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 Kibben

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 and Academy Award-winning documentary about the Khmer Rouge’s, the brutal regime in Cambodia during the 1970s and 1980s, that slaughtered millions, ‘The Missing Picture’ (2013). Oppenheimer, the director of ‘The Act of Killing’ (2012), took a similar approach and made a film that is equally absent. Panh’s choice to represent the trauma of the Cambodian genocide by a well-known filming technique known as ‘distancing’ or ‘depersonalization’ disrupts the viewer’s emotional involvement 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 Omo-Dit-Biot. “I would prefer to have my parents with me than to make movies about the Khmer Rouge” (Punt 3-10-2013). It is not Panh’s first movie about Cambodia’s national nightmare. Best known is his S21: The Khmer Rouge Death Factory (2002), followed in 2011 by Duch, Master of the Forges of Hell, in between he made movies about the colonial past and the return of refugees to his home country, among others. His impressive body of work, including Theact of Killing (2012), for which he was nominated for an Academy Award, are a response to the atrocities committed by the regime of Pol Pot. His work is not only about the regime itself, but also about the after effects of the genocide. His movies are an attempt to bring attention to the human rights violations that took place during the Khmer Rouge’s regime. His films are not only about the past, but also about the present, and how the trauma of the past continues to affect the present.

Acts of killings

Oppenheimer’s ‘The Act of Killing’ (2012) is a disturbing and disturbingly beautiful film. 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 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. Their story is not just about their own roles but also about their roles in the larger context of the Indonesian genocide. Oppenheimer’s film is a powerful reminder of the events of the 1960s and 1970s in Indonesia, and how the past continues to influence the present.

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 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. 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 disagreement from the UN, which regarded the Khmer Rouge as the official representative of Cambodia until 1993.

Graphic details of killing

This attitude is clearly absent in Indonesia. When it comes to the search for historical truth in both countries, Cambodian efforts are evidently more successful. Movies such as those made by Rithy Panh are freely distributed, whilst it would be absolutely unthinkable for films such as The Act of Killing to be promoted by Indonesia as a national product to be proud of – which is exactly what happened with Panh’s movie at Cannes, where it won the prestigious Un Certain Regard award.

Oppenheimer’s movie is, nevertheless, path breaking in 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 hyperbolic shown by those interviewed, and by the stories made public by the victors of the New Order.

In Panh’s movie the graphic details of the killings are portrayed by using clay figurines, whilst Oppenheimer engages in re-enactments to tell his story. Where Panh reinforces his cinematic testimonial 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 Toba Lake, or by a mediated act of remorse by Anwar Congo at the scene of one of his former crimes. Both movies confront us with the phenomenon of the mass destruction of humans. In Panh’s film strategy to unblur the Khmer Rouge’s docudrama, one sees the panic of a regime that fell onto its own sword. This led to its demise but also to a catastrophe for its victims. Oppenheimer’s movie is so disturbing because he suggests that civilian psychopaths or lunatics were mainly responsible for the act of killing.

In a recent book, Dutch sociologist Abram de Swaan makes a convincing argument that Oppenheimer does. ‘The Act of Killing’ shows how hundreds of thousands of 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 genocidal 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-pega. To suggest that the majority of people like Anwar Congo were commonplace, seriously underestimates the ways in which they became involved in the killings. In Congo, in 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 apologise for his former defense of the Khmer Rouge: “Mieux vaut un désastre qu’un désordre” (“better a disaster than a lack of being”). It explains very nearly why Rithy Panh, in his movie, avoided confronting the victims with their executioners.

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References

1 IDFA master class in Amsterdam, 22 November 2013.