

Rithy Panh: Memorializing History Through Documentary

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Through the haze you reach out for a shadow you swear you saw and just as you begin to grasp onto it, it slips through your fingers, disappearing into the darkness just beyond. This is what it is like reaching for a distant memory deep in the crevices of your mind. In Cambodia, the number of people who lived through the Khmer Rouge dwindles each year. Those who remember have pushed it into the far recesses of their minds for various reasons. For some, it is out of guilt for what they did or did not do during this time period. For others, it is to forget unimaginable atrocities, or simply to move forward to live beyond the Khmer Rouge. The people who remember are split between wanting to recognize the atrocities that occurred and wanting to forget this time in Cambodian history altogether. Rithy Panh takes on the role of the gatekeeper of the Khmer Rouge, bringing to life the horrors that occurred under their regime. Through his unique use of narrative techniques, he is able to revitalize the memory of a time not long ago where the people of Cambodia were displaced, tortured, and slaughtered under the ruthless Khmer Rouge Regime. Rithy Panh uses these techniques to restore the collective memory of a country and extend the knowledge of their experience under a totalitarian regime that committed genocide beyond Cambodia to the world.

Rithy Panh uses his ability to make art in the form of documentaries and other films, to recreate the memory of the Khmer Rouge regime, but what is this regime? To understand the importance and style Panh uses we must first take a walk through a painful period of Cambodian history. The Khmer Rouge was the nickname given to the Communist Party led by Pol Pot. The Khmer Rouge came to power when they won the Cambodian Civil War after overthrowing the government when they successfully seized Phnom Penh, the country's capital. The Khmer Rouge

went on to control Cambodia from 1975-1979. Pol Pot, much like Hitler, had a desire to create a “master race”, this one Cambodian. This meant isolating the country from the global community and enacting extreme measures to control the populace. Pol Pot was not only concerned with external threats but the threats within the country as well. This paranoia surrounding a possible coup d'etat that would overthrow the regime drove him to put the entirety of the country under scrutiny. He relocated people to the countryside and to schools, which were for all intents and purposes prisons. Those relocated were worked to the bone, tortured, starved, and killed. Those who were not murdered, starved to death or died of exhaustion. Once a person was labeled as an enemy there was little hope for their survival. David Chandler states the following in his book;

As a DK adage put it, “It is better to arrest ten people by mistake than to let one guilty person go free.” Once they were identified, arrested, and brought to S21, suspects of the Party Center became “guilty people” - guilty because they had been arrested rather than arrested because they were guilty. Dehumanization of the prisoners was immediate and total. (Chandler, Pg 44).

The most notorious of the prisons created by the regime was S21. Of the thousands of Cambodians who passed through, only seven survived the horrors that occurred within those walls. One of those survivors was Rithy Panh.

Taken away from his home and relocated with his family, at the young age of thirteen, Panh had his childhood stolen and obliterated. In a short span of time, his family died one by one. His father was first, starving himself to death in a final act of freedom and protest. His mother, unable to handle the burden of starvation, exhaustion, and the death of her daughter, died too. One after the other everyone he'd ever called family died. He had no family, the sole

survivor. In discussing coming to grips with his survivor's guilt and remembering what happened he states the following;

I learned to speak again and to accept what had happened to me. Then I rediscovered my memories, my ability to imagine, to laugh, to dream, to rebuild my life... Some think we should forget and look to the future, that there's no point in inflicting another ordeal on ourselves by trying to bring back memories and pick over old wounds. (Panh 1999, Pg 30 and 32).

Initially, as an exile in France, Rithy Panh wanted to forget his and his family's history and his link to Cambodia. It was his incidental connection to filmmakers that would lead him to change his mind and seek to restore his memories and those of others. But, it was not immediate. It took him a decade to hesitantly realize the necessity to recollect his painful past. Panh decided it was crucial not to bury his past and the atrocities that occurred in Cambodia, like so many others chose to and still do. People may think repressing and ignoring the memories of such atrocities will bring peace, but it allows the opportunity for such barbarity to occur again. Burying the history of such heinous human actions teaches that genocide and murder can be committed against any person without consequence. It suggests that it is too hard to address these crimes against humanity, so it is better to forget them. But how does the memory of a loved one live on, how do you get justice for them, how do you teach your country and the world about the warning signs, and the things that could occur, if you bury what happened? This is a concept Panh understands deeply and he has not stopped telling his story of surviving the Khmer Rouge or the many stories of other survivors who lived through this deadly time in Cambodia between 1975-1979. Through documentaries and other films, he has carefully used narrative to recreate a memory of the Cambodian Genocide at the hands of the Khmer Rouge.

