

Witness and Recuperation: Cambodia's New Documentary Cinema

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Abstract

The documentary cinema of Rithy Panh has played a significant role in the effort to overcome the traumatic heritage of the Khmer Rouge era in Cambodia (1975-79). His cinema of witness advances claims for the restoration of memory as an ethical imperative, and his films have provided encouragement for the claims of justice for survivors. Witness and re-enactment are central to his mode of address. A new movement has emerged in recent years from a younger generation whose work continues to explore the value of documentary in challenging the prevailing cultural amnesia and seeks to recuperate the connection between the present and the past. This paper discusses the work of some of the emerging documentary makers, highlighting their distinctive voices and visions, their debt to the style and framework of Rithy Panh's cinema, as well as new perspectives which seek to build on the past through the exploration of the value of the artists and intellectuals who preceded them.

Keywords

documentary, Cambodia, witness, cultural amnesia, memory, trauma, Genocide Studies

We have art so we are not defeated by the truth.

—Friedrich Nietzsche
Kritische Studienausgabe

Cambodia's struggle to overcome the traumatic heritage of the Khmer Rouge era (1975-79) has been waged on many fronts. Rithy Panh's confronting documentary cinema has been highly influential in the exploration of this almost unimaginable tragedy. A Khmer Rouge survivor who fled to France as a young teenager, Panh opened up a discourse on Cambodian genocide through the creation of a cinema of witness unique in its dialogic mode and claims for truth. His most important films appeared at a time when national and international efforts to bring the remaining Khmer Rouge leadership to justice were far from secure, and many believe they played a significant part in the final creation of the Khmer Rouge Tribunal.¹ Over the past several years he has developed a program of training and support for young documentary makers from varying backgrounds who are now beginning to make a unique mark on the terrain of non-fiction cinema in the aftermath of that trauma. The first generation to have been born after the end of the regime and to have come to adulthood in a globalized world, they are developing a new mission of memory and recuperation through films which owe little to developments in contemporary Western documentary. Their vision, and the mode of its expression, arises from their own unique experiences and artistic perspectives, as well as a commitment to restoring a sense of valued continuity with elements of former Cambodian culture.

In 1995, Michael Renov proposed that film and video through its memorialization of loss can function as a work of mourning which is also an instance of self-inscription. Such work constructs a conditional self, figured against a ground of irreparable negation. Renov interprets these works against Claude Lanzmann's landmark Holocaust film *Shoah* (1985), which he believes demonstrates the impossibility of cinema accomplishing a "successful" act of mourning. Art can only hope to signify the limits of its healing powers. He titled this piece "Filling Up the Hole in the Real."

Renov remarks that this line of investigation "brings us up hard against the limits of documentary discourse" (121). Following Lacan via Žižek, Renov explains that the Real should be "understood as a zone outside symbolization from which trauma may erupt as symptom" (124). In consequence, mourning can only be

¹ See Fawthrop and Jarvis's *Getting Away with Genocide* (2004) for an account of the manifold difficulties involved in the early stages of establishing the framework for a Tribunal.

understood in relation to negativity, to the Void. What are the limits of cinema as a work of mourning? In the case of *Shoah*, Renov feels it was “doomed to failure” because although the filmmaker’s subjects include Holocaust survivors, perpetrators, and fellow travelers, “[t]here will never be words enough to fill the void left by the six million” (126).

So, at the extreme, must documentary always fail? Is documentary capable of exceeding its traditional truth claims, based on the fantasied figure of the neutral observer whose deliberate construction of a “point of view” is disguised by the techniques of filming and editing which convey authority? The recognition of the dilemmas which arise when cinema is applied to contexts of atrocious inhumanity, to events at the extreme where the concept of humanity itself is pushed beyond the capacity of representation, has become an increasingly urgent topic with the efflorescence of today’s cinema forms. The issues raised by the debate between Jean-Luc Godard and Claude Lanzmann in the 1980s continue to haunt and perplex filmmakers and scholars alike. The testimonial value and ethical significance of Lanzmann’s epic film *Shoah* and Godard’s film-essay *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988-89) may suggest opposite positions on the debate about the ethics of imaging, but the discussion has focused attention once again on the representations of extremity. Libby Saxton’s work *Haunted Images* focuses on what is possible, and ethical, in the context of the image. The traumatic experiences of survivors demand a consideration of what happens when events are recuperated, recreated, or constructed through cinema. Witnessing then becomes a way of bringing to collective communication moments of traumatic intensity in order to refuse their obliteration.²

Cambodia: Eclipse of Existence and a Cinema of Witness

Cambodia suffered an almost complete eclipse of both existence and representation during the Khmer Rouge years (1975-79). The struggle to recuperate some form of memory has taken place in a highly charged political context where formal evidence must rely on testimony and witness. Witnessing, as a specific mode of address to an unstable spectatorship, has become the hallmark of the Cambodian documentary movement. The emergent cinema blends some elements of traditional and new documentary forms in the context of a highly charged historical/political

² Giorgio Agamben’s *Remnants of Auschwitz* (2002) has had an enormous influence on this line of analysis. See also Guerin and Hallas, *The Image and the Witness* (2007).

amnesia. A new generation of documentary makers seeks to remedy the “hole in the Real” through the recuperation of art, culture, and freedom of expression.

