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Filming the face of death: representations of the perpetrators in *S-21, la machine de mort Khmère rouge* and *The Act of Killing*

Abstract

The present work explores the depictions of the executioners in the documentaries *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (S-21, la machine de mort Khmère rouge, Rithy Panh, 2003) and *The Act of Killing* (Joshua Oppenheimer, Christine Cynn, 2012). In this analysis we study different strategies used in both films to make present the past through the memory in the body language and the processes of empathy. Torturers and murderers from the Khmer Rouge regime and from the killings of communists in Indonesia between 1965 and 1966 take part of these strategies to reveal the past. To such purpose, this study firstly proposes a reflection on the way the dominant modes of representation have depicted both historic episodes; and then a three-phase study determined by the strategies applied by both filmmakers: confrontation between the victims and the executioners, reenactment of the acts of torture and killing and the persistency of the past in the today empty spaces. The film analysis is applied on the mentioned films, focused on the analysis and depiction of the *mise-en-scène* and the expressiveness of the faces of the executioners, and particularly on those sequences that display a shared discourse by both directors.

Keywords

Documentary film, genocide, Khmère rouges, Cambodia, Indonesia, executioners, reenactment

1. Introduction: history on trial

In writing this book I have deliberately assumed the peaceful and sober language of the witness, not the lamenting language of the victim or the irate voice of someone seeking revenge; I thought my words would be more credible and useful the more objective they appeared and the less impassioned they sounded: only in this way does the witness on trial fulfill his role, which is that of preparing the ground for the judge. You are my judges (Benchouia, 2006: 8)

The words of Primo Levi serve as introduction to the present work. The extended idea of History being written by the victors should be revised: the official History is written by the victors and also by the victims. As it is not possible to find a story from the past coming from a neutral witness –that neutrality is, in fact, impossible–, the choice between the victim and the executioner as storyteller is the first danger when we look back. This is a false dichotomy where we cannot detect a grayscale not desired by those who see History as a shallow summary of events. However, the many greys we find give a portrait closer to reality and key for the understanding of the episodes described, particularly those of a terrifying nature that cannot be easily identified and understood. But even if we accept this only choice, the victim as a witness reveals himself / herself as someone who has *suffered* in this story, and not as *perpetrator*. Therefore, the testimony of the witness has become fundamental if we want to measure the emotional consequences or even get to know from the inside how the death and destruction machinery worked.

The problem is what is left in this logic of the revision: what about the motivations behind the disaster? To what extent the genocide was preceded by ideological indoctrination? Is it not essential to understand the causes of the human and moral collapse in order to avoid history to be repeated? If so, the key testimony cannot be other than the one from executioners –again, if we accept the simplified point of departure–. Their testimony, usually silenced, can offer a broader view on History and shed some light on the eternal return to barbarism and death that the words of the victims can mourn, but not explain. Therefore, the cold narratives of victory in a war or the automatic demonization, both useless to analyze the logics behind the acts, are endorsed by the omission of the killers' testimony.

In the reflection of History in fiction and non-fiction, the trend to see things in black and white has been reinforced through dozens of films and series about Holocaust. Documentary film is also not free from historiographical positioning, even if non-fiction has not revealed itself as a better place for reflection, with authors like Claude Lanzmann, whose filmography is a work in progress committed to breaking with the traditional modes of representation and approaches.

The present essay aims to study the works of two filmmakers in line with those practices against the tide. The films are *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (S-21, *la machine de mort Khmère rouge*, 2003), from the Cambodian director Rithy Panh, and *The Act of Killing* (2012), a project by Danish filmmaker Joshua Oppenheimer and co-directed by Christine Cynn. In both cases, they approach the history of Cambodian and Indonesian genocides being perfectly aware of the importance of listening to the perpetrators, while they persist in avoiding or changeling the clichés of documentary film. The approach, of course, is not free of ethical problems to be faced: how to film the executioner without condemning him but keeping a position regarding him? And how is it possible to recover the past without using the archive material as common thread? As recalled by Catalá and Cerddá (2007: 17), the guarantee of truth does not lie in media, but in the filmmaker. The films analyzed in the following lines rely on two different but complementary formal proposals, both trying to explain History from the gestures and faces of the executioners. As we will see, to compare the discourses of *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* and *The Act of Killing* can reveal surprising things about historiography and particularly about the perpetration of massive killings.

