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Trauma and Reenactment in Documentary Film

Charley Boerman and Boris Noordenbos

For his documentary *The Act of Killing* (2012), the director Joshua Oppenheimer invited perpetrators of the Indonesian mass killings of 1965–1966 to retell and dramatically reenact their crimes, using the conventions of film genres that they could choose themselves. The ensuing reenactments were a disturbing display of costumes and violence. Not all critics applauded the director’s approach. In a 2013 review in *Film Quarterly*, Nick Fraser called the film artificial and pretentious and argued that *The Act of Killing*, with its flamboyant reenactments, undercut the very promise of the documentary genre:

I’m sure that *The Act of Killing* could have been made in a less “out-there fashion” and still have attracted its share of audiences and prizes. I don’t believe that so much artifice is required, or indeed appropriate. What I like most about documentary film is that anything that can be made to work should be given a chance. You can mix up fact and fiction, past and present. You can add to the cold objective look a degree of empathy. You will of course lie to participants, in particular when they wish not to divulge important pieces of information. Trickery has its place, too. But documentary films arise, surely, from the not inconsiderable belief that it is good to be literal as well as truthful. In a makeshift, fallible way, they tell us what the world is really like. (p. 22)

This chapter—building on work by documentary scholars such as Bill Nichols and Stella Bruzzi—challenges the claim that the strength of documentary film resides in its truthfulness and literality. In addition to the aforementioned *The Act of Killing*, we discuss *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) and *The Missing Picture* (2013). All three documentaries self-reflexively employ forms of reenactment to address 20th-century histories of mass violence. In these films, reenactment can serve different purposes: it is employed, for instance, as a self-conscious exploration of how one might narrativize traumatic histories. But restagings and reconstructions are also used to reject altogether the possibility of cognitive mastery over histories of unfathomable horror. In addition, the dramatic reenactments are structured to mimic

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the “repetition compulsion” of the traumatized mind. What these films share is an interest not merely in history per se but in the epistemological and ethical problems inherent in any representation of a violent historical episode. Trauma is pivotal, and its centrality in these films comes with the awareness that it is not possible, or at best not sufficient, to merely document the past in a “truthful,” literal way.

Post-Traumatic Repetition Compulsion

Since the 1990s, scholars have explored trauma’s relation to narrative and imagery, in many cases taking their cue from psychiatric and psychoanalytic traditions from around the turn of the 20th century. We argue that early work on the repetitive nature of traumatic “neuroses,” when approached critically and supplemented with recent insights from the humanities, can help to illuminate the uses of reenactment in the documentary films discussed below. Particularly influential on recent debates about trauma has been the work of Pierre Janet, a physician at the Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris, who distinguished what he called narrative memory from traumatic memory. The former denoted a memory of an experience that, having been integrated into available cognitive structures and thus voluntarily accessible, could be recounted coherently in words. By contrast, traumatic memory, as conceived by Janet, was really an inherent contradiction. It referred to the indelible imprints of unprecedented experiences so frightening that they could not be integrated within existing mental structures. Janet’s traumatic memory was dissociated from conscious awareness and consequently remained unavailable for narrative meaning-making. Typically, the recalling of such experiences was triggered by situations that were somehow analogous to the distressing events at their source so that the patient would mentally relive or behaviorally reproduce the trauma (van der Kolk and van der Hart, 1991, p. 163).

As Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart explain, Sigmund Freud often failed to sufficiently recognize his debt to the work at Salpêtrière, which he had visited as a student in 1885. In close alignment with Janet, Freud intuited that “the crucial factor that determines the repetition of trauma is the presence of mute, unsymbolized, and unintegrated experiences” (van der Kolk and van der Hart, 1991, p. 167). Freud came to regard this unassimilated psychic material in terms of repression, an ambivalent notion that in certain cases was conceptualized as akin to what Janet described as involuntary dissociation, while in others was read as an active process that pushed away forbidden desires and primitive instincts (van der Kolk and van der Hart, 1991). In any case, Freud suggested that it was precisely the unprocessed and inaccessible nature of trauma that determined patients’ repetition compulsion, which manifested itself in a tendency to belatedly relive, repeat, or reenact—in nightmares, hallucinations, and neurotic behavior—the horrors they had suffered.

But Freud's interpretation of these traumatic repetitions is not unequivocal, as evinced by his seminal essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). In a famous passage, Freud describes his eighteen-month-old grandson's game of flinging and retrieving a toy while uttering sounds approximating the words *fort* (away) and *da* (there). Freud hypothesizes that the game was the boy's attempt to gain mastery over the painful experience of having his mother leave him to go out for hours at a time. Yet the analysis grows more complex when Freud compares the game's dynamics to the repetition compulsion suffered by victims of trauma in combat, a compulsion that, he implies, serves both as an uncontrolled reenactment of distressing experiences and as a neurotic attempt to achieve psychic control over them.

As the philosopher of history Dominick LaCapra underscores, the contradiction of the post-traumatic repetition compulsion, then, is that it functions both as an instance of acting out in which the traumatic past "is repeated as if it were fully enacted, fully literalized" (2001, p. 148) and as part of a process of "working through," that is, as an attempt to cognitively master a disturbing personal or (as LaCapra adds) historical event (p. 143). The repetitive reenactment of traumatic experiences is thus traumatizing in itself—as it is involuntary, visceral, and direct, often throwing the patient back into a moment of overwhelming pain or fright—yet is simultaneously oriented toward integrating the experience into one's conceptions of meaning and time, into what Janet called narrative memory.¹

The ambiguous status of the repetition compulsion, as involved in the non-binary processes of acting out and working through (LaCapra, 2001, p. 63), is important to our discussion of reenactment in historical documentary film. In the cases discussed here, the reenactment of atrocious historical episodes is employed to question the possibility of cognitive mastery over the past, an ideal which is securely anchored in a documentary tradition that emphasizes literalness and truthfulness. To be clear, we do not approach our case-study documentaries as instances of involuntary traumatic repetition by directors or subjects. Rather, we treat the cinematic use of reenactment as a deliberate strategy for exploring how one might make sense of events that, in their horror, seem to elude yet demand understanding. In this respect, this chapter follows Ernst van Alphen, whose "Playing the Holocaust" (2001) discusses several artworks that consciously mobilize play and drama to cultivate new approaches to the history of the Holocaust. Van Alphen proposes that these works—ranging from David Levinthal's staged photography to Zbigniew Libera's LEGO concentration camp set—eschew the widespread imperative to cognitively grasp Holocaust history through education and remembrance. He stresses that one should not regard these works as mere reflections of individual artists' psychic realities. Rather, they solicit from their audience "a production of knowledge that is first of all affective instead of cognitive" (van Alphen, 2001, p. 77). Although they do not deny the importance of historical accuracy, these artworks remind us that confrontation with a traumatic past need not, and should not, be limited to a cerebral understanding of the events.

