

In the context of this conference<sup>1</sup>, Rithy Panh's film, *S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (released in 2003), defends a singular position. In fact, the film effects

## 1. A TRIPLE SHIFT

### 1.1. The first shift is due to the specificity of the Cambodian Genocide<sup>2</sup>.

Unlike the Holocaust, social "cleansing" planned by the Khmer Rouge was not intended to "destroy an ethnic, racial or religious group" as such, but to **establish a line of demarcation *within* Cambodian society**, between the peasants, supposed to be the personification of the original purity of the "Khmer race", and the other corrupt elements (intellectuals, storekeepers and city-dwellers in general).

The deportations and executions of "class enemies" were quickly followed by a long series of purges intended to fight the "internal enemy" who had supposedly slipped into the executive ranks of the regime. Fourteen thousand such internal enemies were detained, tortured and executed in 'S21'<sup>3</sup>, which is the code name of the detention centre in Phnom Penh that was operated by Comrade Duch (who was convicted and sentenced in the first trial of the Khmer Rouge leaders which began in 2009 in Phnom Penh<sup>4</sup>). Of course, the Khmer Rouge kept the place of detention secret throughout the entire time it was in operation<sup>5</sup>.

**1.2.** But, because they wanted to "prove" their victims' guilt, they accumulated thousands of "confessions" from the detainees, as well as photographs of arriving prisoners. **Therefore it is not the lack of archives which justifies Rithy Panh's undertaking, but the opposite:** because the Khmer Rouge wanted to change the memory of their victims, the aim of the film is firstly to **reconstruct a counter-memory of the genocidal event.**

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<sup>1</sup> The author is grateful to Precious Brown for her translation of this article

<sup>2</sup> 2 million people – that's 20% of the population – died of exhaustion, hunger or were executed between 1974 and 1979.

<sup>3</sup> Only seven detainees (two of which appear in Rithy Panh's film) survived. When KAING Guek Eav's (also known as "Duch") trial began in February 2009, some 30 years after the end of the Khmer Rouge's regime, only three of them were still alive and were called to testify.

<sup>4</sup> See the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia's official website: <http://www.eccc.gov.kh/en>

<sup>5</sup> Besides the leaders of the Communist Party, only the guards and torturers who worked at S21 knew of its existence and they were not allowed to associate with the general population. See David P. Chandler, *S21 ou le crime impuni des Khmers rouges*, Autrement, Paris 2007.

That is why – and this is the second shift the film effects – it seems necessary for the filmmaker to reverse the gaze towards the perpetrators. This reversal must be understood in all its implications.

Victims become "something other than men" in the executioners' eyes. So, what remains today of that gaze, must be made manifest through the words, gestures, and reactions of former Khmer Rouges. But this gaze must itself be reversed in order to make evident that the torturer was dehumanized as well as his victim.

However, this "discovery" cannot be made without the agreement and the participation of those who were made the instruments of the death machine (and this is what radically separates *S21* from Claude Lanzmann's film, *Shoah*). A chance meeting on the set of *Bophana, a Cambodian Tragedy* inspired the filmic device used in *S21*: Vann Nath, a painter and survivor, suddenly finds himself in the presence of one of his torturers, Him Houy. He went to the former guard and, according to Rithy Panh, "took him by the shoulders and brought him to look at his paintings. He lead him from one canvas to another asking if the atrocities depicted in the paintings honestly reflected what prisoners had endured"<sup>6</sup>.

If the initiative indeed comes from the filmmaker, the shooting of the film was made possible because the survivor himself wished to question his executioners. More than a key witness, Vann Nath is the alter ego of the filmmaker, who is neither filmed nor recorded. Both want to "understand" the process of dehumanization – in other words, **the transition from humanity to inhumanity** – that affects the executioners as much as the victims.

The filmic device is linked to this position. The surviving detainees, executioners and prison staff are not only gathered in one place, they are also filmed in a single camera movement (rather than a shot-reverse-shot which would oppose the two groups), and there is no voice-over commentary. In this way, the film not only affirms their common membership in humanity, but reveals the fact that the inhuman camp machine was accepted and implemented by men.

### 1.3 The filmic device also involves a **third shift**:

It is not only a question of reconstructing and archiving another memory of the genocide, but also of **rebuilding, here and now, the social link that was destroyed by the amnesia that covers this period.**

In fact, in the words of Rithy Panh, there is a close link "between lack of remembrance and the contradictions that Cambodian society is faced with today: violence, impunity and fear"<sup>7</sup>.

The question confronting the filmmaker is twofold: What could have turned those small farmers and young Buddhist soldiers (for whom compassion is a cardinal virtue) into merciless instruments of the killing machine? And, how were they able to forget this "act" immediately after the collapse of the

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<sup>6</sup> Rithy Panh, avec Christine Chomeau, *La Machine khmère rouge*, Flammarion, Paris, 2003, pp. 48-49.

<sup>7</sup> Rithy Panh, "Je suis un arpenteur de mémoires", *Cahiers du cinéma*, N° 587, février 2004, p. 16.

regime, as if nothing had happened? The film's premise is that there can be no sustainable reconstruction of a social link unless the executioners themselves recover not only the memory but also the compassion that the Khmer Rouge machine took from them.

However, as Rithy Panh reminds us, including perpetrator and victim within the scope of a common humanity does not confuse them, or make them interchangeable.<sup>8</sup> Giving the executioners back their humanity is to give them their free will, that is, to confront them with the choices they could have made but did not make. It is also a way of restoring their uniqueness and therefore of going against the anonymity which they willingly hid behind, trying to pass off as "performers", caught in the cogs of a huge machine.