2. The spectacle of the massacre

The most problematic aspect regarding to the *mainstream* fiction is probably the way in which it might enclose a traumatic event in popular culture. It is not only the narrative

synthesis compelled by film, but also the need of a catharsis that sometimes can limit the possibilities of an uninterrupted discussion about the historical memory. The genocides that took place in Indonesia between 1965 and 1966 and in Cambodia between 1975 and 1979 were reflected by cinema in *The Year of Living Dangerously* (Peter Weir, 1982) and *The Killing Fields* (Roland Joffé, 1984). Interestingly enough, the two films have a lot in common: both show extremely cruel historical episodes witnessed by shocked, bold protagonists, an American photographer (Sam Waterston), in the first case and an Australian reporter (Mel Gibson) in the latter; in both cases they share a strong friendship with a local, a relationship stressing the drama and making them more conscious of the horror they are witnessing. In other words, in both films brutality is helplessly beheld since they belong to a different culture and evoke the myth of the journalist facing the danger in a foreign country.

Somehow, the epic of this representation pushes History and the thinking around it into the background, becoming not passive but surely subordinated. It should also be noted the key differences between them: while Weir's film seeks to capture the critical atmosphere, the moral collapse preceding the failed coup d'état and Suharno takeover and massive killings of alleged communists, Joffé's one is the chronicle of the rise of the Khmer Rouge, the humanitarian catastrophe of Democratic Kampuchea and the fall of the regime after Vietnamese invasion at the beginning of 1979, a story directly linked to the fates of its main characters, Sydney Schanberg (Waterston) and Dith Pran (Haing S. Ngor). However, it is in their respective endings where we find very different approaches. At the end of *The Year of Living Dangerously* we bitterly witness the moral failure of a society from which the protagonist can only escape. On the other hand, *The Killing Fields* concludes with the miraculous reunion between Schanberg and Pran while John Lennon's *Imagine* is heard on the soundtrack. Pran's long suffering is not forgotten, but is somewhat overshadowed in favor of celebration –and claim– of cross-cultural bonds. Against the unease feeling that remains after watching the former, the almost victorious ending of the latter illustrates how in mainstream films emotions prevail and the tragedy is overcome with the message. Then, the main purpose is not to open new spaces for reflection on a past that cannot be repeated, but to find the teachings that will allow to turn the page.

In this regard, non-fiction has shown itself more open to a dialectical concept of History leaving aside the moral unidirectionality of every heroic fiction telling such a terrible facts. Unlike stories following dominant modes of representation, the nature of documentary film has more to do with a pluralistic point of view. Of course this is not a quality inherent in the format, since we can also find the same lack of ambiguity in the epic of a propaganda film or in the victimization endorsed by many documentaries about Holocaust. The ontology of the genre, which has appropriated the close relationship between images and reality, directly inherited from photography (Catalá & Cerdán, 2007: 8), also stress in these cases what Imanol Zumalde and Santos Zunzunegui (2014: 88) have called the *truth effect* generated on the viewers, or the *referential illusion* in terms of structural semiotic. In other words, the aura of truth determined by certain texture and form of documentary films –the one that became canonical– and consolidated by television works in the same way and with approaches less dependent on an ethical distance.

It is therefore interesting to find proposals not taking advantage of that *truth effect* or even daring to subvert it. From that point of view, they distance themselves from commonplaces, mechanisms and resources of the canon so that they can blur the boundaries never clear nor determining of non-fiction. If we consider historiography, we cannot ignore the reuse of two key elements of documentary film: the testimony and the archive footage. In *Shoah* (1985), Claude Lanzmann built his project around the testimonies of the interviewees, with no archival material at all. The people interviewed were survivors, ex-Nazis and witnesses, whose words rebuild History from personal memory. Rithy Panh himself, in order to explain his admiration for Lanzman's work, noted that the genius of

Shoah was precisely in the fact it lets the viewer see through the words (Bataille & Panh, 2011). The absence of images from the past gives way to the oral discourse. The role of the camera is to keep close to the interviewee and to choose the frame, the angle and the movement (if any).

Sometimes, in the midst of a moving narrative, the film focuses on the places where the disaster took place, now empty of archive images and making the past present in spots such as the Warsaw ghetto. As will be discussed later, this is also a resource used in a different way in *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* and *The Act of Killing*. Both films stand out from canonical models and try to rewrite them. Also, they are both groundbreaking approaches taking the executioners as the main reference. In order to evaluate their significance, firstly we need to understand the conditions and intentions we find in their origin.