Waltz with Bashir

Our first case study is Ari Folman's *Waltz with Bashir*, an animated feature-length documentary inspired by the director's recovery of long-repressed memories of his time serving with the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in the Israel-Lebanon War of 1982. Within territory under IDF occupation, Lebanese Christian Phalangists massacred thousands of civilians in the Sabra and Shatila Palestinian refugee camps as retribution for the assassination of president-elect Bashir Gemayel. The documentary explores how memory functions and fails when tainted by trauma. Juxtaposing past and present, memories and dreams, the film relies heavily on animation. Only in the finale, when the animation yields to harrowing footage of the massacre's aftermath, do "real" images confront the viewer. Rather than taking the truthfulness and literality of the documentary genre for granted, *Waltz with Bashir* self-consciously centers on a painstaking effort to make sense of the protagonist's troubled emotions and dissociated memories.

That the past cannot be rendered literally and directly is already underscored by the documentary's narrative and temporal structure. Major historical events, from Israel's invasion of Lebanon to Bashir's assassination and the Sabra and Shatila massacre, are evoked chronologically. Yet the past breaks into the contemporary perspective from which the story is told in several instances, which are marked by sudden changes in the musical score, rapid cuts, and fade-overs. The viewer begins to realize that linear chronological narration is not a simple or neutral undertaking but is rather an (only partially successful) attempt to bind and master distressing events, to work through and counter the uncontrolled anachronisms of acting out. The chronological storytelling is thus part of Folman's effort to reconstruct his role in the war, an endeavor both spurred and hindered in particular by one erratic, intrusive, and recurring flashback: that of Folman and two companions wading through the sea against the backdrop of a yellow sky. As they emerge from the water to enter the city, assumed to be Beirut, they are confronted by a group of wailing, ghostlike women.

Even more than the frequent distortions of linear time, the film's use of animation is central to its conceptualization of trauma. Annabelle Honess Roe (2013) reminds us that documentary filmmakers have often substituted animated sequences for absent real-world footage. In contrast to such "mimetic animation," Roe argues, *Waltz with Bashir* employs animation in a more structural and "evocative" way (p. 26), using it to conjure up emotional memories and embodied experiences. To be sure, the film's scenes of animated talking heads align with Roe's notion of mimesis. But its most effective mobilization of animation is in the flashbacks, nightmares, and highly stylized reenactments based on the characters' distorted memories and testimonies of the war. Animation's evocative possibilities reach their

full potential when Ca'an, Folman's friend and a former IDF soldier, recalls how, feeling seasick on a boat during the invasion of Lebanon, he began to hallucinate. While he imagined how a giant, floating naked woman carried him away across the waves, the actual boat with his fellow soldiers was bombed. An animated scene reenacts Ca'an's memory, showing the naked giantess, which makes it clear not only that Ca'an's account is inaccurate but also that no other memory is available to him or, consequently, to the viewer. In this scene, as in many others, animation signals that the subjects' access to history is filtered through the distorted feelings and fantasies of the traumatized mind.

The animated scenes in *Waltz with Bashir* constitute a particular form of reenactment, and they are beset with the tensions accompanying its use in documentary film. As Stella Bruzzi (2006, 2020) points out, reenactment has an intimate, albeit troubled, relationship with the documentary genre, one that has long been tainted by derogatory views of reenactment as a second-rate substitute for the realities the camera failed to capture. Bruzzi scrutinizes the ideal, implied in such views, of unmediated access to reality and of an indexical link between the documentary image and its referent.² Instead, building on John Austin's analysis of constative and performative utterances, Bruzzi reconceptualizes documentary as a form that always already derives its meaning from the discrepancy between "performance and reality" (2006, p. 186). At the heart of documentary film, she argues, is a tension between past actions and their performative repetition and representation in the present (2020, pp. 49–50).³ The overt use of reenactment highlights this tension and may serve to explore the relations between the (unfinished business of) the past and the "active presentness" (Bruzzi, 2020, p. 50) of its contemporary restaging. Thus, in the words of Bruzzi, reenactment in documentary film frequently "offers a re-opening, a re-visiting or a re-interrogation of an event," serving as a reminder that "the past and the present are not distinct domains" (2020, pp. 50–51). This is precisely the message that *Waltz with Bashir* conveys through its exuberant employment of animation-style reenactment. Adopting the close-up perspectives of traumatized IDF soldiers, the film uses animated reenactment to show how, for these veterans, the past leaks into the present in ways that are by no means transparent. The recalled and recounted events of the 1980s, as the animated form of these reenactments underscores, cannot be reproduced literally, as they are shaped and distorted by the affect of trauma.

This is true for most of the film, but the tenor shifts in the finale, when the return of Folman's memory is portrayed through archival images. The scenes leading up to the cut (still animated) are based on the reportage of the Israeli journalist Ron Ben-Yishai. The camera moves through an alley and through a crowd of wailing women (the sounds coming from archival footage that is not yet shown) to slowly settle, close-up, on Folman's confused face, with his eyes ending up in the very middle of the frame



Figure 16.1 The close-up of Folman’s face as shown in *Waltz with Bashir*.

(Figure 16.1). Unexpectedly, the shot switches to live-action footage of the women (Figure 16.2). They speak, but their calls for help and for their sons are not subtitled for the international audience.⁴ After these images, the scene cuts to silent archival footage of destroyed and damaged buildings and of piles of decomposing bodies. Before the screen turns black, the camera slowly zooms in on a child’s head, scarcely visible amid piles of rubble and bodies.

This is the unassimilable traumatic Real that has so long tormented Folman, a suggestion reinforced by the “archive effect” produced by the sudden switch from animated to live-action footage. According to Jaimie Baron, documentary films create such an “archive effect” when a piece of documentation is integrated from one context into another, producing an



Figure 16.2 The eyeline-match cut to live-action footage in *Waltz with Bashir*.

“aura of ‘authenticity’” and endowing the imagery with an “evidentiary authority” (2012, pp. 103–104). This “archive effect” in *Waltz with Bashir*, at least at first sight, seems to lend the final scene a truth status commonly associated with documentary film. The archival material also marks the return of the protagonist’s memory and the realization of his complicity in the harrowing atrocities: he now understands that the sky’s yellow hue in his recurring flashback was a result of the flares that he and his accomplices launched in their effort to provide the Phalangists with the light necessary for the nighttime slaughter in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps.

