Trajectories of memory embodied in memorial and historical sites

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cholars, artists and eyewitnes-
s participated at a conference in Utrecht 
in 2017 to discuss the history of memory 
embodied in Tuol Sleng, a Phnom Penh 
secondary school converted into a special 
interrogation and execution place by the 
Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. They discussed 
the memorial museum itself, but also artifacts, 
pictures, movies, theatrical productions 
and paintings that contain tangible and 
intangible traces of the Khmer Rouge’s mass 
slaughtering, which turned Cambodia into 
an enactment of an implosion between 1975 and 1979, 
inspired by Maoist China. The results of this 
conference are now bundled in a special 
issue of the French magazine Mémoires-en-Jeu that 
deals with trajectories of memory embodied 
in memorial and historical sites. It also tries to 
analyze what it means in contemporary 
society to memorialize a divided past that 
was accountable for the death of at least 1.7 million people. 

Nowadays Tuol Sleng is open to the public 
as a genocide museum. It plays a role in the 
memorial and historical sites. It also tries to 
analyze what it means in contemporary society to memorialize a divided past that 
was accountable for the death of at least 1.7 million people. 

The display of photographs also played 
a pivotal part in the outreach work of the 
extraordinary chambers in the courts of 
Cambodia (ECCC). While the verdicts of 
judicial cases against the main perpetrators 
might have been a deception for many who 
suffered from the Pol Pot regime, the criminal

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John Kleinen


Special Issue of Mémoires en Jeu, enjeu de société / Memories at Stake, Issues of Society

https://tinyurl.com/memory6-2018

Much attention is devoted to what 
giving others licenses to kill, Pol Pot and 
his henchmen provided the motives and 
orchestrated the means of the killers. 
The special issue, edited by a French-Spanish editorial board (Stéphanie Barzaqueau- 
Gautier, Anne-Laure Porée and Vicente 
Sánchez-Biosca) devotes much space to the 
well-known collection of mugshots that the 
Tuol Sleng prison guards left behind when 
Phnom Penh was liberated on January 7 
by the Vietnamese army and a small group 
of defected Khmer troopers. A small unit 
accompanied by a Vietnamese cameraman 
discovered a place euphemistically called 
Security Office 21 or S-21, which served as 
the main interrogation center for KR-cadres of the Pol Pot regime. The thousands of 
photographs made by the Khmer Rouge in 
the prison became an impressive memorial for 
the victims who were executed 15 kilometers 
away from the killing fields of Cambodia. 
In Tuol Sleng alone an estimated number of 
18,000 people were interrogated, tortured 
and killed. Just a dozen male prisoners and 
four children survived. Pol Pot’s reign of terror 
between 1975 and 1979 was accountable 
for the death of at least 1.7 million people. 

process is, like Sarah Williams argues in her contribution "only one dimension of an ongoing process of remembering" (p.73). Julia M. Fleischman, however, suggests that the results of forensic medical anthropology in the form of human remains are used quite late during the trials of former Khmer Rouge leaders. Her findings are supported by the contributions of Chhay Visoth (about explicit graffiti) and Magali An Berthon (about textile and clothing), who also make an appeal not to dismiss these forms of evidence.

This special issue dealing with the Cambodian genocide – still a term that requires explanation – also gets its weight from the visual material it presents (including archive photos of the museum itself) and the various interviews the editors held with Cambodian and non-Cambodian artists, who were asked to share details of their relationship with Tuol Sleng and the ways in which their work is influenced by the past. The interview by Stéphanie Benzaquen-Gautier with American anthropologist Eve Zucker concludes the section with a fascinating account of memory practices of villagers who try to cope with the horror in their community. It also reflects on the fieldwork she conducted in Cambodia—an experience she recounts in her book Forest of Struggle: Moralities of Remembrance in Upland Cambodia (2013)—as she tracked the recovery of a village community in the southwest of the country, a site that was a Khmer Rouge base and battleground for nearly thirty years. The interview opens up the question of the remembrance of Khmer Rouge atrocities beyond Tuol Sleng and the urban environment. It points to a nationwide traumatic landscape, which in turn helps to better understand the role of the museum in today’s Cambodian memory politics, and to imagine alternative forms of memorialization of a historical period that continues to haunt generations of Cambodians. This closing paper reminds the reader of the limited space most of the authors have contributed to debates about theoretical issues. Ever since Jean Lacouture’s inapt verdict about the Khmer Rouge as an expression of tropical fascism, allusions to the Gulag or Laogai systems have been scarce. As said, the Khmer Rouge’s mass slaughtering as a means to create an enacted utopia, inspired by Maoist China, comes closer to realities than the many references to Nazi-Germany. An approach as proposed by Dutch sociologist Abraham de Swaan in his book The Killing Compartments (2015) might be a way-out to understand and to compare the tragedy that struck the inhabitants of Cambodia between 1975 and 1979.

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