We can only fully understand *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* in its context: 1) the personal experience of Rithy Panh, who lost his family during the Khmer rouge dictatorship because of the famine and the killings; 2) an audiovisual and literary work devoted to rescue the memory of the Cambodian genocide from a more heterogeneous view, from the intimate and visceral tale of *The elimination* (Bataille & Panh, 2011), to the interview with Duch before being brought to the Khmer Rouge Tribunal in 2009, in *Duch, Master of the Forges of Hell* (Duch, le maître des forges de l'enfer, 2011), and the portrait of the suffering and the horrors of Democratic Kampuchea with clay figures in the animated film *The Missing Picture* (L'image manquante, 2013).

Panh's work is a project trying to recover the memory, reveal the barbarism and remedy the absence of audiovisual testimonies. Always from an ethical and distant point of view. Always, except in *The elimination*, as if the filmmaker would confirm that he can only exorcise the personal trauma by writing –while the image forces him to take a moral stand–. In *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* the ethical imperative of the image is always present since Panh films the encounters between victims and executioners, even if there's an important issue to be considered here: at first, the filmmaker had not intended to confront them. In an interview with Joshua Oppenheimer (2012: 243-244), he explained it as follows:

I didn't wish the victims and the guards to meet. The encounter between Nath and Hoi happened as a result of an earlier film *Bophana* [*Bophana, une tragédie cambodgienne: Bophana A Cambodian Tragedy*, 1996, France/Cambodia]. I felt that it wasn't right to impose on the victims the difficulty of meeting their former guards. So during the interview with Hoi I asked Nath not to come while he was shooting that interview. So it rained, and he had to continue the next day so he said don't come the next day either. Nath came looking for paintbrushes and that was how he met Hoi. So what he did when he meet him... he was very nervous at first so he took him by the shoulder and he led him round and showed him all the paintings that he'd made for the museum. And in front of each painting he asked, is this true or not? Nath had not seen the events that he was depicting in the painting but it had been told about them, so he wanted to verify that they were correct. And there were times when he could say 'I've really seen this scene and I've painted it like this'

And so that convinced me that the testimony was not complete unless it was a testimony from both sides of the situation. And it's after that that I suggested to Nath to continue with his film on S21.

On the other hand, *The Act of Killing* needs a prior contextualization in order to understand its strategy to access to the past. Oppenheimer's documentary film not only place the executioners and torturers of alleged communists center stage, like Anwar Congo or Herman Koto, but also urges them to reenact the killings using the conventions of classic film genres like musical or gangster film. The reenactment itself is not an original idea from

Oppenheimer: in his essay *Show of Force: A Cinema-séance of power and violence in Sumatra's Plantation Belt* the filmmaker tells he found his inspiration in the Indonesian propaganda film *Pengkhianatan G 30 S/PKI*, (Arifin C. Noer, 1984). During 24 years, it was mandatory for the Indonesian population to watch this almost 4-hours documentary films in theaters and television until Suharto's resignation in 1998:

The film restages the night of 30 September 1965 as a curious blend of documentary exposé, political thriller and slasher movie. It opens and closes as sensational reportage (black-and-white archival footage and photographs; shots of documents and newspaper clippings; a mastering narration over dramatic music) while the requirements of a thriller narrative are fulfilled through a plot performed by shadowy enemies of state, here played by treasonous PKI villains. The slasher aesthetic renders the graphic murder of the six generals at the hands of a communist mob, their genitals mutilated in a sadomasochistic orgy perpetrated by members of the PKI-affiliated Gerwani (Women's Movement), burnt with cigarettes, slashed with razor blades, stabbed with bayonets, beaten with rifle butts, all to the accompaniment of wild chanting and drums. (Oppenheimer & Uwemedimo, 2012: 289)

What we get from that surprising mixture of genres is a docudrama focused not only on the glorification of the patriotic feelings, but mainly on the graphic portrait of tortures and killings of the generals, who are considered as martyrs. The film tries, of course, to construct an official history and to justify the mass killings that followed the failed coup, as well as telling the audience who is the real enemy¹. Where others would choose to use archival footage and the documentary film texture in order to legitimize a vision of History, the creators of *Pengkhianatan G 30 S/PKI* used the conventions of political thriller. This is what actually fascinated Oppenheimer and led him 30 years later to focus his film in a similar way and access to the past and to the executioner's emotions, strongly linked to it. In the interviews to Anwar Congo and Herman Koto in *The Act of Killing*, we find the same strategy as in *Pengkhianatan G 30 S/PKI*. The difference is the latter uses it against its protagonists: they believe they are film stars, they even boast about being gangsters, and the reenactment of their crimes, certainly a source of pride for them, becomes a charging document that leads the way of the past through the present.