Closer inspection, however, reveals that this stylistically divergent final cut, rather than privileging the irrefutable, objective “‘thereness’ of the archive” (Morag, 2012, p. 102), marks a more complex psychological reality. Crucial is the eyeline-match cut, which already translates the upcoming footage from an indexical trace into a subjective image, one generated not by Ben-Yishai’s camera but by Folman’s memory. This reading of the scene as subjective and traumatic, rather than indexical, is supported by the sudden cut from the mediated animation to shockingly “real” images, which mimics the unbidden reliving of traumatic events that have not been cognitively assimilated, and that “return” in the patient’s mind (literally, or in distorted form) through flashbacks.⁵

Relying on a psychiatric and cinematic tradition that conceptualizes traumatic reliving in terms of the “flashback” (cf. Luckhurst, 2008, pp. 177–208), the finale complicates the film’s take on trauma. The story’s narrative arc bends unmistakably toward Folman’s psychic mastery of his overwhelming and distressing experiences. The recovery of memory suggested in the film’s final scene, then, could be taken as a sign that repression has been lifted and that there is now a beginning from which Folman can work through the events. Yet, ultimately, the structure of the film’s ending points to the repetition compulsion, to an uncontrolled, symptomatic acting out, rather than a therapeutic working through.

The scene’s reframing of the indexical image as Folman’s subjective traumatic flashback also highlights the lopsided treatment of trauma. Notwithstanding the pervasive focus on Folman’s traumatization, he, as an indirect perpetrator, is obviously not among the main victims of the events in Lebanon in 1982. Meanwhile, the actual victims, represented by the wailing women shown at the film’s end, hardly receive a voice (Antoun, 2009). Their lamentations (in Arabic) are not subtitled, unlike the Hebrew spoken in the rest of the film, and hence remain opaque to the international and mainly non-Arab-speaking audience. While the women’s unfathomable pain results from the deliberate murder of their loved ones, Folman’s trauma is apparently wrought through the *seeing* of violence and through the painful recognition of his complicity.⁶

Nevertheless, the traumas of the IDF soldiers take center stage, their moral weight augmented through references to the Holocaust. As Folman discusses his flashbacks with his psychiatrist friend Ori Sivan, the latter

reassures Folman that his “interest in the massacre” is not about this particular atrocity but extends back in time. Folman’s parents had been in Auschwitz, and Sivan explains that the “massacre has been with [Folman] since [he was] six.” In their final encounter, after Folman has acknowledged his and the IDF’s complicity, Sivan absolves him from any guilt or responsibility since even though he symbolically “took on the role of a Nazi,” he did not carry out the violence himself. In this historical parallel, the slaughter in 1982 gains moral relevance only through its comparison with the Holocaust, in the face of which Sivan deems Folman’s actions to be marginal. As Raya Morag points out in her analysis of the film, “the earlier trauma [of the Holocaust] has appropriated the later one” (2012, p. 100).

The Act of Killing

This brings us to *The Act of Killing*, a documentary which takes reenactment’s relation to the psychic realities of (in some cases evidently traumatized) perpetrators to a new level while giving rise to similar criticisms about the marginalization of victims’ voices. Directed by Joshua Oppenheimer and produced by Errol Morris and Werner Herzog, the film addresses the legacy in Indonesia of the mass killings of alleged communists in the wake of the country’s 1965 military coup. The documentary relies on dramatic reconstructions of this horrific episode. Historical accuracy, however, is not Oppenheimer’s main concern, and there is no voiceover to frame what the viewer sees or to guide them through the disturbing and confusing material presented. Contextual information is limited to a title sequence at the film’s opening. Here the viewer learns what happened after the military had overthrown the Indonesian government in 1965:

Anybody opposed to the military dictatorship could be accused of being a communist: union members, landless farmers, intellectuals, and the ethnic Chinese. In less than a year and with the direct aid of western governments, over one million “communists” were murdered. The army used paramilitaries and gangsters to carry out the killings. These men have been in power and have persecuted their opponents ever since.

Fifty years later, the purge’s perpetrators are eager to talk about the mutilations, rapes, and murders they committed. Oppenheimer gave them considerable control over their stories, inviting former death-squad members to script, stage, and film reenactments of their murderous acts in whatever form and genre they chose. While never crystallizing into a full-fledged film-within-a-film, the staged scenes are included in the documentary and are combined with footage of the filming process, along with more conventional portrayals of the perpetrators’ daily routines in Medan, Sumatra, where the documentary was shot.

Taking inspiration from the gangster films that they so admire, the killers enthusiastically set out to reenact their interrogations and executions of communists. They add fantasy scenes, staging, for instance, encounters with vengeful communist ghosts with threatening voices who return from the afterlife to haunt their tormentors. This motif was inspired by the nightmares that plague Anwar Congo, the former death-squad leader who is the film's central subject. To a greater extent than his paunchy, cross-dressing sidekick Herman Koto, or his well-to-do friend Adi Zulkadry, Anwar suffers pangs of conscience and believes that he has been cursed by his victims.

The executioners' startling self-glorification is stimulated by their disappointment with the perceived lack of national-level recognition.⁷ It is further fanned by a local culture that celebrates these "free men" as good-natured tough guys who rid the nation of "communist vermin."⁸ When invited onto a television talk show, the gangsters are heralded as heroes. Anwar explains to the audience how their killing techniques, including the go-to method of strangling victims with a wire, had been inspired by their favorite American gangster movies. As the excited talk show host misleadingly puts it, Anwar and his friends took their cue from cinema to develop "a more humane and less sadistic" method for exterminating communists. The audience bursts into applause.

Oppenheimer's dubious arrangement with the killers seems to facilitate the latter's public boasting and their posing as heroic Hollywood-style gangsters. Yet rather than merely adding layers of fiction and drama to the crimes, the cinematic reenactments tend to reconnect victims and perpetrators alike to the shocking, and often unspoken, realities of violence. As Homa King cogently puts it, in *The Act of Killing* "fantasy can paradoxically be the route back to reality" (2013, p. 35). King's remark resonates with Jonathan Lamb's view that realism in the reenactment of history is not primarily dependent on "situational exactitude" but pivots on "what happens—that is to say, what actually *occurs*—when history and fiction become a volatile and unpredictable emulsion" (2020b, p. 197, italics original). *The Act of Killing* hinges precisely on such "occurrences," as the process of reenactment (dramatic and fictional as it often is) sets in motion a series of unpredictable processes that increasingly elude the narrative and psychological control of those involved.

