 massacre to being a biopicture. The method of this research is phenomenology. Phenomenology is not a single unified body. This method ranges from Husserl's 'transcendental phenomenology', Heidegger's 'hermeneutical phenomenology', to Merleau-Ponty's world of 'inalienable presence'. (Howell, 2013, 30-31). Generally, phenomenology deals with 'things seemed for consciousness'. The departing point is the naive mind that comprehends reality, both objects in the external world and the mind itself. In phenomenology, comprehension need 'a complimentary objective stance', in which objective truth lies in mutuality of recognition between subject and object. Object defines the self, and self responds to the definition of self by others. (Howell, 2013, 55). In my research, I depart from the refraction of the victim narrative of the 1965-1966 massacre as a biopicture that appeared to my consciousness. The understanding of this narrative is a result of mutuality recognition between the object and the researcher. To gain the objective truth of the victim narrative, I involve the historical examination of the 1965-1966 massacre in Indonesia. Lastly, in the analysis, I explore the way the victim narrative of the massacre can be a biopicture.

4. Results and Discussion

Mitchell's Biopicture sees images as living things. (Mitchell, 2015, 34). Image can transform or reappear in other media. As biopicture, the representation of mass violence is often hidden, concealed, and considered taboo by people or the authorities, yet it can always reappear in other media.

After World War II, the representation of genocide, like the Holocaust, was still taboo. The initial debate on the appropriate or inappropriate representation of genocide focused on the "unrepresentability" of the Holocaust. (Veld, 2019, 1-2). Many people believe that telling the story of the Holocaust is impossible and immoral. (Reinmer, 2012,1). Theodor Adorno (1946) wrote, "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric". However, several decades later, Adorno realized and wrote, "A perennial suffering has just as much right to find expression as a victim of torture has to scream. For this reason, it may have been wrong to write that after Auschwitz, poetry could no longer be written". Elie Wiesel, a survivor who has written novels, plays, and essays on the Holocaust, said, "the paradox is we cannot tell the story (of Holocaust), and yet it must be told." (Reinmer, 2012,1).

Like the Holocaust, people encounter some obstacles, such as 'unrepresentability' and immorality, to represent the 1965-1966 massacre in Indonesia. The most obvious obstacle was the government's ban on text and images about the 1965-1966 massacre in Indonesia, except for the official version.

The master narrative of official history created a myth of Gerwani's singing, dancing, and castrating of the Army generals. (Wieringa and Katjasungkana, 2019, 125). Soon after the burial of generals, an Army group led by Soeharto circulated a story via the army-controlled press and radio that a sexual orgy had taken place the night before the general's killing. (Wieringa and Katjasungkana, 2019, 102). All of this propaganda in the G30/PKI film, national radio, and local newspapers aims to make people hate the communists. (Wieringa and Katjasungkana, 2019, 129-130).

However, the victim narrative affirms that the Indonesian Women Movements members are victims of the 1965-1966 massacre. They experienced sexual violence, became prisoners and exiles without trial, and even died. The post-mortem record also shows that there were no sexual violence and eye-gouging in the army generals' bodies. The autopsy report was only known outside of Indonesia when Benedict Anderson accessed them and published it in 1987. (Wieringa, 2002, 303).

The victim narratives then circulate in many artistic expressions, from literature, graphics, and videos, to music. Some films offer a new perspective on the 1965-1966 massacres, such as *Jembatan Bacem/ Bacem Bridge* (2013, Yayasan Wiludiharta/ELSAM), *The Act of Killing* (2012, Joshua Oppenheimer), *The Look of Silence* (2014, Joshua Oppenheimer), *Api Kartini/ Kartini's Fire* (2012, Kotak Hitam Forum), *Menyemai Terang Dalam Kelam/Sowing Light within the Darkness* (2006, LKK/Lembaga Kreatifitas Kemanusiaan/Humanitarian Creativity Institute), *Potret Plantungan/The Portrait of Plantungan* (2011, LKK), *Seni ditating Jaman/Art that Will Not Die* (2008, LKK), and *Surat dari Praha/ A Letter from Prague* (2016, Angga Dwimas Sasongko). These films are accessible in new digital media, like video sharing sites Youtube or Vimeo and the community blog. Recent research on memory and media studies investigates how internet users use internet media to archive, witness, share and remember events. Video sharing sites have become a new space for contesting official and victim's narratives of the 1965-1966 massacres in Indonesia. (Ikhwan et al., 2019, 4).

