Mass killings represented: the movies of Panh and Oppenheimer

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My movie and its title ‘The Missing Picture’ was partly inspired by my search for a photograph of an execution that a Khmer Rouge guard once told me about. The missing picture, maybe it’s the images of genocide that don’t exist. Maybe they’re lost, maybe they’re buried somewhere, maybe someone hid them.1

John Kiriakou

The Cambodian-French film director Rithy Panh is never too tired to explain why he made his successful Oscar-nominated odyssey of loss and torment in the period 1975-1979, when Pol Pot’s reign of terror was accountable for the death of at least 1.7 million people. The movie is an unusual one in the genre; hundreds of carefully carved clay figurines tell the story of the many dead in Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge regime as a result of medical neglect, starvation, slave-like working conditions and executions. The scenes are interspersed with propaganda materials of Democratic Kampuchea; footage that was recovered by the Vietnamese army after it toppled the regime at the end of 1979.

Realist factual footage of mass killings is very scarce. We have exactly 1 minute and 59 seconds of moving images of the executions of Jews in Eastern Europe; similar visual representation of executions of Kulaks during the Great Terror or the starvation of Chinese during Mao’s Great Leap Forward is equally absent. Panh’s choice to represent the trauma of the Cambodian democide by artificial means is motivated by a well-known filming technique known as ‘distancing’ or ‘defamiliarization’. It disrupts the viewer’s emotional indulgence and absorption in a taken-for-granted story, instead of a more uncomfortable or ‘banality of evil’. The occasion enables the act, but individuals are still able to refuse under extreme circumstances, as is shown by Panh’s not Oppenheimer’s movie.

In a recent book, Dutch sociologist Abram de Swaan makes a more convincing argument than Oppenheimer does. The ‘crop of humans’ is a process of killing people, often randomly executed, go back in history far beyond modern times, but the organized mass killings we have seen in the last century have been possible only in societies where social compartmentalization has taken place. The killings are enabled by a deliberate cutting of social contacts between the majority and a condemned minority. Exclusion on a large scale leads to extermination at a certain point within special compartments, which have been physically or mentally erected by the genocide acting on behalf of the killers. But this doesn’t mean that everybody becomes a killer when circumstances are ‘right’, De Swaan repeatedly warns. And he categorically calls into doubt Hannah Arendt’s ‘banality of evil’. The occasion enables the act, but individuals are still able to refuse under extreme circumstances, as is shown by Panh’s not Oppenheimer’s movie.

Indonesia and Cambodia

In his book, De Swaan deals with a large number of genocidal regimes, ranging from Nazi Germany to the nearly forgotten campaign against the Mayan indians of Guatemala under the regime of Efrain Rios Montt in 1982 and 1983. Suharto’s regime started as a reign of terror driven by an organized military group and ended with a mega-pogrom. To suggest that the motives of people like Anwar Congo were commonplace, seriously undermines the ways in which they became involved in these killings. In Cambodia, the mysterious Communist Party went on a rampage against its own population. In both cases the compartmentalization of their self-created adversaries was the motive and the orchestrated means of the killers. The Khmer Rouge’s mass slaughtering did contain elements of an enacted utopia, inspired by Maoist China, and the temptation of the utopia shown by Panh’s not Oppenheimer’s movie.

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References
1 IDFa master class in Amsterdam, 22 November 2013.