A case in point is the shooting of a scene entitled "Interrogation of a Communist." Prior to the filming, the viewer sees the documentary's three main subjects, Adi, Anwar, and Herman, smoking and relaxing on the set. Their assistant, a certain Suryono, tells the gangsters: "If you want a true story, I have one." The men encourage Suryono (clearly intimidated by these respected thugs) to speak "because everything in this film should be true." Suryono then tells the harrowing tale of how he lost his Chinese stepfather. His tone is at first impersonal ("there was a shopkeeper"), but his narrative grows increasingly intimate ("to be honest, he was my stepfather"; "I lived with him since I was a baby"). One night, when Suryono was 11 or 12,

a death squad, possibly including the very men who are now listening to him, abducted his stepfather. “I remember it well. It is impossible to forget!” The following morning, the man’s dead body was found under an oil drum. Interrupting his speech with nervous giggles, Suryono explains that nobody would help the family dig a proper grave and that he and his grandfather eventually buried the man “like a goat next to the main road.” Shortly afterward, all “communist” families, including Suryono’s, were exiled to a remote shantytown at the edge of the jungle.

Now the gangsters are less welcoming. Herman explains that the entire reenactment film has already been planned, and Anwar adds that Suryono’s story is too complicated to be incorporated into it. The men proceed to the filming of the scheduled interrogation scene, with Suryono—his sullen face still distressed by the memories he has just revived—playing the communist. The scene has not been well planned and is ambiguous from the start. The actors constantly check the veracity of their torture methods with the most seasoned ex-killers present (“Anwar, teach how to torture”). The scene is thus simultaneously a reenactment *and* a conversation about the gruesome details of what had happened, each aspect constantly informing the other.

At one point, the viewer—and possibly the gangsters themselves—cannot tell whether the scripted interrogation has been paused to give the distressed Suryono some rest. The latter sits motionless in his chair, holding the glass of water which the gangsters have given him to try to bring him to his senses. However, the bullying continues, and the men now compel Suryono to drink the water, joking aggressively that “it’s not poison.” When Suryono does not respond, Herman pours the water over his head. At this moment, Oppenheimer zooms in on Anwar’s compassionate face: “It’s sadistic,” he mumbles, his eyes fixed on the ground. When the planned interrogation scene resumes, Suryono begins to sob uncontrollably, snot and tears dripping from his face (Figure 16.3). Shots of him, again, alternate with



Figure 16.3 Suryono in his role as a communist in *The Act of Killing*.



Figure 16.4 Anwar watching the scene from the other side of the set in *The Act of Killing*.

close-ups of Anwar, who, in the role of director-cum-cameraman (though still in make-up from a previous scene), oversees the filming from the other side of the stage (Figure 16.4). Suryono begs his executioners, “Wait. Would you give a message to my family? Or could I speak to them one last time?” The favor is resolutely denied, after which the communist’s strangulation is staged.

Intended as a cinematic reenactment, the events on stage become an occasion for Suryono to act out his unspoken traumas. He conjures up, it seems, a constructed “memory” of the horror his stepfather went through just before he was murdered. Suryono vicariously steps into his shoes, but he also reexperiences his *own* loss and the pain caused by the missed opportunity to say goodbye to his stepfather. The temporal and emotional distance from the enacted scene evaporates, and different subjective experiences (of Suryono and his stepfather) overlap. Yet as the filming progresses, the gangsters, too, experience a blurring of the borderline between their former and present selves, their dramatic roles, and their current identities. When the blindfold worn by Suryono during his “execution” threatens to impede his breathing, one of the men crassly suggests that “it’s okay if he really dies.” Another adds, “We’ll kill him for real.”

What makes this scene and others so bewildering is the imbrication of reenactment as a cinematic device and as a psychic reality. On the one hand, reenactment works as a dramatized and fictionalized reconstruction of historical events. Yet, on the other hand (and sometimes simultaneously), it is structured by the repetitive and fractured chronology of trauma (Caruth, 1993, p. 25),⁹ taking the form of an eruption into the present of past experiences, roles, and emotions. This conflation of temporalities is bound to confuse the viewer: is Suryono’s weeping the result of painful childhood

memories or of the intimidation he now faces? Or is his apparent emotional disturbance actually an extreme form of method acting? Is the violence the gangsters inflict on Suryono part of the story they want to convey, or have they fallen back onto (or simply continued) their aggressive behavior?

The relation between reenactment and trauma is especially complex in the case of the perpetrators. While taking the men back to a violent history, the staged scenes also seem to shield them from direct confrontation with the realities of their crimes. The gangster-film tropes (performed with the inevitable suits, cigars, and fedoras) often help the thugs to reframe their cowardly mutilations, rapes, and executions within a self-aggrandizing narrative of toughness and stylishness. Other reenactments retrospectively narrate the killings as a Wild West story, enacted with lassos, horses, and sheriff paraphernalia, and still others build on the aesthetics of Hollywood's Vietnam tradition to reenact the destruction of a communist village and the murder and rape of its inhabitants. Even the far-fetched fantasy scenes seem to be a cinematic buffer between present and past, wrapping the prosaic "acts of killing" in a redemptive gloss.

Telling in this respect is the lavish musical-like finale of the film-within-the-film. The scene's opening shot features a verdant, misty mountain landscape with a waterfall in the background. Anwar, clothed in a black robe, and Herman in drag solemnly wave their arms in sync with the film's theme song, "Born Free." They are surrounded by identically costumed young female dancers whose smiling faces and festive dress provide additional grace notes to this sugarcoated representation of the afterlife. When the song reaches a dramatic crescendo, two scruffy communists appear beside Anwar. They take the wires off their necks (presumably used to strangle them), and one of the men pulls a medal out of his pocket and awards it to Anwar: "For executing me and sending me to heaven. I thank you a thousand times for everything."

Different in form, the reenactments staged in *The Act of Killing* have a double impetus. On the one hand, the glorified scenes of torture and the phony fantasies of forgiveness repackage base murders in narratives of machismo and redemption and thus obfuscate the ways that historical reality still troubles the perpetrators. On the other hand, the reenactments increasingly reveal, precisely in their nervous attempts to mitigate the moral weight of these crimes, a more troubled relation to the past. As dramatized and fictionalized projections, they both visualize and trigger perpetrator traumas, even as they strive to fend them off.