Among those films, *The Act of Killing* and *The Look of Silence* has drawn the world's attention to the 1965-1966 massacre in Indonesia. *The Act of Killing* is a documentary film about the perpetrator's testimony of the 1965-1966 massacre in North Sumatra. *The Look of Silence* tells about a family member of victims who meets the killers. These two films were directed by Joshua Oppenheimer. *The Act of Killing* won an award at a film festival in many countries and became an Oscar-nominated documentary film. (Adam, 2018, par. 58). The criticism of this film generally relates to the unclear ethical position and specific historical context of the massacre. This film might be "deeply misleading" because it represents the massacre as an act carried out by civilian gangsters rather than as a systematic action executed by the army. (Bielecki, 2018,235).

In visual arts, the representation of the 1965-1966 massacres transmitted the memories both of direct and indirect victims. For instance, Dadang Christanto's works in the exhibition entitled *Nineteen Sixty-Five* at QUT Art Museum, Brisbane (November 2015 - February 2016). (Dirgantoro, 2020, 302). His works are inspired by his personal experience, in which his father remains unknown since the violent political upheaval in 1965-1966. Christanto's paintings and installations depict victims' tortured bodies and heads, remembering the suffering of victims and addressing the stains of trauma that disturb many people's lives. (<https://www.artmuseum.qut.edu.au/whats-on/2016/exhibitions/nineteen-sixty-five-dadang-christanto>)

The 1965-1966 massacres in performance art became an issue that inspired Papermoon Puppet Theatre in Yogyakarta. They have staged several plays about the 1965 incident. For example, *Noda Lelaki di Dada Mona (The Man's Stain on Mona's Breast)* (2008) used the 1965 massacre as a background for the events in the story. Papermoon Puppet Theatre also staged *Mwathirika* ('Victims', 2010), which brings up the 1965-1966 massacre issue. This performance is about families living in the same neighborhood as the victim's family. (Bielecki, 2018, 232).

In visual and performance art, the artists usually utilize oral testimonies about the 1965-1966 massacres from survivors to create their works. In this case, the primary witness (the victim) passes the memory of the massacre to the secondary witness (the artist). (Dirgantoro, 2020, 306). In some other cases, the victims and survivors express their own experiences in artistic representation. For example, the *Dialita (Di Atas Lima Puluh Tahun/ Over 50 Years) Choir* creates music to honor those who were wrongly imprisoned by the government during the 1965 tragedy. (See <https://www.thejakartapost.com/life/2017/12/21/dialita-choir-voices-of-the-silenced.html>).

Following Mitchell's Biopicture concept, the representation of the victim narrative of the 1965-1966 massacres in Indonesia, although under the pressure of the government, appears in other media. In reaction to the dominance of Orde Baru's narrative, many artists and survivors create their own narratives in mixed media. The alternative narrative history or the victim's narrative of the 1965-1966 massacre in Indonesia began to emerge in several films, performance arts, paintings, and music. They offer a new perspective on the 1965-1966 massacre, that is, the massacre from the victim's point of view.

5. Conclusion

This study aims to investigate the way the victim narrative of the 1965-1966 massacre becomes a biopicture that is able to transform, reborn, and resurrect in various media, such as films, performance arts, visual arts, and music. The study has identified that the victim narrative of the 1965-1966 massacre counters the master narrative that portrays Indonesian leftists as bloodthirsty, cruel, and sexually perverted people. In contrast, the victim narrative asserts that over five hundred thousand people who were alleged to be Indonesian communist sympathizers became victims of the 1965-1966 massacre. They were massacred, prisoned, and exiled without trial. Although experienced many obstacles, including 'unrepresentability', 'immorality', and the censors of the New Order regime, the victim narrative of the 1965-1966 massacre remains alive, just like a living thing. The victim narrative is distributed in many artistic expressions, from film and music to painting.

The results of this study highlight the idea that cultural products have a significant role in voicing the victim narrative that was silenced during the New Order era. Many researchers have examined the 1965-1966 massacre in Indonesia but mainly investigated

physical and direct violence, as well as the consequences of the massacres. (Herlambang, 2011: 3). This study offers a different perspective that examines how the victim narrative manifested in cultural products can be a powerful means to counter the master narrative.

Being limited to text length, this study did not allow detailed analysis of each artwork that tells about the victim narrative of the 1965-1966 massacre. The study also only focus on the 1965-1966 massacre in Indonesia; therefore does not aim to compare it to other massacre and genocide. However, this limitation does not rule out the possibility of examining biopicture in the victim narrative of other massacres. This would be a fruitful area for further work.

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ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1621-6378>

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