3. Stage 1: Confrontation

This holds true both for the executioners and the victims. It works like a trace eroding the moving image, in the same way that words are present in the Warsaw's ghetto in *Shoah*. In *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*, the encounter between the former guardians and the prisoners gives way to a dialogue driven by Nath. At first, he tries to appeal to the logic and the reasons behind the acts of an individual in order to understand the behavior of the men in front of him during the Angkar years. The confrontation leads to surprising results. There's a scene where language is not enough to define the tragedy. It even reveals itself to be problematic when doing justice to the memory. Nath asks their interlocutors if they see themselves as victims. One of them speaks first and argues that he feels like he has been involved in an accident. Then another one states that all of them were victims without exception. Nath skeptically replies: «*Now if those who worked here are victims, what about prisoners like me?*». He clarifies they were *secondary victims*, since they would be killed if they didn't obey. Therefore, the difference between *victims* and *executioners* is only valid

¹ Oppenheimer and Uwemedino stress the compulsory status of the movie: families were forced to watch it on TV and school groups went to theaters to attend the screenings: "The film was mandatory viewing every year for twenty-four years on Indonesian television and in all cinemas until Suharto resigned in 1998. Schools would visit the cinema, and families were compelled to watch the film on TV" (Oppenheimer & Uwemedimo, 2012; 289).

from the moral perspective of a former prisoner, but not from jailer's one, since they cannot identify themselves as the perpetrators. There's no remorse in their words and gestures, as if they would express actions for which they are not responsible. It is as if the Angkar would have deprived their soul, leaving them no choice.

Shortly after, another sequence shows a double confrontation. Inside one of the rooms of S21, Nath keeps asking the former guards in front of one of the paintings (picture 1), in which we see one of the cells packed with prisoners lying on the floor under the watchful eye of a guard. During the first seconds, Nath is located on the left of the painting, while the executioners stay on the right. All of them are like an audience peeking into a window of the past, a past that must be decoded, an earlier and subjective time they speak about without finding points of agreement: the first one can only recover it from the interiority of his memories; the others, however, look from the exteriority of their acts. The painter recalls his suffering and that of the other prisoners, the beatings and tortures, the hunger and overcrowding. When questioning the others about the reasons for such savagery, they can only blame the party: «...we couldn't hesitate, we had to be determined, even with brothers or parents». Nath still tries to find a logic behind the atrocities, and ask them if the children, some not even a year old and still breast-fed, were also *enemies*. But it is useless. They still argue they just followed the dictates of the party: if a man was arrested, every member of his family was also considered an enemy. The artist concludes that they have lost their capacity to reflect as human beings.



Picture 1. Nath's painting is a window onto the past. In front of it, Nath stays on the left and the former guards on the right.

In *The Act of Killing*, executioners meet victims in a quite different way. While Panh's camera captures the impact of a delayed, unwanted encounter, Joshua Oppenheimer's one registers the routinely coexistence among them. What actually makes the difference is the impunity. While the Cambodian genocide was lately and officially condemned in the Khmer rouge trials held in Cambodia in 2009, the killings by the Indonesian death squads were never tried. On the contrary, they are considered by the executioners a victory over communism during the Cold War, even a source of pride for them. Oppenheimer's documentary show several of them today, free and unpunished, socially integrated. This is the case of the Pancasila group, the military arm that headed the massacre. Throughout the film we see its members attending official events. In one of them, its leader Yapto Soerjosoemarno give a speech in favor of gangsters, arguing they are free men and recalling the security and stability of the dictatorship years. His discourse is shared by the Vice

President Jusuf Kalla, who in front of the Pancasila Youth defends gangsters as a praiseworthy institution outside the system. Likewise, the possibility of Koto running for the presidential elections proves that the corruption and crime are not only allowed, but also rewarded. Thus, how could we find the guilty when there has not been a public trial and the atrocities committed between 1965 and 1966 remain uncondemned?