The story of the Khmer Rouge years in Cambodia has become a key trope for the understanding of that country’s history.³ Nevertheless, there is almost no visual material through which to examine or interpret it. During their years in power, the Khmer Rouge permitted no outsiders to enter, no journalists and certainly no filmmakers. Some films were made at the behest of the regime, mostly black and white silent party propaganda pieces which were shown, if at all, to the senior cadres and supporters. Very little of this material survives today, and none provides any evidence of atrocities, cruel treatment, barbaric repression or executions. Far more than is the case in Nazi Germany, the visual archive of the Khmer Rouge years is virtually empty. Apart from the fragmentary films and the Tuol Sleng photographic archive, there is no visual record of what actually happened during the regime.⁴ The oral testimonies of survivors began from late 1975 on as a few managed to escape over the border to Thailand or into Vietnam, but often their accounts were not heard or were disbelieved. What was happening seemed too incredible.

The stunned, traumatized, and terrified survivors had no access to any kind of explanation or comprehensible account. They experienced these years as a gap in existence, in their very sense of human being, an inexplicable lacuna. Families were broken up not only by death but by the constant relocations practiced in the countryside. Forced marriages took place between people who had never met each other. Children were taken from their parents at an early age and placed into group care where they were instructed in anti-familial values and ways of life suitable for the socialist collective. Many disappeared without trace. The normal accompaniments of death and mourning were completely unavailable. This absolute gap in the framework of human existence seems to have been one of the most deeply traumatic elements of the experience of those few short years. It was as if the survivors emerged only slowly from an incomprehensible nightmare. Many children and adolescents witnessed horrific scenes including the violent deaths of their parents. Many were trained to fight, and some became torturers and killers. Those who lived through such events may understandably want to forget. As at Auschwitz, or in other prison/concentration camp circumstances, people did things to survive which they could not or did not want to remember. Survival itself

³ Key works include Chandler, *Brother Number One* (1992); Chandler, *Voices from S-21* (2000); Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime* (1996); Etcheson, *After the Killing Fields* (2005).

⁴ See Ledgerwood.

produced widespread feelings of guilt. Suppression of memory became a widespread survival technique.

The obliteration of memory and state of denial led to repression as far as the next generation was concerned. When some form of organized existence in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge social collapse became possible, and children again began to be born, the new generation was largely left ignorant of what had happened.

It is not possible in the course of a short paper to detail the many ways in which the experiences of those years have hung over the subsequent generations.⁵ Those born in the early 1980s were children in a society struggling to re-establish itself. There were almost no educated people to undertake the virtually limitless tasks required for a functioning society. The efforts by a few to re-establish a viable mode of existence were truly heroic. But as the decade passed, the lives of the new generation of children progressively improved. By the time they were approaching adulthood, Cambodia had recovered to a remarkable extent, and this recovery, not without its deep difficulties of course, has been truly amazing.

Today, young people from modest backgrounds attend high schools and universities, they learn English and/or French, they are exposed to the world through contemporary media, they use emails and cellphones and participate in a modern society which appears to have recuperated almost seamlessly from the horrors of the 1970s. But is it really possible to just “move on,” to forget the sufferings of those years, to put them aside and consign them to history? There are reasons to think so, but also reasons to resist this apparent “sealing over” of a gap in the record, as if it had never happened.

Part of that resistance comes from a sense of the profound injustice of allowing such events to go unremembered and above all unpunished. Is it possible that perpetrators of such horrors can be allowed to go on living in the same society which they had almost completely destroyed just a short time before? It is in this context that the documentary cinema of Rithy Panh emerged.

The Cinema of Rithy Panh

Although there was a lively and flourishing feature film industry in Cambodia prior to the Khmer Rouge era, there was almost no indigenous documentary-

⁵ Recently Van Schaack, Reicherter, and Chhang have attempted an assessment. See *Cambodia's Hidden Scars* (2011).

making.⁶ Rithy Panh has pioneered the documentary form for Cambodia from a powerful personal ethical imperative. His most influential films have been directed towards the necessity of memorialization and a form of recuperative justice based on recognition and acceptance of the realities under the Khmer Rouge regime. Through the development of a highly revelatory and aesthetically modulated documentary film technique, he has had a powerful impact on the representation of Cambodian history and memory both inside and outside Cambodia.⁷

Living in France as a displaced exile, with no family, Rithy Panh wanted to forget, rejecting any link with Cambodia. He felt alone and afraid in the world. Survivor's guilt engulfed him. But almost by accident he came into contact with filmmakers, and found himself drawn to this mode of visual exploration. Over a decade passed before he began hesitantly to accept the need to rediscover his own past and recuperate his memories. He returned to Cambodia in 1990 hoping to find any survivors of his family and recover the remains of the dead so their souls could be reincarnated and stop wandering the earth. The impossibility of this process became quickly evident. There were no records. He did not know where to turn. All traces of his family's existence seemed to have disappeared. Finally he went to Tuol Sleng, the "Genocide Museum," hoping to find a photo of his uncle. Although he could not face going inside at first, the knowledge that there was information there, photographs in particular, began a process in his thinking which led him finally to the idea of not only visiting Tuol Sleng but beginning a film project based on that experience. Thus Rithy Panh's career as a filmmaker was informed by this personal history and his own effort at recuperative memory.⁸

If he could not find memories of his own family, he could find and explicate the memories of others. *Bophana: A Cambodian Tragedy* was completed in 1996, and attempted to recreate, through photographs and the memories of survivors, the life of two young people condemned to interrogation at Tuol Sleng and executed finally on the same day not long before the regime fell. This film was made for a French audience, without English subtitles, and was not widely circulated. However, his subsequent film *S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (2003) was released to an Anglophone market, with English subtitles, and quickly began to circulate on

⁶ The only exception I am aware of is some early film experiments made by Prince Norodom Sihanouk, who was an ardent filmmaker himself but seemingly had no real interest in the documentary form. For an overview of the history of cinema in Cambodia, see Hamilton.