Panh uses a series of documentaries to recreate the memory of what happened under the Khmer Rouge regime through multiple narratives. A few of these films are; S21, Duch, Bophana: A Cambodian Tragedy, and The Missing Picture. Each film takes on a different use of narrative, revealing different pieces and perspectives of what occurred. In S21, we have the opportunity to hear from the survivors as well as some of the guards from the prison. Panh relays the following piece from the film, “One of the executioners at Camp S-21, in Tuol Sleng-Pol Pot’s main torture centre - today only expresses his “regrets”; he doesn’t feel guilty. He destroyed non-persons, people the Khmer Rouge had stripped of all humanity” (Panh 1999, 31). Probably one of the most daunting moments for me watching the film, was the lack of remorse and guilt from the guards. To state you feel regret but not guilt is indicative of not having remorse for what one did as a merchant of death in actions that resulted in the killing of many thousands of people. Is the regret only in being caught and viewed through the lens of the world as an inhuman murderer? What justified torturing and breaking down other human beings? Does their belief in Pol Pot’s “master race” allow them to continue justifying these actions in their own minds? They killed their own people who were still living, breathing human beings with families and friends. People whose lives were destroyed and ended at the hands of these guards. I can only imagine this is the emotion Panh wanted his audience to feel when watching the film, not only to have the narrative of the survivors, but the narrative of the perpetrators. It evokes a sadness and a connection to hear a survivor’s story of what occurred but then to hear the perpetrator’s side of it evokes an even deeper anger than just hearing about what they had done. It causes the viewer to question what happened, how it happened, and how some of those involved still find justification for it. In a sequel of sorts to S21, Panh released Duch. Duch is the in-depth interview of one of the leaders of the S21 prison. The film uses archival footage from the Khmer

Rouge, pieces of footage from the S21 film, and interviews with Duch whose real name is Kaing Guek Eav. In Leslie Barnes's paper she discusses the film;

In another clip, immediately following a take in which Duch claims to have directed but never participated in an interrogation, his being a theoretical and pedagogical labour, a guard recounts having witnessed Duch torture a prisoner during one of the sessions.

Again Duch laughs, shaking his head. In many of the 'exchanges' between himself and his former guards, Duch relies upon a notion of truth that is at once absolute and variable over time. In other words, the truth that held between 1975 and 1979 is not necessarily the truth of the former guards in the early 1990s, nor is it Duch's truth today. (Barnes 2016, Pg 202).

It is like watching a loop. Duch watches clips of his fellow guard's testimonials on what occurred in the prison, then states that never happened, then it repeats. The only people who know the truth are the guards, the survivors, and the dead. Even the survivors cannot speak on everything those who died endured and they did not witness it all. But the guards, they witnessed, committed, and discussed every horrific action that occurred as part of the Khmer Rouge and their genocide of the Cambodian people. The guards interviewed in S21 did not have much to lose, but Duch at the time of filming of the documentary, was under trial for the crimes he committed as a leader in the Khmer Rouge regime. He would, ultimately, answer for his crimes. Initially, Duch was sentenced to 30 years and then that sentence got upgraded to life in prison. There was no doubt of what Duch and the rest of the guards had done, so why lie? Had they committed so many crimes, they could not keep them all straight? Just like the survivors of trauma, had they begun to repress the horrific things they'd seen and done or had the memories of the atrocities they committed just collided with one another to make them indistinguishable

from one another? The narrative form in the film not only allows the viewer to see the cycle that is created after a genocide with the uncertainty of who did what and what occurred, but leaves one presented with many more questions to ponder about the events and those involved.

Bophana: A Cambodian Tragedy, is a docudrama that Rithy Panh directed. The docudrama recreates the relationship between Hout Bophana and Ly Sitha. They were engaged, but before they could marry each other, war broke out. To avoid the draft, Ly Sitha became a monk and Hout Bophana moved to the city. She was well educated, which made her a target of the Khmer Rouge, and she was relocated. Ly Sitha had sworn his allegiance to the Khmer Rouge and was able to track her down, keeping her safe and alive. Unfortunately, their relationship was exposed through love letters they were sending each other. Ly Sitha was executed for betraying the regime and Hout Bophana was sent to one of the prisons where she was tortured and executed. Leslie Barnes makes a comparison between Hout Bophana and Vann Nath in her paper;

The film contrasts the story of Bophana with a few survivor narratives, most notably that of Vann Nath, the artist who survived Tuol Sleng by painting portraits of Pol Pot. In one of the most striking scenes in the film, Nath walks a former prison guard, Houy, through an exhibit of his post-genocide paintings hung at the Tuol Sleng museum, explaining to the latter the various scenes of interrogation and execution depicted in his images. In each instance, he insists on the importance of fabrication in the creation of these paintings, at once testifying to the torture that took place in the interrogation centre and alluding to the impossibility of witnessing the events he documents. (Barnes 2016, Pg 193-194).

