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 Kleinen

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The Act of Killing, to be a deliberate choice for Panh. In an interview with Bophana, a Cambodian tragedy of millions. In a recent book, Dutch sociologist Abram de Swaan explores 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 1979. 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 Khakas 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 the way it brings back a nearly forgotten way of representing the acts of killing, which were not the sole responsibility of the Khmer Rouge, but also seemingly ordinary citizens whom we went on a killing rampage. This is accentuated in the movie by the hiss by shown through these interviews, and by the stories made possible by the political supports of the New Order.

In Panh’s movie the graphic details of the killings are portrayed by using clay figurines, whilst Oppenheimer engages in re-enactments to tell the story. Where Panh reinforces his cinematic testimony 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 Toho Lake, or by a mediated act of remembrance 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 filmic 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’s position.2 The near absence of victims in Oppenheimer’s movie is, nevertheless, path-breaking in the way that it brings back a nearly forgotten way of representing the acts of killing. Unlike Panh’s movie, 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. TheAudience 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 possibly 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 Julius 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’s stories of his killing sprees. Adi reminds the viewer of the victim’s justice. “War crimes are defined by the victims. We won.”

The near absence of victims in Oppenheimer’s movie is for good reason. Filmmakers in Indonesia are confronted by an officially encouraged conspiracy of silence about the past, this is unlike in Cambodia where, already in 1975, 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. 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.

References

2 De Swaan’s, 2014. 3 Portrayed in an article...

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Mass killings represented: the movies of Panh and Oppenheimer