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 Akomfrah

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 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 Khulak in 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 demise by artificial means is motivated by a well-known filming technique known as ‘distinguer’ or ‘defamiliarization’. 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 the one to my parents get older, 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 Ono-Dit-Biot. “I would prefer to have my parents with me than to make movies about the Khmer Rouge” (Le Point 3-10-2013).

It is not Panh’s first movie about Cambodia’s national nightmare. Best known is his 52[1]: The Khmer Rouge Death Machine (2003), followed in 2011 by Duch, Master of the S21: The Khmer Rouge Death Factory (2013). Oppenheimer’s The Act of Killing (jugal or ‘Executioner(s)’ in Indonesia) was the big surprise of 2012. Unlike Rithy Panh, Oppenheimer exclusively used the staged memory of criminal and political vigilantes who did the dirty business for the Indonesian army and the politicians who toppled President Sukarno in 1965. The Auditors of 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 current-day politician Jusuf Kalla, who is seen congratulating the English comic Bookseller over a certain point within special compartments, which have been physically or mentally erected by the genocide’s acting on behalf of 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 genocide regimes, ranging from Nazi Germany to the nearly forgotten campaign against the Mayan indians of Guatemala under the regime of Efraín 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 mega-weapon. To suggest that the murderers of people like Anwar Congo were commonplace, serially underestimates the ways in which they became involved in the 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 experiment is cynically voiced by the French radical philosopher Alain Badiou, who needed 35 years to apologize for his former defense of the Khmer Rouge: ‘Mieux vaut un désastre qu’un désêtre’ (“better a disaster than a lack of being”). It explains very neatly why Rithy Panh, in his movie, avoided confronting the victims with their executioners.

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References

1 EFA master class in Amsterdam, 22 November 2013.