They are of course aware of those atrocities, but they conveniently remember them in their own way. Some of them, like Anwar Congo and Herman Koto, stick their chest out and unabashedly boast about their gangster life, the tortures and the murders. Other give way to a more deep reflection. That is the case of Adi Zulkadry: Oppenheimer asks him about the killings and reminds him that the Geneva Conventions defined what they did as *war crimes*. The answer is clear: «The Geneva Conventions may be today's morality, but tomorrow we'll have the Jakarta Conventions and dump the Geneva Conventions. 'War crimes' are defined by the winners. I'm a winner. So I can make my own definition. I needn't follow the international definitions.» Zulkadry gives the key to understand the impunity of the executioners: they have defined the new order and also its vocabulary and morality; within that definition, the genocide is seen as a heroic correction of History, or the necessary eradication of the communist terror. In this context, we don't witness an encounter between the executioners and the victims, but a cohabitation based on fear and humiliation. This becomes clear in the sequence with Suryono, Anwar's neighbor (Picture 2).



Picture 2: Suryono tells the executioners the story of the kidnapping and murder of his step-father

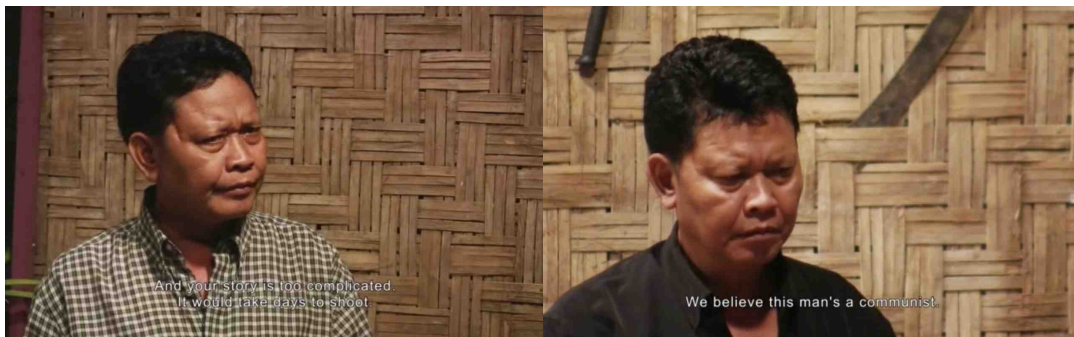
While shooting the alleged movie starred by the torturers, Suryono tells Congo, Koto and a third person during a break that he knows a real story. They reply that real stories is just what they need for the project, so he's invited to tell it. At first, the atmosphere is relaxed, but soon it becomes strained because of the story. This narrates how Suryono's stepfather, of Chinese origin –along with communists, Chinese population was the main target of the massive killings of 1965–1966– was draught out his house in the middle of the night and the next day was found dead inside a barrel of oil, with his head and feet covered by sacks. He reminds then how his grandfather and he dragged the corpse like a goat and left it next to the road without any help from anyone. Soon after, his family and other families of communists were expelled and sent to the slums next to the jungle. That is why he could never go to the school had to learn to read and write by himself. Instead of telling the story with a grave tone, he laughs nervously and gesticulates enthusiastically. One of the listeners asks him how old he was, and he replies he was 11 or 12. He remembers quite well, and will never be able to forget it. When he finishes, he insists that he is not bringing back those memories to criticize what they are doing, but to give them feedback. By then, the

faces of Congo and Koto reveal their incommodity and they end the conversation by telling him that it's not possible to include every story in the movie –otherwise it would never end, they argue–. Congo also says Suryono's story is too complicated and it would take too much time to shoot it. The scene makes explicit the way in which the historiography –referred by Adi Zulkadry– works: winners always decide what can and what cannot be told, while the defeated have to lower their head and remain silent.

4. Stage 2: Reenactment

After the dialogue between Suryono, Congo, Koto and the others, they peacefully continue with the rehearsal of the filmed reenactment of the interrogations to communists. Oppenheimer wisely blurs the frontiers between the rest time during the shooting and the rehearsal moments of the sequence they are about to film: several shots–reverse shots make indistinguishable one context –a pure documentary film, using the codes of the making of– from the other –the rehearsal before the flamboyant reenactment of an episode from the past, here fictionalized by the executioners and the victim–. First we see Congo and Koto telling Suryono that they cannot include his story. But then the reverse shot shows him listening their explanations and accepting the omission (Picture 3).