In one reenactment (its style reminiscent of film noir), Anwar impersonates a communist who is supposedly planning to ban the screening of American films in Medan. He is intimidated by his interrogator (Herman), then strangled. During the "execution," Anwar, suddenly out of character, becomes overwhelmed with fear, whispering to Herman in a frightened tone that he "can't do that again." Later, at home, after watching the kitschy afterlife scene (which deeply moves him) on his small television, Anwar asks



Figure 16.5 The screening of the interrogation scene in Anwar's living room, as shown in *The Act of Killing*

Oppenheimer to screen the filmed interrogation scene (Figure 16.5). He is again visibly disturbed, this time by merely seeing the footage of his strangulation (Figure 16.6). Fixated on the screen, Anwar intimates to Oppenheimer that here, at this moment, “my dignity is destroyed, and then fear comes right there and then. All the terror suddenly possessed my body. It surrounded me and possessed me.” When Anwar asks Oppenheimer if he thinks the people he had tortured had felt the same way, the latter, in a rare off-screen intervention,



Figure 16.6 Anwar watching the interrogation scene in which he portrays a communist.

responds decisively: “Actually, the people you tortured felt far worse because you know it’s only a film. They knew they were being killed.”

While this is no doubt the case, it is also true that the process of reenactment has splintered Anwar’s well-established defense mechanisms, not only deepening his perpetrator trauma but also opening up possibilities for the recognition of his victims’ humanity (Crichlow, 2013) and providing a potential means to relate to their experiences. Shortly afterward, in a much-debated scene, Anwar climbs up to the Medan rooftop that was once his favorite execution spot. Earlier in the film, he had shown Oppenheimer this place, merrily explaining his killing techniques. But this visit is different. The rooftop now triggers memories that are apparently appalling enough to sicken Anwar. Retching and gagging, he reflects, “Why did I have to kill them?” While this scene should not be too hastily interpreted as an expression of sincere feelings of remorse,¹⁰ it does mark Anwar’s heightened and embodied sensitivity for the unfathomable horror he has inflicted on his victims.

Here the viewer begins to grasp the full complexity of the documentary’s reenactments: Suryono’s enacted fantasy of his stepfather’s last moments (filtered through his own traumas); Anwar’s apparent compassion toward Suryono during the torture scene, when he found Suryono’s treatment to be “sadistic”; Anwar’s visceral identification with his own victims in his impersonation of a convicted communist and his later viewing of the performance. In all these scenes discussed above, reenactment, while initially creating a convenient fictional barrier between past and present, ultimately forges a reconnection with the past, opening up at least the possibility for “empathic unsettlement” in the face of the victims’ experiences.¹¹

The audience, too, is not unaffected by these processes. The many close-ups of Anwar watching the restaged horror—with pity, fear, or disgust—suggest an uncomfortable parallel with the viewing behavior of the documentary’s audience. If Anwar can be unsettled by merely *watching* the bullying of Suryono (by no means harsher than Anwar’s actual treatment of presumed communists decades earlier) or the staged execution of a communist, how could he have actually committed these horrors? And how far are we, the sometimes equally appalled spectators of *The Act of Killing*, really removed from the psychology of the mass murderer?¹² The documentary ultimately implicates its Western viewers and asks that they reconsider their geographic, cultural, and moral distance from what they are being shown, a process that is reinforced through the centrality of Hollywood violence as a source of inspiration and as an interpretive frame for the documentary’s protagonists.

This implication of a Western audience in an atrocious historical episode seems to be precisely what Oppenheimer is after, as is already evident in the film’s opening titles, which emphasize that the mass killings were conducted “with the direct aid of western governments.” In his analysis of the facilitating role that the US State Department and the CIA played in the violence, Errol Morris rhetorically wonders, “Is this a story about Indonesia or also a story about us? [...] Have we erased the memory of what happened?”

Have we denied our own complicity?” (Morris, 2013). More than the suggestion of US political involvement, however, it is the unpredictable effect of reenactment that in *The Act of Killing* turns the viewers into what Michael Rothberg has called “implicated subjects.” With this open-ended concept, Rothberg theorizes the “ongoing, uneven, and destabilizing intrusion of irrevocable pasts into an unredeemed present” (2019, p. 9). More specially, the term points to subject positions that are implicated in or “folded into” (the persistent repercussions of) historical events, even when these events “at first seem beyond our agency as individual subjects” (2019, p. 1). Rothberg’s concept thus “move[s] us away from overt questions of guilt and innocence and leave[s] us in a more complex and uncertain moral and ethical terrain” (2013, p. 40). The disturbing emotive force of *The Act of Killing* is due precisely to such a dynamic of implication. Destabilizing comforting distinctions between the past and the “active presentness” (Bruzzi, 2020, p. 50) of its restaging, between dramatic reconstruction and traumatic repetition, cinematic and physical violence, and ultimately between the psychic world of the mass murderer and that of the viewer, the documentary precludes the audience’s detachment from the violence displayed.

The Missing Picture¹³

While *Waltz with Bashir* and *The Act of Killing* largely address the traumatic experiences of perpetrators and bystanders, Rithy Panh’s *The Missing Picture* focuses on the victims of historical mass violence. However, like the other two documentaries, Panh’s film privileges imaginative reenactment over documentary film’s more conventional truth claims. Like *Waltz with Bashir*, *The Missing Picture* is motivated by an ambiguous stance toward the value of direct, visual evidence of traumatic realities while also expressing trust in reenactment as a medium suited to the evocation and working through of past horrors.

The Missing Picture engages with Panh’s personal experiences before, during, and after the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia (1975–1979), including his time spent in a forced labor camp where most of his family members perished. As is well known, the Khmer Rouge’s agricultural reforms, their summary executions, and the incarceration and torture of supposed political opponents in labor camps resulted in the deaths of approximately 1.7 million Cambodians.¹⁴ While Panh’s filmography contains many films dealing with this historical episode, most notably *Rice People* (1993) and *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (2003), *The Missing Picture* was, until recently, the only film to draw from his personal biography.

Panh uses mixed media—including dioramas, tableaux, photographs, and fragments from his earlier films—to tell the heartrending story of his family’s demise. Meanwhile, the film’s poetically intoned first-person narration provides a self-conscious reflection on the images being shown and the story being told, raising epistemological and ethical doubts about this project. We learn that Panh initially set out to find photographic evidence

of executions carried out (for instance, at the Choeung Ek killing fields) by the Khmer Rouge. Such material was not found, and Panh reflects that, had it been available, he “could not show it, of course.” Panh’s musings here are strongly reminiscent of the discussion between *Shoah* director Claude Lanzmann and Jean-Luc Godard about a hypothetical reel showing the extermination of Jews inside a gas chamber. Lanzmann claimed that, were he to have found such a reel, he would have destroyed it (Cazenave, 2018, p. 52). Not only does Panh insist on the inappropriateness of showing such material (had it existed), but he also questions the value it would have: “What does an image of death reveal?” (*Que montre une image de mort?*).