⁷ Rithy Panh's work has garnered increasing scholarly attention recently. See Boyle; Gleeson; Lim.

⁸ The sources for these comments are, *inter alia*, Panh, "Cambodia: A Wound" (1999); "La parole filmée" (2001); "Je suis un arpenteur" (2004); "Bophana" (2004); "Interview" (2004).

television, in educational institutions, and in theatrical screenings, especially in locations where expatriate Khmers were living. Release on DVD quickly followed.

Rithy Panh sees a primary purpose of his films as the creation of a platform from which witnessing can take place. The testimony comes from survivors—victims, guards, torturers, executioners, their families, bystanders, and ex-Khmer Rouge cadres. The filmmaking process brings them into close personal contact, in strangely communicative spaces. He creates situations where participants comment on their actions, framing history in human terms based on daily repetitive experience, rediscovered through the act of speaking on camera, to an off-screen filmmaker, who stands in for the viewing audience. In this way the audience/viewer is invited to share recollections which become part of collective memory.

Rithy Panh is also associated with one of the most remarkable projects to have emerged in the reconstruction of Cambodia. Through tireless efforts he found funding and support for the establishment of the Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center (Centre de ressources audiovisuelles Bophana) in Phnom Penh. In a humble building provided with the assistance of the Ministry of Culture, an open-access library and database has been established to contain digitized copies of every surviving fragment of audio-visual material related to Cambodia. Due to the destruction of almost all cultural products during the Khmer Rouge era, the collection of the surviving heritage materials was a difficult process involving sources all over the world. The material is recorded in digital form and made available through the Resource Center. Documentary and feature films, film fragments from the Khmer Rouge era, newsreels, interviews, old radio programs, individual photographic records, and many other items are available for public access in Bophana. A small suite of now rather old and poor quality computers are located on an upper floor, where bare-footed scholars, filmmakers, schoolchildren, local people, and international visitors are made welcome by a talented and enthusiastic multilingual band of workers. Behind the scenes, Rithy Panh, who spends time in both Phnom Penh and in Paris, may be working on one of his films, while other staff continue to document and index and carry out a variety of projects related to the ever-increasing holdings. More of a library, and strictly speaking not an archive, Bophana nevertheless fulfills the most fundamental purpose of an archive, namely, it stores, catalogues, and then makes available rare and otherwise unobtainable materials to whomever wants to see them.⁹

⁹ The atmosphere at Bophana Center is utterly different from that of any actual archive I have ever worked in. Visitors, no matter who they are, are made welcome. Front desk staff help locate

Rithy Panh's second major heritage is his promotion of and support for the development of a new generation of documentary filmmakers in Cambodia. The first major project took place in 2007. In collaboration with the Royal University of Phnom Penh's Department of Media and Communication, Rithy Panh offered workshop training to a number of students in the undergraduate degree. This was, to my knowledge, a pioneering venture: the first time the young Khmer with no previous experience of filmmaking were offered the opportunity to create a body of documentary film. The students were given access to video cameras and asked to prepare and make their own short films around themes relating to memory and witnessing in Cambodia's recent history. The project was labeled "Looking Back, Looking Ahead."¹⁰

The ten short films were made in color with sound, in Khmer with English subtitles. They each offered testimonies on the Khmer Rouge period, and canvassed opinions regarding the Khmer Rouge tribunal, then about to begin. The cross-section of people in rural and provincial areas who appear on these films are those whose views are seldom heard in any form of mass media in Cambodia. Each film was edited down to four-to-six minutes of length, set in a different location, and covered different aspects of the subjects' life experiences and current views. The concept of individual testimony provides the guiding thread.

Putheary Sin, one of the student directors, explored issues around the establishment of a commemorative site at Krang Tachan in Takeo Province. Plans for a Buddhist structure (a *stupa*) which would act as a memorial and resting place for the thousands of anonymous bones and skulls found in nearby fields have raised deep issues for the survivors in the area. Some local villagers are not convinced that this kind of memorial, where the human remains are collected together and retained, rather than being cremated, is the best solution. This issue has been a cause of continuing deep anxiety all over the country. As there is no record of the identities of the deceased, the remains cannot be returned to families. Buddhist rites support cremation; the pattern established at Choeng Ek near Phnom Penh, where skulls are piled up and on public view so that the events of the era are not forgotten, is not widely accepted within traditional Khmer culture.

Other topics covered in the short films include interviews with survivors of the regime and recollections of their activities during the Khmer Rouge era. Speaking out, an act which in the past has had terrifying implications, makes each

materials. Schoolchildren are as welcome as international scholars. The patience and kindness of the staff is outstanding.