The shot marking the separation between one regime of representation and the other is that in which we see Congo sit in his chair smoking and searching for the words to not discourage him. Suryono uselessly replies from off-camera that at least his story could be used to motivate the actors. In the following reverse shot we see Suryono quiet and in the same position with his head forward slightly, in front of the same fake, wooden wall (Picture 4). At first sight, nothing seems to have changed, but the context is completely different: he is wearing a different shirt and we hear Ady say in a threatening tone: «*We believe this man's a communist*».



Pictures 3 and 4. The change of context is barely discernible

Then the following frame is an American shot where Congo, Koto, Zulkadry and a technician discuss how to make the torture scene more realistic. Zulkadry remembers how he tried to make the prisoners accept they were going to die, and Congo is invited to show his torture techniques. He takes the machete from the technician and both put it to Suryono's neck, while they force him to beg for his life. He remains steady and silent, tolerating the harassment even if it is a part of a representation or rehearsal. After a break in which Zulkadry argues with a veteran journalist of the Medan Post², the images show the

² This argument is quite interesting, since it introduces a new position towards the barbarism. The journalist insists that he never knew what was going on, which directly contradicts Ibrahim Sinik's testimony. This puzzles and even bothers Zulkadry, who wonders how is that even possible since everybody knew. It is not by chance that in the moment we hear this conversation Congo says the victim must be blindfolded: the sequence is introducing in a

reenactment of the interrogation to a communist prisoner³. The executioners throw a glass of water in his face, invite him to smoke, blindfold him and place a rope around his neck to simulate the strangulation. Oppenheimer's camera records it not in a typical way, reluctant to focus on the torture and drama. Rather, in the middle of the action it looks for the faces of the perpetrators.

The camera seeks beyond the acting: it tries to capture the consciousness making its way between the actors who recall the cruelty of a reality in which they took part. The aim is to eliminate the distance they have taken from it, so that they can empathize with the suffering of the *other*, the one who has been dehumanized. The other visual axis is Suryono: his sobbing and begging reactivate his memories and make inseparable his acting from the real pain he feels. Oppenheimer will reverse the roles later, in a sequence using the codes of gangster films, where Anwar Congo himself plays the role of the prisoner, while Koto is his interrogator. After all the hitting, yelling and threatening with a knife to his neck, Congo asks for a break to drink water and rest. Soon after, the scene ends with an execution by strangulation, the same killing they were reenacting with Suryono (picture 5).



Picture 5. Congo is interrogated in a sequence using the codes of gangster films

The executioners play a different role in *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*, even if they also reenact their past acts. Reenactment is a key element in Rithy Panh's documentary, but it is even more important its repetition to reveal the memory of the gestures, repressed in their bodies. For many of them, words are not enough to express the witnessed:

I discovered that there was another memory, which is the bodily memory. So it may be twenty years later, but survivors would talk about pains they feel in certain areas of the body, even if it was a long time ago. But you find the same things with the former guards. Sometimes the violence is so strong that the words become inaudible. (Oppenheimer & Ten Brink, 2012: 244)

In Tuol Seng's old S-21 prison –where the Genocide Museum is currently located–, the former guards are invited to make rounds and watch the corridors and cells, –as if they

subtle way the position of the journalist, who decides not to look –or look the other way– and erase from his memory that outrageous past.

³ The sequence uses the codes of war films, from the setting –the interior of a wooden hut in the middle of the jungle is recreated here– to the atrezzo and costume –Congo's combat helmet–.

were still working there— while the images are accompanied by the anthems of the Democratic Kampuchea. However, this is only the first stage in Panh's interest in the character and their gestures. On the one hand, the purpose of revisiting the nightly rounds or the humiliations to the prisoners is to make the past present. Firstly, there is a kind of consciousness in them reluctant to reveal the truly essence of evil, responsible of the dehumanization and death, something that keep them away from a hidden essence that made them a part of the Khmer machinery for the annihilation of millions of human beings. Nevertheless, by repeating the same actions they give way to a more intense memory.

