Mass killings represented: the movies of Panh and Oppenheimer
Kleinen, J.G.G.M.

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John Kleinen

The Cambodian-French film director Rithy Panh is never too tired to explain why he made his successful documentary on mass murder 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 Khukas 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 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 ‘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

John Kleinen is associate professor emeritus of the

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