¹⁰ The project results are held at Bophana and available for public viewing: DMC_VI_001995.

short film a kind of performance, a negotiation of the repressed, as issues which raise complex feelings and conflicting responses emerge unexpectedly. One film shows a meeting at a village hall where those who lost family members under the regime could express their feelings in a public forum. The key issue raised, one which has been covertly discussed all over the country, concerns whether or not only the top leadership should be tried, or whether others responsible for events during the era should also be brought to justice. Opinions on this reflect the prevailing uncertain responses. One person interviewed commented that many who died under the Khmer Rouge regime did so because they had committed sins: from this perspective, their deaths were ordained due to their own lack of *karmic* merit. This alarming interpretation is offered without further comment. In this and some other moments these short films come up to the edge of what can be stated and discussed in a public context in Cambodia. Whether, as Ung Bun Y asserts in her short film about her own grandmother, all the survivors should openly tell their stories is an issue which continues to simmer beneath the surface of efforts to address the deeper issues of the Khmer Rouge era. The claims for memory and reconciliation which lay behind this student documentary training project turned out to be unexpectedly problematic.

The Bophana Center has acted as a catalyst and “nursery” for the further development of young documentary filmmakers, although it is clear that other factors have also been important. Today these relatively few individuals represent the face of a movement which one of them, Davy Chou, has labeled “Neo-Documentarism.”¹¹

This is a new kind of filmmaking with little or no precedent. It develops out of, but does not mirror, the film forms used by Rithy Panh. The Khmer Rouge era continues to provide an actual, or implicit, context for their testimonial filmmaking. However, rather than a focus on the material horrors of the past, this new body of work seeks to overcome the fundamental absence of representation, and to open up and expand on elements of cultural continuity and creative survival.

These young filmmakers seek to offer positive visions of the value of that which was shattered and destroyed. Rather than refusing the memories of the “before,” they seek to bring them forward, to show that there was a valuable world and society from which the Cambodian people were wrongly estranged. There may

¹¹ Davy Chou introduced this term during a presentation following a showing of his film at a film festival held in Hua Hin, Thailand. He kindly forwarded me copies of the slides of his presentation, and we have discussed his work in person and by email correspondence throughout 2012.

be a profound effort at healing here. Many in Cambodia express today the feeling that they have no idea what the Khmer Rouge era meant or why it occurred. For four years people were told that their former society was worthless, that the Khmer Rouge were introducing a morally and socially superior regime to purge a society which had been utterly corrupted by colonialism, Westernization, and capitalism. The impact of this hyper-intensive ideological manipulation, in concert with the absolute destruction of all elements of community and collective values, may have been far more profound on the survivors than is commonly understood.

The new generation seems to be trying to restore a sense of continuity, and to assert the value of what existed prior to 1975. They are part of the first generation who can really be considered post-Khmer Rouge in their education and thinking. Three of them have close ties with France through education and training. They may be considered, like Rithy Panh, to be Franco-Khmer, to the extent that such an identification is meaningful.¹² Two others, still even earlier in their career and experience, have been educated entirely in Cambodia, with a complete immersion in Cambodian life, and very little overt external influence.

Davy Chou

Davy Chou is the senior of the group. His most recent film, *Golden Slumbers* (*Le Sommeil d'or*) (2011) has been widely shown at film festivals and screenings around the world prior to its formal release date in September 2012 in France.¹³ In this work, film history, oral history, and survivor testimony coincide. It is unlike any other Cambodian-based documentary insofar as, while using a cinema of witness clearly indebted to Rithy Panh, it offers a sensibility both joyous and elegiac, a tone or tenor which indeed suffuses many aspects of life in contemporary Cambodia. It is a work of profound imagination and deep research inspired by the spirit of a past creativity, brought back to the present almost by an act of invocation.

The reception of the film has been generally rapturous although some commentators have found it overlong and sometimes puzzling. Spoken in Khmer and French, with English subtitles, the film is a beautifully constructed reminiscence of the Golden Years of filmmaking in Cambodia. During the 1960s,

¹² It is impossible here to enter the debate about the authenticity of diaspora cultural producers, although it raises profound problems with regard to the ethics and aesthetics of national identification in cinema.

¹³ The blog site for the film collects together all the French-language reviews and comments, far too many to summarize here. See <<http://goldenslumbersfilm.wordpress.com/>> (accessed 12 Oct. 2012). Some English-language interviews and comments are listed at the end of this paper.

Cambodian film was at a stage of lavish and sometimes bizarre magnificence. Around four hundred films were made in Phnom Penh between 1960 and 1975, of which only thirty survive today. The extraordinary qualities of Cambodian cinema at this time have recently begun to be appreciated by film aficionados around the world, to the extent at least that these films can be seen. The Khmer Rouge destroyed most of them: very few remain in their full versions. Among them must be numbered the extraordinary films of the late Prince (King) Norodom Sihanouk, most of which have fortunately survived. His films, however, were only a tiny fragment of the whole. A highly imaginative and unique film style and language filled the popular screens, owing some cultural debt to Hindi films of the 1950s but far more to the indigenous cultural imaginary and the contemporary ethos of swinging Phnom Penh, with its beloved popular singers and big bands, nightclubs and parties, and the subterranean realm of ghosts, marauding shape-shifters and gigantic snakes making love to pretty girls.

