Mass killings represented: the movies of Panh and Oppenheimer
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Published in:
IIAS Newsletter

Citation for published version (APA):
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The Focus

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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 Akomfrah

Acts of killings

Oppenheimer’s ‘The Act of Killing’ (jugal or ‘Execution(ers)’ in Khmer) was the big surprise at Venice 2012. Unlike Rithy Panh, Oppenheimer exclusively used the staged memory of criminal and paramilitary vigilantes who did the dirty business for the Indonesian army and the politicians who toppled President Sukarno in 1965. TheAudet de 30 September 1965 brought Suharto's military junta to power. In a wave of killings lasting five months, members of the Special Forces, ad hoc criminal gangs and religious Muslim fanatics destroyed the lives of at least, and possible more than, half a million people. Unlike the Khmer Rouge leaders, these people were never brought to justice. Instead, they continue to be feared and in a certain way respected, still enjoying the admiration of many in Indonesia. Two protagonists prominently figure in The Act of Killing: Anwar Congo (72) and Adi Zulkadry (69) - who re-enact their own roles during the murderous events. Anwar was a petty thug in the mid-1960s, trafficking in movie-tickets. Adi was a leading founder of the paramilitary Pancasila Youth and a member of its elite death unit, the Frog Squad. Embarrassingly for Indonesia's democratic rulers, Anwar maintained personal relations with a local newspaper editor who played a coordinating role during the massacre. But similarly uncomfortable is the appearance in the film of the victims with their executioners.

Graphic details of killing

This attitude is clearly absent in Indonesia. When it comes to represent the trauma of the Cambodian genocide by art means is motivated by the viewer’s emotional indulgence and absorption in a taken-for-granted story, instead of a more general picture of extreme asymmetric power balance.

References

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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 armed with a megaplan. To suggest that the massacres of people like Anwar Congo were commonplace, seriously underestimates 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 adversities 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 Kudeta of 30 September 1965 brought about a mega-pogrom. To suggest that the motives of killing sprees. Adi reminisces the view of the victor’s justice. “War crimes are defined by the victors.”

De Swaan repeatedly makes a more convincing argument than Oppenheimer does. The films of human rights-thousands of people, often not 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 a particular social compartments, which have been physically or mentally erected by the genocide acting on behalf of their 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.

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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 figures 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 1978. 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 Khulas 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 decimation by artificial means is motivated by the well-known filming technique known as ‘distanting’ or ‘depersonalization’. It disrupts the viewer’s emotional indulgence and absorption in a taken-for-granted story, instead of a more general picture of extreme asymmetric power balance.

For Panh, the picture that was missing was a personal one that he never will get to see. “It’s the one that I miss the most. It’s to see my parents get old, to be able to share time with them now, to help them, to love them, to give them back what they gave me,” he said to Le Point reporter Oto-Dit-Biot. “I would prefer to have my parents with me than to make movies about the Khmer Rouge” (Le Point 3-10-2013).

The near absence of victims in Oppenheimer's movie is for good reason. Filmmakers in Indonesia are confronted by an officially encouraged conspiracy of silence about the past, this is unlike in Cambodia where, already in 1979, the Vietnamese advisors of the Heng Samrin government tried to bring Pol Pot and Khmer Rouge Foreign Minister Ieng Sary to justice. This trial, often considered a ‘show trial’, resulted in death penalties, which for lack of defendants in custody were never actually carried out. And it took nearly two decades to successfully arrest and imprison some leaders and absorption in a taken-for-granted story, instead of a more general picture of extreme asymmetric power balance.

Oppenheimer’s movie is, nevertheless, path-breaking in its unwillingness to let the story be told. Where Panh reinforces his cinematic testimony by alternating sequences from propaganda movies (shot by China-trained Khmer Rouge cameramen) with stills of the clay puppets, Oppenheimer leaves us puzzled by phantasmatic shots of a bizarre opera-buffa near Toho Lake, or by a mediated act of removal by Anwar Congo of the scene of one of his former crimes. Both movies confront us with the phenomenon of the mass destruction of humans. In Panh’s filmic strategy to unravel the Khmer Rouge’s desêté” (“better a disaster than a lack of being”). It explains the way it brings back a nearly forgotten way of representing the acts of killing, which were not the sole responsibility of the Indonesian army, but also seemingly ordinary citizens who went on a killing rampage. This is accentuated in the movie by the lurid scenes by those interviewed, and by the stories made public by the victorious Vietnamese army.

In Panh’s movie the graphic details of the killings are portrayed by using clay figurines, whilst Oppenheimer engages instead in re-enactments. Where Panh’s movie represents the Khmer Rouge’s mass slaughtering did contain elements of an enacted utopia, inspired by Maoist China, and the temptation of the Kudeta of 30 September 1965 brought about a mega-pogrom. To suggest that the motives of killing sprees. Adi reminisces the view of the victor’s justice. “War crimes are defined by the victors.”

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