With regard to this project, it is necessary to question **what the presence of the camera actually does**: which is to create a gap between the memory of the witnesses and the filmic images and recorded sounds.

## **2. WITNESS' MEMORY AND FILMIC MEMORY**

### **2.1 Regarding the reconstruction of memory, the collection of the guards' testimony is the centerpiece of the filmic device.**

However, as we know, the temporality of testimony can not be that of memories - that is, of "story telling". In fact, to be told, a story requires a narrator or, in other words, a "subject" who was capable of analyzing the situation at the time he was living it. Now, to the contrary, the executioner could be a torturer only on condition he gave up that which made him a man: thought.

In this sense, the executioner properly becomes a **"witness"** only when his speech, for himself as well as for us, makes him, **at the present time**, the author of a story. It is now, in the scene offered by the film, in the presence of the camera, in *our* presence, that **testimony about the event and "subject-witness" are together (inseparably) constructed**.

But if the witness cannot "remember", how can his amnesia be ended (an amnesia that is part of the process of dehumanization)? The challenge of the film is to initiate the process of remembering. For this, three conditions must be met: a confrontation with the written and photographic archives, of course, but also a return to the places where the killing occurred, and even, the mimicking of gestures of the past. Indeed, Rithy Panh presumes that the repetition of a situation (that was undergone more

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<sup>8</sup> The filmmaker writes, "the torturers' and victims' process of memory cannot be situated at the same level" (Panh, *La Machine khmère rouge*, p. 232). However, he says that there "comes a moment when victim and executioner need each other in order to continue the process of memory" ("*La Parole filmée. Pour vaincre la terreur*", *Communications*, N° 71, 2001, p. 383).

than it was experienced) will provoke a "flashback". His hope is that a new speech will come out of the witness' (newfound) emotion.

This is why I would like to show you a short sequence where the Khmer Rouge's instructions are read aloud by Prak Khan<sup>9</sup>, one of the prison officials.

## [PROJ 1]

### 2.2 The 'embodied archive' of dehumanization

What we see emerging here is what I would call a "**memory without a subject**": His finger following line by line, Prak Khan reads the document in a loud voice, articulating instructions like a soldier under orders. His face, focused on reading, shows no emotion. Above all, his diction, jerky and monotonous like a robot, gives the impression that he has not yet become a "subject" assuming what he says. Somehow, something like an 'embodied archive' of dehumanization appears in his speech.

To put it more exactly, his "testimony" makes perceptible both his imminent return to humanity *and* his existing inhumanity.

I want now to focus on the moment when he describes his former internal partition : " When I raised my hand, my heart did not stop my hand or my foot from hitting", he says. Right then he joins the gesture to the speech. Locating in his body the different instances of human will, the former torturer then makes the operation of the totalitarian machine visible: by eliminating the reflexive distance, it reduces men to mere corporeal machines of obedience.

This 'embodied memory' is what the cinema allows us to explore. And, it appears blatantly in a sequence where Poev, the guard, reenacts his former work for the camera.

## [PROJ 2]

By making Poev repeat his actions, Rithy Panh hoped to circumvent the difficulty of describing his former role in the prison. The restaging was therefore supposed to give him a representative distance. But what happens in the presence of the camera is quite different. The purely descriptive commentary of his actions gradually gives way to insults and threats he *once* made to inmates But that he addresses *today* to empty cells. One has the feeling that the repetition guarantees neither distance, neither mastery of the past: it is, to the contrary, **the past itself which again takes possession of his body and speech.**

More exactly, the silent presence of the camera seems to reestablish his relationship with *Angkar*, the invisible "Organization" who surveyed everyone at every moment. One has the impression that in the camera's gaze, he returns to his former obedience, but remains unable to introduce the distance required to historicize his past experience. In other words, his past dehumanization becomes visible

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<sup>9</sup> Prak Khan, a member of the interrogation group, was charged with torture. It is to be noted that the torturer, who had hitherto disguised his role, recognizes it when faced with the archival document that accuses him.

as an involuntary recollection, that of a "**body-archive**", which retains a reproducible imprint of obedience.

### 3. THE EFFECT OF THE FILMIC DEVICE ON THE SCENE OF TESTIMONY

3.1 The sequences we watched **reveal the space between the memory of the executioners and that of Vann Nath, the painter**. Nath's profession involves the production of a representation of the past - both for himself and for us. To the contrary, the image of the dehumanization of the guards exists only for us. It is in this gap that something of the ever-present genocidal fracture may appear. One of the best indicators of this gap, is the impossible exchange of gazes between the painter and the guards. Indeed, the guards keep their eyes obstinately lowered. It is as if they could not separate themselves from the place that was once theirs, when they were **subjected to the gaze of power, but never the subjects of the gaze on the power**.

3.2. The **filmic device shows here its limit and its paradoxical effect**. If the guards can not meet the gaze of Vann Nath, it is because the painter's age gives him authority over the younger 'S21' employees. In other words, the restoration of the traditional order allows Vann Nath to take the place of the former Khmer Rouge! Today, as in the past, the guards cannot be the subjects but only the objects of the gaze. If I push this paradox to the limit, I could say that the filmic device, in seeking to access the "past-present" memory of the genocide, partially (at least at the level of individuals), **perpetuates the conditions of the former fracture**.