

The Complexities of Representing the Cambodian Genocide (2016)

The twentieth century saw many genocides; Europe, Asia, Africa, South and Central America all suffered brutal efforts to exterminate and erase whole populations. One might think that in the century of the ubiquitous camera that documentation of these events would be thorough but the perpetrators, well aware of their actions and potential reaction, often forbid or destroyed documentation. Nonetheless, even with only a few images, documents, and first-hand stories we can begin to piece together what happened and how it happened. This source material has been fodder for filmic documentaries and fictional Hollywood productions. We have testimonies, academic studies, and photographs. All together, these representations and re-representations enable us to peer into the darker side of human behavior presumably with the hope of not allowing these events to ever happen again. But, it is not so simple; the representation of genocide is a complex matter. It raises many questions: What end do the representations serve? Can it be too graphic or not graphic enough? Do the images serve only shock value or can we learn something truly valuable? Do the artifacts of genocide elicit compassion or fear or anxiety? Does it do justice to history, to our memory, and to the memory of those who experienced genocide first hand to exhibit these images?

In this paper I will consider two drastically different but related representations of the Cambodian genocide: Rithy Panh's documentary *S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (2003) and *Photographs From S-21: 1975-1979* an exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in 1997. Panh's film tells its story in situ relying heavily on the voices of two former prisoners, Vann Nath and Chum Mey, and a few of the perpetrators. Through conversation, confrontation and reenactment the story of the Cambodian genocide begins to unfold. The overarching

question of the film is, “what is the future of a country that has denied its past?”¹ Taking a very different approach is MOMA’s exhibit of twenty-two photographs of prisoners at Tuol Sleng. The exhibit was curated as a place for visitors to, “pause to sit and reflect”² and it demanded a great deal of the viewer to piece together some semblance of meaning. The exhibit was strongly criticized for its approach and its design. For all their differences, I find both representations to be a astute use of staging: strategically sited, conflating subject and object, each locating us in some realm of complicity. Writing about Panh’s *S-21*, media historian Deirdre Boyle says, “What is appropriate in documenting trauma needs to be considered in terms of the specific cultural context in which it occurred.”³ I wonder, especially when curating an exhibition of photographs or screening a film of genocide’s brutality - far removed from site of those crimes – whether it is ever appropriate.

Beginning in the mid-1970s, under the leadership of Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge set out to make the Cambodians an agrarian, entirely self-sufficient people. In doing so, they committed an atrocious genocide. It is unreal and incomprehensible how, in such a short time and with decisive inhumanity, the Khmer Rouge so radically transformed a nation. The government forced all of the urban population to the countryside, destroyed all the effects of westernization and modernization, forbid buying and selling, closed the country to all outside connection, banned religious practice, identified unwitting enemies, tortured and executed those “enemies,” romanticized revolution, and glorified sacrifice. As many as two million of the country’s seven million people were killed or died of starvation.⁴ Writer and sinologist Pierre Ryckmans (pen-

¹ Boyle, Deirdre. *Shattering Silence: Traumatic Memory and Reenactment in Rithy Panh’s S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*. Frameworks, 50:1-2, Fall/Spring 2009. Page 101.

² Museum of Modern Art, Department of Communications. *Photographs From S-21: 1975-1979*. Press Release. May 1997. Web. 18 September 2016.

³ Boyle, Deirdre. Page 101.

⁴ Jackson, Karl D. *The Ideology of Total Revolution in Pol Pot’s Cambodia. Genocide: A Reader*. Edited by Meierhenrich, Jens. Oxford University Press, 2014. Print. Pages 136-138.

name Simon Leys), considering the chain of genocides in the twentieth-century writes, “The Cambodian genocide stands as a most extreme and most grotesque epilogue (to the 20th century): it was not only a monstrous event, it was also the *caricature* of a monstrosity.”⁵ The Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum and the documentation held therein, is a testament to the monstrosity.