In his search for images of the atrocities, Panh does unearth canisters of pre-communist footage as well as Khmer Rouge propaganda. The regime in Cambodia did not produce as much propagandistic material as its counterparts in Vietnam or China, yet the entourage of Pol Pot was well aware of the power of the image, and the Khmer Rouge employed a marked visual strategy from the early stages of their rule onward.¹⁵ Taking great pains to destroy the memory of pre-communist cultural life and eliminate its carriers (Schlund-Vials, 2016), the regime imposed its own grand narratives of hard-won social equality, agricultural modernization, and historical progression upon Cambodia’s inhabitants (Torchin, 2014).

Consequently, the missing picture (*l’image manquante*) of the title possesses a plethora of varied yet resonant associations. Besides the missing photographs of executions, the phrase refers to the cultural images of Cambodian life before 1975 (including its thriving musical and cinematic scenes) that the regime hoped to efface from collective memory. Yet the term also points to the injustices not documented by the regime. For instance, the tragedy of the forced evacuation of Phnom Penh’s residents to the countryside is, in the period’s official discourse and imagery, also a “missing picture.”

Most importantly, what is missing in the carefully orchestrated propaganda are the personal experiences and stories of those individuals who fell victim to the regime. When showing archival aerial footage of the deserted capital in the wake of the communist overthrow, the voice-over remarks: “The revolution is so pure that there is no room for humans.” Later, in a more personal tone, Panh’s narrator invokes his own family of imprisoned urban intellectuals: “The missing picture, that is us.”

It is in this context that Panh’s mixed-media approach acquires its full force. The director commissioned elaborate dioramas from the Cambodian sculptor Sarith Mang. These detailed miniature worlds depict myriad settings, including Panh’s childhood home, the camps where he worked, the hospital where his mother and sister died, and the film studios where he spent much of his childhood before the Khmer Rouge takeover. These sets are populated with figurines that have been made with clay from Cambodia’s rice fields and killing fields. The resulting scenes are often gruesome, depicting executions and starvation, and are sometimes imaginative—picturing, for instance, the funeral rite that his father never received. The dioramas

and figurines are regularly interspersed with and superimposed over archival footage and propaganda material. Panh thus restores a human perspective, “peopling” the Khmer Rouge’s empty utopias with the disfigured bodies and heart-wrenching stories of its victims. In *The Missing Picture*, it is reenactment that allows the director to imaginatively make up for the unrecorded experiences of those whom the regime made suffer.

Besides the figurines and dioramas, Panh uses montage and patchwork frames to juxtapose historically disparate archival images, comparing, for instance, the streets of Phnom Penh before and after the advent of the communists. In all these cases, he does not supplant one image for another but rather develops a mode of editing that preserves historical and ideological multi-layeredness. Through such a rearrangement of existing material, the film explores what seems to be the director’s haunting self-reflection: how can documentary film bear witness to historical atrocities if the same medium was used to efface past crimes or to airbrush them with propagandistic lies?

Panh’s reflection on his chosen medium, and the reality it can create, is exemplified well in a scene toward the close of the film. What appear to be Panh’s hands investigate a damaged film reel. The narrator says, “We understand the Khmer Rouge on seeing their footage. Pol Pot forges a reality conformant with his desire.” The scene cuts to a diorama in which prisoners, guarded by Khmer Rouge soldiers, watch a film. The figurines, looking exhausted and dispirited, stand in stark contrast to the zealous revolutionary fighters shown on screen. The narrator explains that the camp prisoners were made to watch films about the “brave fight against the colonialists.” At such a moment, the inmates, including Panh, would opt to sleep in the back (Figure 16.7). Here, too, Panh does not contest one vision of reality with a



Figure 16.7 The inmates of a forced labor camp watch a propaganda film, as shown in *The Missing Picture*.

vision of his own. Rather than taking recourse to the uncomplicated referentiality associated with the indexical image, he reframes existing material (the propaganda film on screen), embedding it within the imaginative reenactment (the diorama of camp life) to convey personal and emotional truths about historical trauma.

These reframing strategies are not merely visual. The director also embeds his own mnemonic project within an intertextual network of what Michael Rothberg (2009) has called “multidirectional memory.” Through his implicit reference to the notorious Lanzmann-Godard disagreement, for instance, the director places his film in dialogue with the memory of the Holocaust. It is hard to miss, moreover, how the intonation of Panh’s solemn and poetic French voice-over alludes to the narrator in Alain Resnais’s seminal *Nuit et Brouillard* (1955), arguably the first documentary about the Holocaust. The film thus aligns itself both aesthetically and intellectually with Holocaust memory in order to create a context for its discussion of the lesser-known Cambodian genocide.¹⁶

In his work on “multidirectional memory,” Rothberg resists the widespread notion that the cultural memories of diverse groups will inevitably compete for public and political recognition. Instead, he argues, it was precisely the growing intellectual attention to the Holocaust in the second half of the 20th century that created possibilities for the articulation of other cultural memories in public debate, especially those concerning colonial violence. Instead of being fixed and isomorphic with static group identities, cultural memory, according to Rothberg, is a dynamic and open-ended process that is subject to intercultural exchange (2009, pp. 1–29). In *The Missing Picture*, the European cultural memory of the Holocaust serves as a persistent (yet implicit) multidirectional reference, which imbues Panh’s concerns about Cambodian historical trauma with additional force and meaning.

Panh’s film not only refracts Cambodia’s recent traumatic history through an ethical and epistemological debate about Holocaust representation but also leans heavily on European psychoanalytic models of traumatic memory. Explaining the motivation for his cinematic quest, the narrator notes: “In the middle of life childhood returns. Like water, bitter and sweet. I seek my childhood like a lost picture [*une image perdue*]. Or rather it seeks me. ... The memory is there now.” This passage returns throughout the film, each time using slightly different wording: “In the middle of life childhood returns, bitter and sweet, with its images.” These remarks invoke yet another connotation for the “picture” (*l’image*) of the title, associating it with the long-repressed but emergent (visual) memory of childhood experiences, a complex of recollections tainted simultaneously by trauma and nostalgia (being bitter *and* sweet). The traumatic undertones receive the most attention; childhood’s horrors and losses, it is suggested, are subject to a post-traumatic repetition compulsion. They return, “seeking” Panh as if by their own volition.