Davy Chou's late grandfather Vann Chann was one of the well-known movie producers of the era. But Davy knew little or nothing about his grandfather's activities, or indeed about Cambodian cinema. His parents moved to France in 1973, during the chaotic years just prior to the Khmer Rouge takeover. Davy was born and grew up in metropolitan France. He knew little about his grandfather and nothing about the Cambodian film industry of the sixties. He became enthusiastic about making films, and began to experiment himself, although he had no formal training. His aunt was able to give him some information about his grandfather's career as a film producer, and around the same time he found the remarkable blog site being developed by Vattana Huy, originally of Battambang but now resident in France. This French-language site offered (and continues to offer to this day) the most comprehensive and well-documented account of Golden Age Cambodian cinema in the world drawing on a world-wide collection of images, photographs, materials, recordings, transcriptions, and audio-visual records, many of which have been collected by diaspora Khmer and posted on YouTube.¹⁴ Davy, in 2009, was inspired to go to live in Cambodia and explore this story which seemed to link his own life-history, his past, and the missing pieces of a previously hidden cultural history.¹⁵

¹⁴ See <<http://golden-age-of-khmer-cinema.eklablog.com>> (accessed 12 Oct. 2012).

¹⁵ Davy has discussed many aspects of his work in published or filmed interviews. See especially the very informative interview with Rowena Aquino, University of Southern California Asia Pacific Arts. See Aquino.

The film relies on interviews with the few surviving former producers, famous actors and others from the cinema of that era. In part a reconstruction of Cambodia's cinematic legacy, the film is also like an excavation, locating the faint traces of a life's work which no longer exists. Lobby cards, a karaoke bar in what used to be a film studio, dim fading interiors, sounds at the edge of consciousness: a palpable sadness and sense of loss pervades the film, the discovery that something which once existed with such vitality and power now survives only in small fragments of film and memory. The interviewees themselves are active and vital, even while speaking of the missing pieces of their lives and work. The film often uses the popular music of the era including the songs of Sinn Sisamouth and Ros Serey Sothea, both of whom were murdered by the Khmer Rouge. Images of the old movie theaters, the Hemakcheat, the Capitol, the Phnom Pich, and the Bokor, among others, show the decaying sites of what were once vital cultural hubs of urban Phnom Penh. Scenes inside the decayed movie theater, now the dwelling place of many who otherwise have nowhere to live, are extraordinarily vivid.

The tone of the film is set by the first images, as the viewer travels along a rural highway into a city at dawn. Only slowly does it become apparent that the travel is backwards: the film is taking us back into the city from which everyone was expelled in 1975, and back in time to a state of being which disappeared, in its original form, forever. We, the viewers, are to consider ourselves survivors, seeking the elements of a vitality which was foreclosed without warning and of which almost nothing can remain. The film briefly alludes to classic early movies such as *Lea Haey Duong Dara (Goodbye Duong Dara)* and the ever-famous *Puos Keng Kang (The Snake Man)*.¹⁶ However, there are few extracts from any of the films which did survive. Davy has said that his intention in not including these is to be faithful to the reality of the situation in Cambodia in 2009 where the films were almost impossible to find and had not been shown for decades. The memory of the films in the present society is what concerned him: how they have managed to survive to the present, in traces, memories, and imagination. This approach highlights and emphasizes for the viewer the sense of what is missing.¹⁷ In spite of

¹⁶ Several films have been made on the theme of the giant snake, released under various titles in Khmer, Thai, and English. The original version made in 1970, directed by Tea Lim Koun with famed actress Dy Saveth in the main role, was a huge success across the region. In 2001 Fai Sam Ang directed a new version, also released under the title *Kuon Puos Keng Kang (The Snake King's Child)*.

¹⁷ Personal communication, Singapore, September 2012 and email of 30 Oct. 2012. Davy explained this point in a French-language interview which described how the few remaining copies, on VCD or commercial VHS, were in terrible condition, with inaudible soundtracks. They

the elegiac quality of the film, there is also a sense of abundant, bursting life. Images are beautifully cut, emphasize with elegant camera angles the framing of space and the throbbing life of contemporary Phnom Penh, with many street scenes, images of the construction boom, pop songs, bustling traffic, thoughtful quiet interludes interspersed between them.

The making of a film such as this was a major undertaking. Davy had no prior experience of making a full-length film, let alone a documentary involving multiple sites, interviews, and unpredictable elements. The fundraising for the film was also complex, some money being raised for production as well as post-production through the AND, ANA, and Touscoprod projects.¹⁸

In spite of its positive spirit, though, the realities of past loss are never far away. Probably the most powerful scenes conveying this take place in the abandoned Hemakcheat Theater, which was once a luxury movie palace. Today it is the home of numerous people crammed into barely habitable spaces, where the stories and memories of those living there intersect with the political realities of the past. Although they seem like slum-dwellers—or like people who were born in the street—it becomes apparent that once they were just ordinary inhabitants of Phnom Penh, people who used to go to the movies like anyone else, and enjoy a night out on the town. They were former audiences when they were young, but now they live in the miserable surroundings of a decaying theater and watch movies on old television sets strung up to the crumbling electric infrastructure. This illuminates, more than anything, the way in which the Khmer Rouge broke the continuity in the story, and the cultural experience of the country.

Lida Chan

The second of the group, Lida Chan, was born in Cambodia in 1980 but lived and studied in France for many years. She gained a Diploma in Journalism at the University of Strasbourg in 2004, but then returned to Cambodia to work for Radio France Internationale as Cambodian correspondent. During this time she also worked as a research analyst at Bophana Center. Being closely involved with the

were not in a condition to be incorporated into his film. To utilize a few archival images would have betrayed the reality of the situation. See <<http://www.critikat.com/Davy-Chou.html>> (accessed 22 Oct. 2012).

