

Violence & the Body

At the beginning of *The Look of Silence*, we see a batch of cocoons. They jump up and down, back and forth, their inhabitants moving erratically and excitedly within them. We return multiple times to these cocoons, focusing intently on every crevasse and detail of them. We are never shown their butterflies.

Violence objectifies. In the words of Sontag, it “turns anybody subjected to it into a thing”. A body, separate from the self, from the mind. A thing is easy to understand; it is easy to put in a box and separate from itself. Violence is impossible to digest. Inherently, then, when violence is done, it and its subjects must be objectified in order to be understood.

This objectification is multifaceted, depending on the killer or the victim. The body can become funny, almost; in *The Look of Silence* and *The Act of Killing*, the perpetrators of violence turn their subjects into ragdoll playthings – “we ripped off his penis!” – contorting and pinning up the body, understanding their violence as something light, as frivolous, childish comedy. Others have different modes of objectification, framing violence as some contest of strength, or honor. The surface of the thing is made pleasant enough, engaging enough to the brain on a basic level, that the brain does not prod further down into the violence and confront it on its own terms. Of course, this is not how the body operates.

The killers know this, on some level. There is an attempt to satiate the body, to give it, too, something to play with, occupied enough to ignore the grisly fact of the violence it has committed. In *The Look of Silence*, they drink the blood of their victims to satisfy some torrential fear of what they are doing. The body must feed. For if it doesn’t, memories of violence as it was truly will rise to the top like oil spilt into the bay. Karma must be after you; what can be done to slow it down?

Violence is processed through process; the executioners explain how they optimize killing, the games they play with themselves to make mannequins out of as many people as possible within an hour. Don’t wear white; you’ll get dirty. You must keep your good clothes clean from the blood. Separate the violence from the rest of your life.

This objectification is about severing the body from the mind, keeping the violence away from the places where it can truly attempt to be understood. It’s fine that there’s festering, crawling bile; just keep it away from me. That ‘me’, of course, being the hiding place of the brain.

The father in *The Look of Silence*, subjected to the violence of his son’s killing, loses control of his body. His teeth fall out; his body begins to deteriorate. His wife has to tell us this because at this point his body is sick and contorted enough that he has become nearly mute; the violence seems to have moved through him entirely, consuming him within its incomprehensibility. What he does say is unrelated, grasping at memories which are crowded out by the specter of death; he thinks he’s seventeen, he thinks he’s in high school. His body, though, knows.

His mind and body are severed in much the same way that the killers have done to themselves in order to cope. The key difference being, of course, that he had no say in the matter;

his mind and body were forced apart, the violence infecting his body, pushing his mind out of it, untethered and drifting in the causal currents of memory. This is not to say that he is not comprehending what has occurred; he is, of course, both his mind and his body. It is presenting a false (but extremely useful!) dichotomy to suggest that they are different things. Even though he does not speak about the violence, he knows. His teeth fell out. They know.

Victims cannot objectify away the violence in the same way killers can; they must deal with it, sit in what has been done to them and their loved ones while Anwar and company can wash their hands, giggle, and move onto the next thing. Victims must perceive and at least attempt to comprehend what has happened. This can break a person.

In *The Look of Silence*, Adi attempts to bring the killers' bodies to a place where they may comprehend their actions in the way he has. He watches the television as they talk glibly about mass murder, as they laugh about their gruesome use of his brother's body. He adjusts his oppressors' glasses, tinkers with their eyes, so they may look in the mirror and see themselves with the dead-eyed stare with which he watches them. He confronts them with the unadulterated, hideous acts of their past in conversation, attempting to divorce the violence from its objectification, sharpening their eyes so they may see it. They, of course, do not. They are petrified of what boils beneath the surface; prefer not to acknowledge its existence. The slick ease of oil is not so easily passed up for the deep, murky waters through which Adi treads.

Like Adi's father, though, they know. Even without verbally or mentally acknowledging the truth of the matter, they are uncomfortable. They shift and squirm, quietly desperate to get away from the parts of them which know how killing feels.

Violence moves through the body, slides away from and across the mind's dialectics, finds its home in limbs and flesh, settles down to rot in dry gums and empty stomachs. It festers and boils until it demands to be confronted by the body. Teeth fall out. In *The Act of Killing*, Anwar, finally wrestling with his atrocity, dry heaves. His body attempts to expel itself, remove the authentic water and leave the oil. Nothing comes out.

A physical act has a physical reaction. The body knows more fully than the mind seems to. The self knows, fully and truly, whether or not it chooses to acknowledge it. A cocoon contains something resembling a butterfly even if that thing never emerges; even if it continues to squirm and writhe within its fleshcage until death, it is there.

Bibliography

Sontag, S. (2004). *Regarding the pain of others*. Penguin Books.

Oppenheimer, Joshua (2014). *The Look of Silence*.

Oppenheimer, Joshua (2012). *The Act of Killing*.