This interpretation is confirmed in the film's finale. A diorama shows a clichéd psychoanalytic setting: an analyst sits in a chair beside a patient (presumably Panh himself) lying on a couch, his gaze fixed on the ceiling. Looming over the scene is an iconic photograph of Sigmund Freud. "Sometimes, I see a child. Let's say it's me," says the narrator, and immediately the adult patient is replaced with the brightly clothed figurine that, throughout the film, has represented the childhood version of Panh. Superimposed over the (now again adult) patient on the couch are real-life shots from a forced labor camp, suggesting that the patient is seeing these images. The stereotypical Freudian scene serves as shorthand for a European psychoanalytic paradigm of trauma, yet the narrator quickly rejects the therapeutic trajectory habitually associated with it: "They say talking helps. You understand. You get over it. For me, this wisdom will never be. I seek no picture of loved ones, I long to touch them."

Panh thus references Western paradigms of personal and historical trauma, yet not to subscribe to them wholeheartedly but to place them (critically) in a constellation that includes other, culturally embedded mourning traditions. As Jennifer Cazenave remarks, Southeast Asian mourning practices differ significantly from those in the West, as the dead are typically "considered social actors who demand in the present moment material care from mourners rather than memorialization" (2018, p. 58). The specific meanings and rituals of mourning in *The Missing Picture* underline the importance of a historically and culturally sensitive approach to trauma. In his study *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma out of Bounds*, Stef Craps scrutinizes a Western-centric understanding that sees trauma as the result of one discrete and shocking event, the "railway accident" or wartime "shellshock" being paradigmatic cases in this tradition. Such a conceptualization of trauma has long blinded researchers to more incremental and accumulative instances of traumatization, for instance, in (post)colonial contexts. Criticizing the persistence of Eurocentric and universalizing tendencies in trauma theory, Craps advocates a scholarly attitude that "take[s] account of the specific social and historical contexts in which trauma narratives are produced and received, and [that is] open and attentive to the diverse strategies of representation and resistance that these contexts invite or necessitate" (2013, p. 5). While referencing a western psychoanalytic tradition of trauma theory, Panh foregrounds its limitations and puts forward an alternative approach.

The figurines are essential in this respect, and their creation is part of the film's story. When Panh shows the sculptor's hands carving out figures representing the bodies of his family members, the narrator's solemn voice, as if to highlight the activity's ritualistic significance, remarks: "With clay and water, with the dead, with rice fields, with living hands, a man is made." Only when given new symbolic bodies—materially connected to life and death, to the rice fields *and* the Khmer Rouge's killing fields—can Panh's family members become recipients of material care. Such posthumous care

is perhaps enacted most powerfully when Panh gives his father the burial he never received. In reality, the camp guards had taken away his father's corpse, and Panh's mother had told her children that he really "should have been buried by his own." Panh stages the ceremony. Several figurines dressed in white, the color traditionally associated with mourning, stand in line to pay their last respects.

Even as he borrows from European discourses about psychic and cultural trauma, Panh shows himself keenly aware of their limitations. Set against a habitual focus on words (e.g., Freud's "talking cure") and images (the mentally engraved image of psychic trauma, but also the hypothetical, gruesome historical picture) is the performative mode. Giving "flesh" to his deceased family members and reenacting their stories, he relates to their loss not only through word and image but also, primarily, through the tactility of touch. Reenactment allows, moreover, not merely for victims' lives and deaths to be reconstructed but also for imagined and symbolic forms of redress to be performed. If the paradoxes of verbal and visual representation are associated with trauma, the performative logic of reenactment—with its material, embodied, and interactive qualities—clears a path toward mourning.¹⁷

Conclusion

The three documentaries discussed in this chapter all embark on a hazardous journey. Each addresses violent events that have long been repressed, both psychologically and politically. In the wake of such histories, the documentary filmmaker may seem to be shouldered with the task of representing and reconstructing, of filling in the blanks in the history books, and of unearthing long-buried memories of unfathomable cruelty. In North America and Europe, debates about the Holocaust in the postwar period often pivoted on the duty to reestablish the truths of historical violence. Such a task has often come with a recognition that conventional modes of representation fall short in the face of unspeakable horrors. In his introduction to *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the Final Solution*, Saul Friedländer points to a widely shared belief that the Holocaust is best represented through an "allusive or distanced realism [...] which leaves the unsayable unsaid" (1992, p. 17). This mode of representation (to which literature and art are often thought to have privileged access) expresses a belief that histories of mass violence simultaneously demand and elude understanding.

Folman, Oppenheimer, and Panh have obviously been influenced by these arguments, yet their approaches are not burdened with the epistemological and ethical orthodoxies that so often inform debates about Holocaust representation. Instead of working with an "allusive or distanced realism," they address historical horrors in a style that is at once direct *and* imaginative. In their films, reenactment erodes the distance that directors, subjects, or spectators may hope to maintain to the histories addressed, opening up

embodied and affective connections to the past. Moreover, the frequent overlap in all three documentaries, between dramatic or cinematic reenactment on the one hand, and traumatic repetition on the other, further problematizes the temporal distance to the historical events invoked.

While undermining temporal and emotional detachment, the films simultaneously violate the deep-seated expectation that documentary film provides immediate access to the real. *Waltz with Bashir*, *The Act of Killing*, and *The Missing Picture* self-consciously exhibit their imaginative and performative recreations of historical reality. Consequently, when measured against the ideal of truthfulness and literality (invoked in Nick Fraser's review of *The Act of Killing* [2013]), they may appear worthless, even blasphemous. However, if one follows Stella Bruzzi's argument that documentary is "a perpetual negotiation between the real event and its representation" (2006, p. 13), it becomes clear that these films exacerbate and highlight, in a self-reflective way, the performative element that is always already at the basis of the genre. Importantly, in the films discussed here, this performativity is never an instance of gratuitous postmodern self-doubt and meta-discourse. In the wake of incomprehensibly cruel events, the question of how best to represent history, and consequently how to make sense of it, is of acute relevance—to individual victims, to bystanders, and perpetrators, and to their larger communities.

We may now see how *Waltz with Bashir*, *The Act of Killing*, and *The Missing Picture* are not simply to be measured within a paradigm of representation and its oft-invoked cognates: accuracy, immediacy, and objectivity. Instead, they hinge on the performative, that is, they do rather than show: these documentaries enact representation's difficulties, explore memory's workings, and chart reenactment's effects. And most importantly, in doing so, they implicate subjects, directors, and spectators in the pasts they confront.

