Mass killings represented: the movies of Panh and Oppenheimer

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Mass killings represented: the movies of Panh and Oppenheimer

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 Clanton

Acts of killings

Oppenheimer’s ‘The Act of Killing’ (jagal or ‘Executioner’) in Indonesia was the big surprise of 2012. Unlike Rithy Panh, Oppenheimer exclusively used the staged memory of criminal and paramilitary vigilantes who did the dirty work for the Indonesian army and the politicians who toppled President Sukarno in 1965. The August 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 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 enjoys Anwar stories of his killing sprees. Adi reminds the viewer of the victor’s justice: “War crimes are defined by the victors.”

In Panh’s movie the graphic details of the killings are still the curator of Camera Lucida for anthropologists. John Kleinen

References

1 IDFA master class in Amsterdam, 22 November 2013.
3  See: ‘The Act of Killing’ by John Kleinen, 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 désert” (“better a disaster than a desert”).

It is not Panh’s first movie about Cambodia’s national nightmare. Best known is his S21: The Khmer Rouge Death Machine (2002), followed in 2011 by Duw, Master of the Forge 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 Bophana, a Cambodian tragedy of Democratic Kampuchea; footage that was recovered 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 unravel the Khmer Rouge’s democide, 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 more convincing argument than Oppenheimer does.4 The mass slaughtering of 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 conquered minority. Exclusion on a large scale leads to extermination at a certain point within particular compartments, which have been physically or mentally erected by the genocide acting on behalf of the victors. 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 Ixil 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-pogrom. To suggest that the murderers 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 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 désert” (“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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