The former Tuol Sleng prison in Phnom Penh is the *mise-en-scene* of *S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* and the source of the images exhibited in *Photographs From S-21: 1975-1979*. During its operation, between 1975 and 1979, many thousands of innocent Cambodians were incarcerated there. They were photographed, tortured and killed, only a handful are known to have survived. The record keeping at the prison, written and photographic, was meticulous, not as way to track the prison’s operation but in order to amass “proof” of the treasonous population and show precisely how treason would be dealt with. The testimonies to treason were not only forcibly contrived but also often absurd: “wasting fabric” and “breaking sewing needles.” “You invented a law that forced people to lie, not to the interrogators like you, but to lie to ourselves,” Vann Nath reminds former S-21 guards and interrogators in the Panh documentary.⁶ When the Vietnamese army entered the facility in 1979, they discovered paper documents, some six thousand photo negatives, dead bodies, and evidence of torture and abuse. In 1980, the site was converted into the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum where a great deal of this documentation is now on view.⁷

It is undeniable that films and documentaries - relying on montage, collage, poetic narrations, face-to-face interviews, musical scores and visceral imagery – can be tremendously impactful. They have the potential to reach large audiences, to be shown in multiple venues.

⁵ Leys, Simon. *The Hall of Uselessness: Collected Essays*. New York Review Books, 2011. Print. Page 409.

⁶ Rithy, Panh, Cati Couteau, Nath Vann, and Marc Marder. *S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*. INA/ARTE France, 2002. Youtube. 8-15 October 2016.

⁷ Leys, Simon. Pages 413-414.

Rithy Panh's *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* is no exception. The film begins with a quickly edited but succinct history leading up to Panh's story: pre-war independence and neutrality, 1970 coup, Vietnam War, American bombing, civil war, 600,000 dead, 1975 victory of the Khmers Rouge, Khmer ideology, genocide, empty city streets. A brief clip of the national anthem, playing over images of masses of peasants criss-crossing dry dusty land, speaks of much blood: "Bright red blood that covers cities and plains," "Sublime blood of workers and peasants," "The blood changing into unrelenting hatred." (Figure 1) Here, the film segues from black and white to color, and from past to present. Right away we are made to understand how the events of the past are still deeply affecting the present. Former Tuol Sleng security deputy Huoy Him and his family speak of their ongoing struggle to deal with the haunting memories of the past. The family's personal struggle is emblematic of Panh's struggle and Cambodia's struggle, setting the stage for the remainder of the film.

Considering the horrific events surrounding this place and these people, the film is remarkably quiet. This seems emblematic of the denial or silence surrounding the genocide. There is a tremendous tension, a volatility even, in the contrast between deed done and gentle matter-of-factness in in the story's retelling. This is further amplified by the usually subtle musical score or sounds of nature that now fill the courtyard, hallways, and cells. We hear the wind and the rain, birds chirp and dogs bark in the distance. At first only survivors Vann Nath and Chum Mey are together at Tuol Sleng. Mey is distraught as his memories come flooding back. "It's hard to talk. I can't do it." He says through his tears. "Why did it happen like that?" He asks. There is very little Nath can say to comfort him. (Figure 2) Together they sit and go through the record of Mey's biography – his confession. Forced to name other conspirators, Mey admits that he just said any name that came to mind. Fortunately since he was taken in just

before the fall of Phnom Penh he prays none of those people were arrested, he wants good karma. They look through piles of photographs, mug-shot like images and piles of paperwork. Nath finds the page where his name is marked, “Keep for use.” Because he was a talented painter the Khmer Rouge used him to paint portraits of the country’s leaders. This saved his life. We see him working on a painting, making note of his careful touch, “I had to have respect, do light strokes,” he says, “I had to paint the face in a pink shade, like smooth, delicate skin, as lovely as the skin of a young virgin.” (Figure 3) How painful it must have been to be so kind to such cruel people. And what a stark contrast to his later work, expressively depicting the tortures and horrors of what really happened in the prison.