¹⁸ AND (Asian Network of Documentary) is an organization run by the Busan International Film Festival. ANA (Arts Network Asia) assists a variety of art projects. Touscoprod gives supporters an opportunity to send funds to support worthwhile or experimental filmmaking projects.

archives while working in this role, she was keen to accept the offer of professional training in filmmaking with Rithy Panh. Her first film, *My Yesterday Night*, was a short documentary (18 minutes) completed in 2010. The film told the story of a former prostitute and was screened at the International Film Festival in Cambodia in 2010, and also at the Festival of Vesoul, in France, 2011.

Lida is becoming widely recognized for her second work, a documentary made with Guillaume Suon, produced by Rithy Panh for Bophana Productions in coproduction with Tipasa Productions.¹⁹ *Noces Rouges (Red Wedding)*, officially released in November 2012, had already won prizes and notices: for example, “Best Film” at the International Documentary Film Festival/World View competition in 2012.

The film uses a testimonial technique to unfold the hidden story of the forced marriages which took place under the Khmer Rouge. The circumstances of these forced marriages have, like many oppressive and sadistic events in the treatment of women in wartime, been suppressed and covered up for decades. In what amounted to rape, or at the very least forced sexual relations, up to 250,000 young women, often aged no more than fourteen or fifteen, were forced into “marriages” with Khmer Rouge cadres through the disastrous year of 1978. By that time the death rate in the country was so terrible, and so few children had been born or survived, that the regime decided on a policy of forced population increase. But the bizarre logic operating behind the scenes was completely obscure to those forced into these marriages. The girls and young women were simply instructed to prepare for weddings, which took place in groups to men whom they mostly had never met before. On the wedding night, Khmer Rouge spies were located under the houses to make sure the marriages were consummated.

Pen Sochan, aged in her late forties, is at the center of the film. Forced into marriage at sixteen to a man she found repulsive, she was repeatedly raped. This occurred only a few weeks before the liberation by the Vietnamese in 1979. The episode has remained deeply traumatic for her all her life, as she explains in the film. Her deepest question is “why?” She wants to understand who in fact is responsible for her fate. She survived the regime and later remarried, having five children, and tried to reconstruct her life. However, her husband died and today she lives as an impoverished widow in a rural environment. Fortunately she has two young daughters whose work in a nearby factory helps to support her.

The question of sexual violence under the Khmer Rouge remains a great taboo in Cambodia. While the terrible massacres, forced labor, famine, and torture are all

¹⁹ Guillaume Suon will be discussed further below.

now widely recognized, the situation of women and girls subjected to violence, brutality, and sexual exploitation has hardly ever been mentioned. In Cambodia virginity prior to marriage is considered essential. Rape is seldom spoken of and almost always the woman is held responsible. Even those forced into sex during the Khmer Rouge years cannot escape a sense of shame and disgrace. Pen Sochan spent most of her life living in silence, fearing to talk about these events. However, when the Khmer Rouge tribunal was set up, she decided that she needed to give her testimony of what had happened, to bring herself peace of mind, in the hope that justice would be done. Through the mechanisms set up for civil parties to participate in the Khmer Rouge tribunals she was able to bring her complaints against the Khmer Rouge leadership.²⁰ The film allows her story to unfold in layered sequences, as Pen Sochan talks with her friend, meets other women who suffered during those years, and seeks to uncover and understand the truth of what had happened to her.

Lida received small grants to allow her to finish her film. The Alter-Ciné Foundation provided a \$5,000 grant, and a further \$15,000 was provided by the International Documentary Film Festival of Amsterdam. In June 2011 she became a Documentary Film Fellow of the Sundance Institute to work in the Sundance Documentary Edit and Story Lab. The film, ultimately fifty-eight minutes in length, was shown first in Phnom Penh at the French Cultural House, at Bophana Center, and at Meta House, but since then has been seen around the world.

There is no commentary at all in the film, only the voices of Sochan, her friend, and those she is speaking with. Moments of intimacy and communication, as well as instances of silence and blocking manoeuvres, offer a startling rhythm. On occasion, the conversations seem forced. As in many of Rithy Panh's own films, the participants seem to have been "coached" on what to say, without having a script or precise instructions. Some scenes are confronting, particularly those where Sochan tries to get former Khmer Rouge functionaries who well knew her personal circumstances to speak about what had happened to her. There is little orientation for the viewer, who may not realize that ex-Khmer Rouge cadres are interspersed today throughout Cambodian society, continuing to lead their lives alongside those they had dominated or whose family members they may have killed.

Lida Chan's film highlights the prevalent historical amnesia which underlies so much of the repression and avoidance still experienced today. The most powerful

²⁰ Interview published in French in *Le Petit Journal* <<http://www.lepetitjournal.com/culture-cambodge/81107-khmers-rouges-le-tabou-des-mariages-forces-leve-par-lida-chan.html>> (accessed 21 Oct. 2012).

impression from the film is the sense that the women at its center, in spite of everything, are able now to acknowledge the past. Their lives, as young women during the Khmer Rouge era, had lasting effects on them but they are able to process and accept those effects. If Pen Sochan is determined to make others recognize her, and her experiences, this is because she carries forward into the future a sense of self-value which the terrorization of her early life has not been able to suppress. She, herself, is a valuable person.