Vann Nath recreates a narrative of what occurred during this time period by hearing other survivors' accounts of what occurred. While there are no photos, these paintings of the memories

of survivors act as a “photo” archive of the Khmer Rouge. Paintings can be used as a form of a vivid narrative just as Panh’s films are used as a narrative of the voices of those who are no longer around to tell their story. Long after the people who lived through the Khmer Rouge are gone, Panh’s films and Nath’s paintings will still exist as a testimonial, a form of narrative on the atrocities that occurred there.

The Missing Picture is one of Panh’s most acclaimed works. He uses his own testimony of what he experienced in the S21 prison, attempting to recreate a memory of the childhood he lost. Lior Zylberman states the following in his review of the film;

Panh undertakes the reconstruction of the days spent in the ‘rehabilitation’ and labor camp. At the same time he denounces the workings of the regime of the Khmer Rouge. The models made out of clay, painted and characterized as different people, are still, motionless, against a background of cardboard. Nevertheless, the camera moves around them, apparently bringing life to the inanimate. The story being told helps us combine all the elements so that what is in our imagination comes to life. Panh acknowledges that his testimony is driven by a need: “They say [that] talking helps. You understand, you get over it.” (Zylberman 2014, Pg 103-104).

It's his unique use of recreating a memory; his own memory that engages the audience. Always behind the scenes, we finally get a glimpse of Panh and his own experience during the years of the Khmer Rouge. He uses this unique narrative to create an image of all that was lost during those years and to address the trauma he endured. He understands that not talking about his experiences will not help him in his survival, his guilt, helping others understand, or work through the atrocities one experienced. It is only through the process of remembering that will allow one to work through what they have experienced. Writing down an experience that is

traumatic will bring out details that have been long forgotten, which helps to process not only the surface level trauma, but the deeper repressed pieces of it as well. No matter, his recreation of a picture long lost in time, is a unique form of narrative, that brings a new outlook on the documentary style films and the travesties that occurred in Cambodia as well.

What is the true purpose of documentaries and the narrative styles they use? It is to recreate a memory, much like Rithy Panh has successfully done time and time again. Michael Renov states the following;

The emphasis here is on the replication of the historical real, the creation of a second-order reality cut to the measure of our desire - to cheat death, stop time, restore loss. Here, ethnography and the home movie meet insofar as both seek what Rolan Barthes has termed “that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead” (Renov , Pg 25).

The purpose of documentaries, at least in the case of Cambodia and many other places, is to recreate the voice of those who lost their lives. To memorialize the voices who have yet to leave us and allow them to give the retelling of these historical events in the first person for generations to come. It is with the lens of a camera and the voice of someone who has a story to tell, that we can capture footage that will be here for ages to come. A documentary cannot successfully convey these important pieces without the use of voice, in this case the narrative is essential. Ib Bondebjerg discusses the importance of narrative in her paper;

The link between narrative, emotion and memory is therefore central for our understanding of who we are, for our understanding of how mediated visual material and forms of representation influence our mind and body. Documentary forms and narratives

become embodied visions and experiences in our minds—in line with experiences for ordinary ‘real’ life. (Bondebjerg 2013, Pg 14).

The way a documentary style film conveys the narrative is critical for the audience. It allows them to truly engage with what the documentary is discussing and what occurred. A good use of narrative will draw your audience in and invoke emotional responses to the film. Judd D Bradbury and Rosanna E Guadagno state the following in their paper; “Documentaries are stories that use models as representations of factual events. The production of documentary film has always included the tension of creating artistic images that an audience will find appealing with the presentation of knowledge about the real world” (Bradbury and Guadagno 2020, Pg 340). The use of an engaging narrative is a form of artistic images. This allows for the audience to feel as if they are experiencing and truly understanding whatever topic the documentary is discussing. It is meant to pull the audience into the topic and bring awareness to whatever it is.