This is the case of one of the guards, who reenacts several times the way he got in one of the cells, threatened or gave instructions to the prisoners, gave them water and then left. We see him repeating the same process over and over, but the camera restlessly follows his movements (Picture 6). Every time he does it, he picks a bowl, open the doors, gets in the room, speaks to the prisoners like if they were there and starts over again. The repetition eliminates the barrier of consciousness and the simulation to openly expose the sign in its natural form. Then, it is a process quite similar to the one seen in the rehearsals and shootings in *The Act of Killing*. The difference is that, while the reenactment in Oppenheimer's film gives way to a moral consciousness, in Panh's the morality is repressed and only can be revealed by showing the essential truth linked to the body memory.



Picture 6. The body memory of the former guards make the present past

Panh's work on the bodies has also much to do with the *mise-en-scène* in a very particular way, even if he does his best to keep the distance. In some sequences, the participants are invited to reenact scenes emphasizing the bureaucracy behind the horror. They only have a chair, a table and a pile of documents and file folders. In one of those sequences, we see one of the former executioners reading aloud the strict specifications for torture, while others bring to the room a torture chair. In another one, we see all of them remembering the way they joined Angkar around a table full of records and pictures. Almost immediately, the sound of a typewriter accompanies the images of two of them walking down the corridors of S-21 and watching the empty cells. In the following shot, Chum Mey is drying his tears in front of a table he is looking at. There we see one of the former guards constantly typing with concentration (Picture 7).

The camera pans from the first to the second capturing the accumulated waste and dust of the room and recalling the remaining ashes of the annihilation. Therefore, the remains of the destruction and the routine of the typist are cohabiting within the same frame, a recurring idea throughout Panh's work. The obsession with documentary register is for sure a key element to understand the Cambodian genocide: while there are few audiovisual records of the Democratic Kampuchea –at the beginning of *S-21: The Khmer*

Rouge Killing Machine we see images of some of the few propaganda images remaining–, the pictures of the faces of the victims are countless. Each one of them was photographed in the moments before the interrogation, so they were the preamble to the death of the prisoners and the elimination of their identity, becoming mere statistic. «And as soon as that photograph is taken, that person is replaced by a number, and he has lost his or her identity. To have an affective genocide machine, it's very difficult to kill a human being. But if you take away the identity of that human being, if you de-humanize» that human being, it's much easier for that machine to work effectively (Oppenheimer, 2012: 249). There is a logic behind the documentary that is already expressed in the title: Panh only conceives the Khmer horror as a mechanical structure, a process fully automated and controlled by ideology. Thus, S-21 is a huge killing machine that needs order and effective bureaucracy.



Picture 7. The obsession with documentary register of the Cambodian register
in *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*

In *Duch, Master of the Forges of Hell* (Duch, le maître des forges de l'enger, Rithy Panh, 2011), Duch himself is presented as mere clerk behind his desk with a frontal shot stressing the man and the documents. This constant is present throughout the work of the Cambodian filmmaker, and then it is fundamental to confirm the link between the massive tortures and killings and the perfectly organized administration. In conclusion, Panh rejects the idea of a spontaneous evil in particular individuals and embraces the logic and structure of the system of destruction.

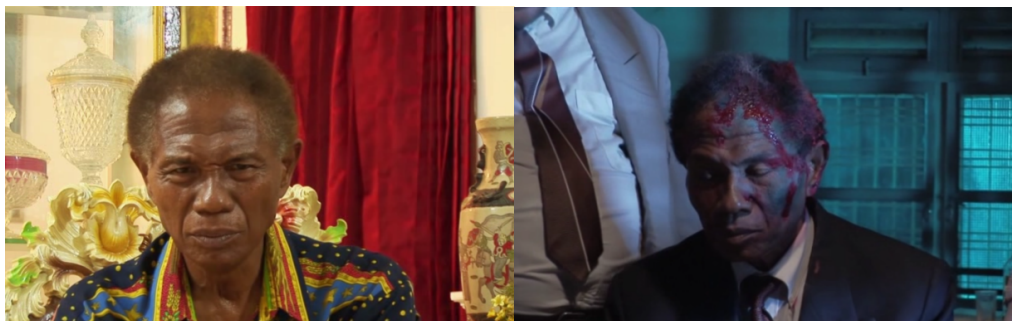
At this point, it is inevitable to think in Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (Arendt, 1964), since the executioner is seen as a clerk, responsible of his outrageous acts – or their outrageous consequences–, but not necessarily guilty if we consider the exceptional legal framework: those acts were not only allowed; they were a regular practice, a part of it. In his book *The elimination*, Panh only partly agrees with Arendt: he accepts the idea of «banality of evil», in the sense of officers as links of the extermination process, being part of a world of chains and gears stained with blood (Bataille & Panh, 2011: 128). Therefore, the director thinks beyond the individual. At the end of *Duch, Master of the Forges of Hell* we see Duch any given day praying and doing exercise while listening music. Panh refuses to portrait the executioner as exceptional, avoiding to take the moral responsibility away from the community. At the same time, he embraces the idea that each individual is unique, concluding that it is essential to know his emotional, familiar and intellectual experience to understand his acts and with them the conditions that led to the horror.