Notes

- 1 Kaja Silverman, too, notes that "the repetition through which psychic mastery is established exists in [...] an intimate relation with the repetition through which it is jeopardized" (1992, p. 61).
- 2 The index, as part of the semiotics developed by Charles Sander Peirce, constitutes a sign that is linked to reality by causality or proximity (Hongisto, 2015). This means that the photographic image, or moving image in the case of film, contains an imprint of reality, presumably without (human) interference. This understanding of the "indexical quality" of the moving image is what gives it its "evidentiary status" and what has lent documentary its "truth status" (Nichols, 2010, pp. 35–36).
- 3 Bill Nichols offers a similar view when he claims that "the very syntax of reenactments affirms the having-been-thereness of what can never, quite, be here again. Facts remain facts, their verification possible, but the iterative effort of going through the motions of reenacting them imbues such facts with the lived stuff of immediate and situated experience" (2008, p. 80).
- 4 *Waltz with Bashir* was nominated for both the Academy Award and the Golden Globe for Best Foreign Language Film, winning the latter. As Raya Morag notes, the film was released in Israel, France, Germany, the United States,

- Finland, Switzerland, Belgium, and Australia (2012, p. 94), signaling its international presence and intended audience.
- 5 As Ruth Leys (2000) shows in her in-depth discussion of the western intellectual history of psychic trauma, the issue of the veridical or literal nature of the traumatic dream or flashback has been contested ever since the conceptualization of trauma. Leys critically discusses an increasingly dominant tradition (in literary studies and psychiatry alike) that takes the traumatic image as an unassimilated shard of the distressing event itself, an element that essentially defies the mediation and sense-making of narrative and that is relived or reexperienced by trauma patients in pristine form.
 - 6 Michael Figueroa (2020) arrives at similar conclusions about the lopsided treatment of trauma in his detailed analysis of the auditory make-up of the film. He notices that the highly diverse musical soundtrack, composed by Max Richter, occasionally works to aestheticize the process of memory recovery but more often accentuates the dissonance between diegetic events on the one hand and extra-diegetic, retroactive attempts at sense-making on the other. Through such dissonance, the soundtrack conveys a generalized notion of the senselessness and absurdity of warfare while also retaining the specific focus on Folman's perpetrator trauma. According to Figueroa, the film's almost exclusive preoccupation with the experience of the protagonist "sublates the victim's trauma within [Folman's] own sublimation of trauma" (p. 138).
 - 7 As Anderson (2013, pp. 281–282) explains, official accounts of the 1965 events tended to cling to euphemistic language, according to which the communists had been "secured," a discourse that left no space for celebrations of the killers' (self-declared) heroism.
 - 8 The Indonesian term for "gangster" that the perpetrators use to describe themselves derives from the Dutch *vrijman* (literally "free man"), a term used during the Dutch colonial period to designate entrepreneurial urban gangsters who often performed auxiliary services to the colonial authorities.
 - 9 In her analysis of the documentary, Saira Mohammed goes so far as to describe the entire film-within-the-film as "a manifestation of Anwar's 'repetition-compulsion'" (2015, p. 1196).
 - 10 Some reviewers are more cynical about the sincerity of Anwar's emotions in this scene. Jonathan Lamb helpfully offers two possible readings of this moment in the film: "The first is that the emotion caused by the reenactment must be utterly excessive, as excessive as the limitless cruelty it mourns and the inexpiable guilt it confesses. [...] The second is that Anwar has finally figured out what Oppenheimer was after and is faking it" (2020a, p. 96). Errol Morris adheres to the second stance, describing Anwar's behavior as "one more performance for himself and for us" (Morris, 2013). Oppenheimer only partly agrees, saying in the interview with Morris that while Anwar may be well aware of the camera, "he allows the past to hit him with an unexpected force in that moment" (Morris, 2013). Others have criticized *The Act of Killing's* apparent insistence on the power of redemption, a message that is allegedly imposed through Oppenheimer's editing choices: presenting the footage of Anwar's retching at the rooftop as the film's culmination, Oppenheimer constructs (rather than documents) a story about the ultimately "unavoidable implications of [Anwar's] crimes against others" (Crichlow, 2013, p. 41).
 - 11 Dominick LaCapra, writing about the role of trauma and affect in historiography, proposes "empathic unsettlement" as a desired attitude when relating to the traumas of others. This unsettlement is not to be confused with a straightforward identification with victims. Rather, it is a mode of understanding that "poses a barrier to closure in discourse and places in jeopardy harmonizing or spiritually uplifting accounts of extreme events from which

- we attempt to derive reassurance or a benefit” (LaCapra, 2001, pp. 41–42). The phantasmagoric afterlife scene in *The Act of Killing* presents a bizarre and extreme variant of such a “spiritually uplifting account.” Immediately after this spectacle, however, Oppenheimer shows Anwar’s unsettlement in watching the interrogation scene. Here, the reassurance created through self-staged redemption is decisively undone.
- 12 As Michael Meyer aptly remarks: “While [Anwar] Congo never comes across as likeable, there’s something disturbingly relatable about his vanity and delusion” (2013).
 - 13 We would like to express our gratitude to Stéphanie Benzaquen-Gautier for her helpful comments on an earlier version of the analysis in this section.
 - 14 The identity of the victimized groups remains a contentious issue today. The hybrid U.N./Cambodian War Crimes Tribunal, officially called the “Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia,” only refers to the ethnic genocide of the Muslim Cham and the Vietnamese (see <https://www.eccc.gov.kh/en/case/topic/119>). However, as Cathy J. Schlund-Vials notes, “the sick, the starving, the weak, and the elderly” were also targeted, as were the Khmer Khrom and “those who carried the most pre-revolutionary memory: teachers, lawyers, judges, civil servants, doctors, court dancers, royal musicians, artists, and returning Cambodian expatriates” (2016, p. 288).
 - 15 For a closer analysis of the Khmer Rouge’s (visual) propaganda strategies, see Stéphanie Benzaquen-Gautier (2016, pp. 18–30).
 - 16 In 1979 Panh fled to Thailand, from where he continued to France to settle as a refugee. He received his cinematic training there. It should thus not be surprising that he filters his approach to the Cambodian atrocities through (French) Holocaust-based discussions and aesthetic strategies. For more on Panh as a transnational filmmaker, see Jennifer Cazenave (2018).
 - 17 In one of Panh’s most recent films, *Graves without a Name* (2018), mourning is at the center as he takes part in a variety of rituals to communicate with his family beyond the grave and to locate their remains.

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