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Mass killings represented: the movies of Panh and Oppenheimer

John Kleinen

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 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 genocide by artificial means is motivated by an important desire to make the viewer feel as if they are to some extent responsible for what happened. This is the viewer's personal experience, and it is the viewer's experience that is the object of this film. The Act of Killing is about the experience of the viewer as it is given to him by the filmmakers. The Act of Killing is a film about the experience of the viewer as it is given to him by the filmmakers. The Act of Killing is a film about the experience of the viewer as it is given to him by the filmmakers.

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References
1 IFFA master class in Amsterdam, 22 November 2013.

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 hubs shown by those interviewed, and by the stories made public by those who supported the New Order. In Panh’s movie the graphic details of the killings are portrayed by using clay figurines, whilst Oppenheimer engages into re-enactments to tell a 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 Tobo 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 physical manifestation of the mass destruction of humanity. 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 convincing argument against Oppenheimer does. The mass killings 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 persecuted minority. Exclusion on a large scale leads to extermination at a certain point in time, and it is this kind of control that has been taken place.

In both countries the absence of victims in Oppenheimer’s movie is disturbing. For example, it is quite mentioned in Indonesia that the victims are lost, maybe they’re buried somewhere, maybe someone hid them. In Indonesia and Cambodia.

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 communities 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 mass killings of people like Anwar Congo were commonplace, seriously underestimates the ways in which they became involved in these killings. In Indonesia, the mysterious Communist Party went on a rampage against its own population. In both cases the genocidal party of self-proclaimed perpetrators was the motive and the orchestrated means of the killers. The killers’ mass slaughtering did contain elements of an enacted utopia, inspired by Maoist China, and the temptation of the experiment is exclusively 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 explains very naturally why Rithy Panh, in his movie, avoided confronting the victims with their executioners.

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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

Acts of killings

Oppenheimer’s The Act of Killing (jugal or ‘Execution(er)’ in Khmer) was the big surprise at Venice 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. TheAudite 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. Embarassingly 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. We won.”

The near absence of victims in Oppenheimer’s movie is for good reason. Filmakers 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 advisor 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 after 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.