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Kleinen, J.

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Mass killings represented: the movies of Panh and Oppenheimer

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 Khukus 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 genocide by artificial means is motivated by a well-known filming technique known as ‘distancing’ or ‘defamiliarization’. It disrupts the viewer’s emotional indulgence 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 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 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 Omo-Dit-Bidt. “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!: The Khmer Rouge Death Machine (2003), followed in 2011 by Dutch, Master of the Furies of Hell. In between he made movies about the colonial past and the return of refugees to his home country, among others. With his impressive Impasses, a Cambodian tragedy (1997), memorialising the victims portrayed in the thousands of mugshots that the prison guards left at Tuol Sleng, he opted to show the atrocities exclusively from the victims’ perspective. Separating victims from perpetrators seems to be a deliberate choice for Panh. In an interview with Joshua Oppenheimer, the director of The Act of Killing, he said: “Now, since [.]. 521 has been made [.]. there are several films [.]. where they bring the victims and the guards together. But often also against each other’s will. And that gives a kind of sense when you see that kind of encounter between people.”

Acts of killings

Oppenheimer’s Te Act of Killing (jugal or ‘Executioner’) in (2014) was the big surprise of 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. The Audet 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 Kongko (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 Pancasta 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 members of Indonesia’s youth movement, Pemuda Pancasila, for their share in exterminating Indonesian communism.

Revealing is the applauding audience of a TV talk show that visibly enjoy Anwar stories of his killing spree. Adi reminds the viewer of the victor’s justice: “War crimes are defined by the victors. We won.” 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 of the Khmer Rouge, where the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC, better known as the Khmer Rouge Tribunal) could finally start proceedings in 2004. Whatever one’s opinion of the tribunal, at least the Cambodians have sought justice for the victims. Legal actions have been ongoing since 1979, despite disapproval from the UN, which regarded the Khmer Rouge as the official representative of Cambodia until 1993.

References

1 IDFA master class in Amsterdam, 22 November 2013.

John Kleinien

Above: Still from The Missing Picture Copyright ContactFilm.