In an attempt to rescue some truth, give voice to the silence, and perhaps even find some catharsis, Vann Nath and Chum Mey are joined by several of the prison’s perpetrators. Panh’s camera captures understandably awkward greetings. It is clear that everyone’s sense of culpability and responsibility is very complicated. They trip on their own words, clearly still stuck in the rhetoric of the past. Standing before Nath’s painting of prisoners shackled together in a cell they are faced with the reality of a prisoner’s point of view. Fear seems to be very much at play. Some of them stand back from the painting as if getting too close will transport them back to that time and place. It is clear that their indoctrination was extremely powerful and the perpetrators resort to the party line, former guard Khieu Ches insists from the background, “The Party of Bureau S21 told us: When the Party makes an arrest, it arrests an enemy of the Party. If the Party arrests them they’re enemies.” An excuse? A justification? Indoctrination for sure.

Slowly, the group begins revisit the space, to tell its stories. Many scenes are of conversations amongst the men as they sit around a table looking at the ephemera of a time past, reminiscing, retelling, remembering (Figure 4). It reads like group therapy sessions but the film,

“carefully brings the memories of each of the perpetrators into consciousness, not as an exorcism or therapy for them but for all Cambodian society.”⁸ Both an individual and collective experience unfolds before us. Questions are asked and life in the prison is ultimately reenacted. In a much talked about series of scenes Ches begins to channel his younger self, reenacting his routine with great detail. It is these scenes where the subtlety and matter-of-factness gives way to a raw and palpable terror. “Why is this sequence so significant, so powerful? Why do the hairs on one’s neck stand up while viewing the transformation of the laconic Ches into a tyrannical guard before our eyes? As we watch Ches reenact his experience, we witness the past become present.”⁹ (Figure 5) Others, perhaps following Ches’s lead, begin to reenact their roles. The scene of the crime becomes a stage. The actors are playing themselves but it is a version of themselves, a former self that inhabits their psyche just below the surface.

The tension, which has been building steadily but almost imperceptively, is broken when the film cuts to a conversation between Nath and Mey. They are talking about the possibility for reconciliation, moving on and putting Pol Pot and other living Khmer Rouge leaders on trial. In a situation where no one has ever admitted guilt, where no one has begged for forgiveness, is it even possible to move on? For Nath and Mey forgetting is impossible and remembering is very painful. “I don’t want revenge against these people.” Mey says, adding, “So long as I live, nothing will be erased.” In her book *The Art of Cruelty*, Maggie Nelson writes, “Compassion is not necessarily found where we presume it to be, nor is it always what we presume it to be, nor is it experienced or accessed in the same way, nor is it found in the same place in the same way over time. The same might be said of cruelty.”¹⁰ Mey’s attitude, and the entire film, is lesson in

⁸ Boyle, Deirdre. Page 101.

⁹ Ibid. Page 100.

¹⁰ Nelson, Maggie. *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2011. Print. Page 9.

the complexities of compassion and cruelty. Anger and fear, propaganda and indoctrination, national pride and desire for a better life, past and present... all these things are amorphous, contingent, and subjective. For so much of the film, the players in *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* speak with a sort of aloofness. Yet, this default position betrays the precarious place in which they all exist: somewhere between helplessness and seething angst. Tuol Sleng and the people who worked there were a machine built to destroy humanness. "We become dust," Nath tells the perpetrators. Slowly, together, they try to make sense of it, to understand how they came to have their unique histories. There is no reconciliation in this film. But there is processing. Spaces, actions, memories, ephemera, and people are brought to life from another time, hopefully in an act of healing. And as witnesses to both the historical event and its reenactment we are called to locate ourselves in our moral obligation to know and to act in the name of human decency.