5. Stage 3: Silence

Therefore, what is left after the camera has confronted the executioner? What is left says a lot about the process that made him the perpetrator in the great tale of History. At the end of *The Act of Killing*, Anwar Congo watches with Oppenheimer the images they have filmed. Initially, he is enthusiastic about what he sees. Even he gets up to bring his grandsons to watch the film with him. It is not by chance that the camera is confronting them from the TV position, looking at them. For the first time in the whole movie, the images of the re-enactment of the past are looking to the executioner, who is being ironically tried since he is watching a fiction where he himself is the tortured victim.

The exchange between documentary images and the fiction ones within them is made explicit in the reverse shot: we see the torture sequence without the TV frame. Thus the editing is directly confronting the fiction and the (presumably) real (Pictures 8 and 9). The exchange continues and the children leave the frame, leaving Congo alone in front of his own representation. Then the expression in his face starts to change, looking more serious and concentrated, while the same face in the screen is shown blooded and battered. Suddenly, in the middle of the silence, a question arises:

“Did the people I tortured feel the way I do here? I can feel what the people I tortured felt. Because here my dignity has been destroyed and then fear comes, right there and then. All the terror suddenly possessed my body. It surrounded me, and possessed me”, he wonders. “Actually, the people you tortured felt far worse, because you know it’s only a film. They knew they were being killed”, replies Joshua Oppenheimer from the off-camera. Something happens in his face. Watching himself acting, Congo realizes the atrocities he has committed. His eyes become glazed and his words reveal remorse, suddenly feeling fearful of being punished for what he did. Here is where Oppenheimer’s strategy comes to an end: using re-enactment / fictionalization, he has reverted the process of dehumanization that precedes the annihilation. A long silence follows. The executioner has recovered the empathy with the others, and the ideological reasons that led him to torture and kill are not important anymore.



Pictures 8 and 9. The shot / reverse shot between two contexts of representation make explicit how Congo recovers the empathy with the victims he tortured and killed.

In this sense, *The Act of Killing* and *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* present a symmetry in which ideology is annulled as the main cause of evil. On the contrary, it cannot be directly linked with violence, but with indoctrination and the denial of humanity of the neighbor and acquaintance. In a first stage, the communist ideology of Democratic Kampuchea or the anti-communist one of Indonesia in the mid-sixties work as the discourse of seduction that along with the administrative machinery that lead the individual to get rid of his emotional baggage, becoming a part of the killing machine. This is why, once the historical and exceptional framework of horror has faded away, the guards of S21 fail to explain to Van Nath how they could execute the orders of Angkar without even questioning

their morality. Or how they could forget, hit or even torture their friends and acquaintances on its behalf. That is also why Congo seems to wake up watching himself as a victim, like if he had been asleep for years.

In both films the re-enactment is used as an instrument to reflect on the figure of the executioner and its complex bond with a dreadful reality. They both conclude that evil is not an isolated phenomenon. The final sequences in both works put an end to their reflections with a slight difference. In both we see the specific places where the horror took place –a terrace where the executioners used to kill the victims, in *The Act of Killing*, and one of the rooms of S21, in *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*-. While Oppenheimer's film takes to the extreme the reaction of the perpetrator and shows Congo feeling sick when remembering the killings, Panh's shows one of the main rooms of S21 empty of people, only to film how the wind blows the dust (Picture 10). The weight of time has never left the space, so it can only be understood by the audience as the context to constantly let the memory by replacing the absence and reveal the emptiness that follows any attempt to explain the horror.



Picture 10. Memory is now occupying one of the empty rooms of S21

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