Guillaume Suon

Lida's co-director, Guillaume Suon, is currently working as a filmmaker at Bophana Center. His first film, *Priphan, le dernier refuge*, with Anne-Laure Porée, explored the situation of a Cambodian ethnic minority struggling to preserve traditional ways in a remote part of Cambodia. His best known film, *About My Father* (2009), received recognition at the Cannes Film Festival in 2010 and was selected for several other film festivals including Tunis, London, and others. The film has also been shown on French TV5 Monde.²¹

About My Father tells the story of Phung-Guth Sunthary, who was one of the first to have filed a suit against Duch, the director of the former Khmer Rouge prison, S-21 (Tuol Sleng). Her father, Professor Phung Ton, was a highly respected Cambodian intellectual and civil servant who was imprisoned at Tuol Sleng very early in the regime. His photograph is found with the identification number 17, indicating he was the seventeenth to have been incarcerated at the prison on that day. But it hardly resembles him: only her mother is sure it is the same person. Sunthary's story highlights the role of the international criminal court not only in providing a space in which to examine the historical record, but also through analyzing the crimes committed to give some relief to the suffering of the survivors for whom the state of "not knowing" is constant and often unbearable. Sunthary's deep desire is to understand what actually happened to the father she knew and remembered. She seeks him in photographs and the memories of others, a man of great capacity who had been the university teacher of many including apparently Duch himself. She brings him back to the present through his photographs, images, and a beautifully handwritten letter (in French). This, we understand, was a truly civilized and admirable man, of whom Cambodia should have been proud. Instead, like other intellectuals, scholars, and creative people, he was destroyed.

²¹ Guillaume Suon was unable to participate in the interviews for this paper due to his busy schedule. He will participate in a further development of this project planned for 2013.

At Tuol Sleng she meets with Him Houy, known as “the executioner,” together with one of the interrogators who has agreed to meet her to talk about what happened to her father.²² Like Duch (in the dock during the Tribunal) they refuse (or are unable) to say anything significant about her father, his treatment or his death. They deny he was tortured but beyond that offer nothing. Sunthary is certain they are lying. The film seeks to acknowledge the irremediable loss of the citizens of the old regime, and to bring back from silence the memory of those whose value and qualities were so arbitrarily and painfully negated.

The three filmmakers discussed above are still at an early stage of their careers although they have already been remarkably successful. They are now relatively experienced and are all working on different projects at the present time. At an even earlier stage of their development are two young Khmers who have grown up and been educated in Cambodia, with little formal training and no immediate connections with France or any other European country. These “first generation” Khmer filmmakers are working entirely from their own direct experience and within the constraints of Cambodia today, with its opportunities and limitations.

Neang Kavich

Neang Kavich is still (in 2012) a university student, studying Digital Film and Television at Limkokwing University. He was born in Phnom Penh in 1987. His parents had been living in Pursat Province but moved to Phnom Penh after the collapse of the Khmer Rouge regime. Kavich remembers constant stress and difficulty in his childhood. His name was an inversion of a more common Khmer name and it caused others to constantly harass and bully him. In Cambodia, names are traditionally given to reflect the day and month of the child’s birth, and so are readily recognized by others. Kavich’s father, a talented sculptor, did not want him to have a name like everybody else’s. Perhaps his father saw an exceptional destiny for him. There were two sisters and three brothers in the family. The eldest brother has remained in the province, but everyone else lives in Phnom Penh.

Kavich began to learn Cambodian traditional music and dance at the Cambodian Living Arts organization, where he began to play the Ta Khe, a traditional musical instrument. He had no special feeling at first for traditional music and dance but joined the classes because they were close to his home. As

²² Him Houy plays a key role in Rithy Panh’s film *S-21* also.

time passed, though, he began to feel closer and closer to these artistic forms, and to treasure them. His brother also was a dancer, and they earned good money from their performances, which helped out at home. His parents had problems with their relationship and his father stopped providing sufficient support for the family. His mother and older sibling had to support the family so the other children could remain in school.

Kavich was given a salaried internship for two years at the Cambodian Living Arts Recording Studio, where he worked with the studio engineers and learned film editing and recording. In 2008 he joined a program promoting cultural exchange between youth in Southeast Asia, and then had the unique opportunity to perform in England and Scotland with his dance class for the WOMAD (World of Music, Arts and Dance) and Edinburgh Art Festival.²³

Kavich has not formally studied documentary film but was drawn to it as a means of expressing his interest in the traditional arts. In 2008 he completed a short film about the life of Chapei player Kong Nay, known as Cambodia's Ray Charles. He later attended the large film workshop run by Davy Chou, along with sixty other students, making a film called *The Twin Diamonds*, referring back to the style and themes of the sixties. The film was completed in 2009. Some scenes from the making of this film appear in Davy Chou's film *Golden Slumbers*. Kavich also made a ten-minute film, *Dancing in the Building*, which presents the voices of artists and dancers who live in a famous city site which serves as an artistic studio and meeting place.