In his efforts to ensure the historical narrative of the people of Cambodia will continue to be told and maintained for future generations, Rithy Panh established the Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center in Phnom Penh along with filmmaker, Ieu Pannaker. It is intended to be an archival resource of television, film, photography, and sound on Cambodia. Established in 2006, the center has grown beyond simply an audiovisual repository into a space where films are screened, people from around the world do research on Cambodia and its people, offers training in filmmaking, and produces various multimedia and film projects. It ensures a new future in documentary filmmaking by Cambodian film artists and storytellers. It is important to establish spaces for new voices in film that want to focus on visual history and remembrance.

The Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center is similar to the USC Shoah Foundation-The Institute for Visual History and Education that was established by Steven Spielberg in 1994 to

videotape and preserve interviews with survivors and other witnesses of the Holocaust. It uses narrative technique, testimonial, and remembrance in its films to memorialize the Holocaust experiences of survivors and witnesses just as Rithy Panh has done in his filmmaking. Rithy Pahn has acknowledged the importance of film preservation and memory;

After the Khmer Rouge fell [in 1979], the whole country was in ruins. Generations of memory had been destroyed, and it was left to us survivors to rediscover and redefine our shared identity. Many of the tools, the tangible things and the people that would ordinarily help us do this, were no longer. Wanting to preserve what limited memory was left, Ieu Pannakar began collecting old films he found scattered across streets and cities. (Loden 2015).

Steven Spielberg has also recognized the importance of preservation of film and memory. The institute he established was created not just for the purposes of memorializing historical experiences, but to help overcome prejudice, intolerance, and bigotry. This institute has gone beyond preserving the testimony of Holocaust survivors. It has the following collections of testimonials; Cambodian Genocide, Genocide Against the Tutsi in Rwanda, Armenian Genocide, Guatemalan Genocide, and many more. It includes photographs and images as well. Like Panh's Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center in Cambodia, The Institute for Visual History and Education is creating a next generation of documentary filmmakers who are telling stories through testimony and narrative techniques. Stephen Smith, executive director of the Shoah Foundation, related, "This is inspiring students not only to listen to the past, but act for their own future" (USC Shoah Foundation). This institute documenting the Cambodian Genocide has done something Panh has stated the importance of;

The footage used in this film was not singularly used by me but has been used by many directors and filmmakers both here and abroad to document the Khmer Rouge. It is a long-term goal to see this database extend to become accessible worldwide and available over the Internet for other cultures and places to learn about our past. (Loden 2015).

The Institute for Visual History and Education is a resource beyond Cambodia that has provided accessibility for the world to learn of the Cambodian past. As Panh has stated, this is something important for remembrance and history because, “Being able to learn about your roots, your culture, your identity and that of others is an essential component to any healthy society” (Loden 2015).

Panh has chosen to focus his filmmaking on the narrative technique that allows us to engage with the past through those who survived it. He successfully engages the audience with his documentary-style films. Creating various forms of narrative to pull the audience into what happened to the people of Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge regime. When asked if he believes there are lost Cambodian films somewhere in the countryside, he said that he does believe there is lost footage and he desires to locate any that exist. It is important because it can provide the Cambodian people with a view of their past before the Khmer Rouge, but it is likely that the atrocities of this totalitarian government could be found in that film. Panh continues to want people to understand fully the experience of the Cambodian people and the meaning of genocide;

Genocide is not only killing; it is not only deaths. It is much more than that. It is the complete destruction and deprivation of our culture and our identity. After all of this, when we look to rebuild what we have lost, we find ourselves left begging for help—as if all the responsibility and accountability have been placed on our backs alone and the past forgotten. If we don’t try to access and preserve our memory, it means the millions dead

will stay only a statistic with no face, no name, no story. The dead will be nothing.
(Loden 2015).

That is the significance of Rithy Panh's filmmaking, it preserves and memorializes the history of the people of Cambodia that the Khmer Rouge sought to extinguish. Just as Panh seeks to find the lost film of Cambodia, his documentaries leave the viewer seeking more information. More knowledge of what happened to the guards, the leaders within the regime, the survivors, and the victims whose lives were lost. How did the country repair itself? Or, has it repaired itself? Why do people not want to talk? Why do some want to forget what happened? The films engage you and leave you still wanting to know more. It brings to life a memory long forgotten of a country whose people are still trying to recover and move beyond the legacy of the Khmer Rouge.

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