As an interesting counterpoint to Panh's documentary, let's consider The Museum of Modern Art's 1997 exhibition *Photographs From S-21: 1975-1979*. There are stark differences and profound similarities in the two representations. It is challenging for me even as I write this essay to move myself psychologically from the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Phenom Penh and the voices of first-hand experience to an exhibit of photographs in white cube gallery in a world-class museum in New York City. MOMA curator, Adrienne Williams, chose to exhibit twenty-two black and white photographs of prisoners who passed through the Tuol Sleng prison. The photographs are printed from a collection of six thousand negatives that were made available to American photographers Chris Riley and Doug Niven by the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum. Riley and Niven created the non-profit organization, Photo Archive Group, where the negatives were cleaned and cataloged. Ultimately one hundred images were selected to be included in a

book, *The Killing Fields* (Twin Plams Publishing 1996). The images were also printed and made available for exhibition.¹¹ The exhibit is described as:

A collaboration between the Museum's Department of Photography and Department of Education, Gallery Three offers a place where visitors may pause to sit and reflect, and where Museum curators may share their enthusiasms for particular photographs, their thoughts about particular episodes in photography, and their explorations of the Museum's rich collection.¹²

The design of the exhibit is compelling. Gallery Three is an intimate space (Figures 6–8). The exhibited photographs are framed in simple black frames, the mattes are white, and each is overall ten by ten inches square. They are all hung in a perfect row at eye level. The minimal wall text gives some background on Tuol Sleng and the Cambodian genocide. There is a comment book for visitors to share their thoughts and experiences. Two small black sofas are arranged in the middle of the room facing each other. In between them is coffee table with copies of Riley's and Niven's book. No wall labels are present; both the individuals pictured and the photographer are anonymous.^{13 14}

The Museum encountered a great deal of criticism for the exhibit based on two critiques: first, aestheticizing the images, second, a lack of contextualization.¹⁵ The very fact that they are exhibited in and were collected by MOMA - a prominent art institution - appears to establish the

¹¹ Museum of Modern Art. Press Release.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Simon, Roger I. *A Pedagogy of Witnessing: Curatorial Practice and the Pursuit of Social Justice*. State University of New York Press. 2014. Print. Page 190.

¹⁴ The identity of the primary photographer at Tuol Sleng: remains contentious however Nhem Ein, in response to an exhibit of the Tuol Sleng photos at an annual photography festival entitled *Les Rencontres photographiques d'Arles*, also in 1997, Ein spoke proudly of "his" exhibition. This caused a great deal of controversy, even for MOMA, raising concerns that these images would be understood as "art" and Ein an "artist." MOMA now credits Ein in their citation of the photographs. De Duve, Thierry. *Art in the Face of Radical Evil*. OCTOBER 125, Summer. pp. 3–23. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA. 2008 & <http://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/247?locale=en>.

¹⁵ Simon, Roger I. Page 192.

photographs, at least in most people's eyes, as art. Once something is established as a work of art it is difficult to forego a certain aesthetic critique even if the content is the trauma of genocide. In fact, even Riley and Niven, in an interview in *Photographers International*, reveal that when examining the negatives they, "saw the possibility of making beautiful photographs."¹⁶ This issue calls into question the very purpose of art, the role it plays in culture and the contentious relationship between beauty and content. Art has long played an important role in the representation of history - however inaccurate or biased a work may be. Viewing art need not be a didactic experience. Art presents opportunities for us to ponder, to assess, to critique, to be inspired to understand that which is not immediately clear. The museum is a theater and the galleries are stages; as viewers we are presented narratives and, often very calculated points of view. It is a dialectical experience. And this experience is precisely what the curator has made possible in the design of the *S-21* exhibit.

Similarly, I feel the issue of context is also spurious. Granted, very little is spelled out for the viewer but all the information the audience needs is present. There is background information placing the images in a particular time and place. It is clear how the images were discovered and made available for exhibition. There are the copies of *The Killing Fields* book and a place to sit and read. And, most importantly, there are the photographs themselves. Although there is no direct display of violence in these images, no implements of torture seen, no depiction of abject suffering - the posture, the gaze, the mug-shot style, the numbers, say so much (Figures 9-12). The subjects are as much looking at us as we are looking at them, implicating us in their story. As viewers sit and reflect, I imagine a sudden and disturbing conflation of subject and object. For those open to the experience this is very powerful. One image in particular is perhaps the key to

¹⁶ De Duve, Thierry. *Art in the Face of Radical Evil*. OCTOBER 125, Summer. pp. 3–23. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA. 2008. Web. 29 September 2016. Page 11.

our comprehension of the horror and cruelty of what was happening outside of the frame. In each photograph, the person pictured has a number pinned to their shirt. Yet one young man, who is shirtless, appears to have his number pinned directly to the flesh of his chest (Figure 12). Though some have denied that this is actually the case, the suggestion alone is compelling. No matter how expressionless his face may be, or the fact that there is no blood present, it implies a complete and utter disregard for the body, for humanity. It is emblematic of the Khmer Rouges' complete lack of decency in the face of death. And it reveals the way an institution – an art institution - speaks to its patrons about history and humanity, cruelty, and compassion.

Intellectual arguments may rage about what is art and what is the role of the museum but I am confident when I say that these images do what art is supposed to do and MOMA did what an art institution is supposed to do: present, question, and inspire. It is our choice as viewers to be open to that experience or to dismiss it. Photography has always aroused suspicion when presented as art – or as a record of truth. Yet, Susan Sontag has this thoughtful insight, “Photography is the inventory of mortality. A touch of the finger now suffices to invest a moment with posthumous irony. Photographs show people being so irrefutably there and at a specific age in their lives; group together people and things which a moment later have disbanded, changed, continued along the course of their independent destinies.”¹⁷ The destiny of those whose photographs were displayed in *Photographs From S-21: 1975-1979* was no less than devastating. Even with the most minimal information contained in these documents and only nominal context we can discover a great deal about human behavior, including our own. The exhibition plays an important role in our memory and understanding of both personal and collective traumas, past and present. And, as in *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* we are

¹⁷ Sontag, Susan. *Susan Sontag on Photography*. Picador. New York, NY. 1977. Print. Page 70.

identified as witnesses and therefore located – implicated even – in the actions of our fellow humans.

What we take away from a representation of a traumatic experience, especially one as horrific as the Cambodian genocide, depends on many factors. Some of these factors relate to who we are emotionally and psychologically: our ability to empathize, our sense of compassion, our willingness to admit complicity, our ability to connect past and present. Other factors speak to larger aspects of our identity: ethnicity, race, class, national pride, even our attitudes towards racism, misogyny, or homophobia. Some people may find themselves moved more by a film than a photograph or more called to action by an impassioned speech than a visit to a museum. For me, it's not an either/or situation, it is the totality of representations, each with its own strengths and weaknesses and focus and bias, that help us remember what has happened and remind us to be aware of what is happening now. There is a complexity in this breadth of representation, one that demands people dig deeper, sensitize themselves to subtlety, look at the most malignant human behaviors. It is a lot to ask. "True moral complexity," Maggie Nelson tells us, "is most often found by wading into the swamp, getting intimate with discomfort, and developing an appetite for nuance."¹⁸ Finding our moral compass may require us to do some hard work, to stumble through some fetid territory. Yet, we can find comfort in knowing that offering even the smallest kindness, speaking out against the slightest injustice, or showing some respect for those who have suffered and are suffering today, is worthy leap forward for all of humanity.

¹⁸ Nelson, Maggie. Page13.

Images:



(Figure 1)



(Figure 2)



(Figure 3)



(Figure 4)



(Figure 5)



(Figure 6)



(Figure 7)



(Figure 8)



(Figure 9)



(Figure 10)



(Figure 11)



(Figure 12)

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Images 1-5:

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Images 6-8:

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Images 9-12:

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