Kavich was then selected by the Meta House film program in Phnom Penh to work on a documentary film, *Smot*. *Smot* is the name of a form of classical Cambodian poetry which was traditionally recited at funerals and Buddhist ceremonies. The performance of *Smot* after death was common for people from different classes and backgrounds, but due to the years of war and the Khmer Rouge suppression, knowledge of this form of recitation faced near extinction. Many young Cambodians have no knowledge of it, and some fear and dislike it, believing that its association with death is dangerous. However, elderly *Smot* masters in the Province of Kampong Speu are now teaching young Cambodians this unique art form. Kavich's film captures the delicate and difficult process of conveying these

²³ Personal communication. See also <http://filmfestival.payap.ac.th/?page_id=833> (accessed 12 Oct. 2012).

skills to a younger generation with little exposure to or knowledge of its background.²⁴

He has taken multiple roles in all his projects. During pre-production he researches and writes. At first he needed a lot of help as he had never written a film or story before. During production he works as a director and often also as first-cameraman. In post-production he works in the studio and edits the footage. Kavich's work has come entirely from his own inspiration and experiences. He has seen many documentaries in Cambodia relating to the Khmer Rouge years, including those produced by overseas filmmakers, but his favorite films are classical Hollywood movies. In spite of the difficulties of funding, organization, support and other elements, he hopes to continue to work as a filmmaker, and to be able to study outside Cambodia following his graduation.²⁵

Ngoem Phally

Ngoem Phally is a shining example of the new generation of cultural producers in Cambodia, even though she is only beginning her career. Phally was born in Phnom Penh in 1989, and came from a family with seven daughters. Her father became village chief and her mother was a housewife. She was the youngest child and was fortunate to be able to continue studying. Her sisters are now all married with children. She finished high school and began to study English Literature, switching to Media Management in the Department of Media and Communications at the Royal University of Phnom Penh, studying journalism, print, online, and broadcast media.

During her senior year of studies she watched documentaries, mainly about the Khmer Rouge years. One of her courses focused on documentary film, mainly from a practical point of view. She was deeply impressed by Lida Chan and Guillaume Suon's film *Red Wedding*. But her interests ranged far beyond Cambodia, and she was especially interested in documentaries about different ethnic groups, the Vietnam War, the war in China, and conflicts in Europe during the era of Hitler.

Phally felt touched by the few Cambodian films she was able to see while growing up, and felt she learnt a lot about the value of family relationships through these films. She was not able to visit cinemas, other than with a school group, and preferred in any case to watch films on TV or on DVD. She liked foreign films,

²⁴ In 2010 he joined another documentary workshop run by the Cambodian Film Commission in association with Rithy Panh, producing a short documentary, *A Scale Boy*.

²⁵ Personal communication by email, October 2012.

such as Chinese, Thai, Indian, and Western movies and saw many during her high school years.

After completing her degree she came to work at Bophana, where she undertook some documentary training and worked with a team at the workplace. She also learnt scriptwriting and interviewing techniques. Obviously she has been deeply influenced by the work of Rithy Panh and the processes he uses, including the effective use of the limited holdings of archival film.

As a result of a project to spread understanding of the Khmer Rouge Tribunal she was chosen to join a group going to Germany on a two-week study tour visiting Nuremberg, Munich, and Berlin. The intention was to increase the abilities of young filmmakers to work on reconciliation issues. The museum displays, such as at the Anne Frank Center (Berlin), the Jewish Museum (Berlin), the Dachau Concentration Camp site, and other memorial sites in Germany, impressed her. She is interested in the effects of museum visiting on people who have suffered trauma, noting that the experience can often cause a kind of post-traumatic stress especially when people of little education are exposed to things which they cannot contextualize or understand. She notes that the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide has improved a great deal recently, becoming more of a library of history rather than just a crime site.

Phally epitomizes one of the little recognized problems of young women who attempt to develop as documentary filmmakers in many Asian countries. Social and family expectations have caused some stress and conflict over the development of her career as a filmmaker. Her family has found it hard to deal with the idea of her living and traveling independently. Her parents want to support her remarkable achievements but are worried about her safety, and there is also the question of the family image, which still today expects girls to live in a very modest way, coming home early and traveling by car rather than public transport.

Today Phally is preparing to work as an assistant on a film concerning the consequences of the lack of economic opportunity for many girls in Cambodia. In recent years many thousands of young girls, usually from village backgrounds, have been recruited to work as maids in households in Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore. Once there, they have little control over their lives and are ripe for exploitation. The export of young Cambodian women's domestic labor to the more developed countries in Southeast Asia is a by-product of relatively low education levels and lack of other employment, which in turn is the outcome of Cambodia's shattered economy and society which still cannot provide work for many girls and young women. Those who are recruited for these occupations are often treated

cruelly or sexually abused. Yet this work offers an opportunity for girls to expand their experience and obtain some financial benefit which they can in turn use to “repay” their family. The issue is coming to public attention although the real dimensions of the problem are little understood. Phally hopes that her experience working on this film, hopefully as assistant director, will equip her to begin to undertake similar projects in her own right.²⁶

Conclusion

The young documentary makers discussed above are working within and beyond the framework established by Rithy Panh in his pioneering works of the 1990s and 2000s. Rithy Panh’s films bring forward the spirit of the witness as an agent of memory and justice. His witnesses are brought alongside each other, and the viewer is invited to join them, almost to participate in their discussion. In *S-21* he uses no interviews, no voice-overs, and no commentary. He himself is present, though not on screen. He brings the camera close, lingering on faces, hands, eyes, tracing gestures. When the jailers and torturers discuss their actions with the victim Vann Nath, we gaze with him at first one then the other, watching them reproduce their physical movements, re-enacting without shame their unacknowledged cruelty. Rithy Panh’s film is focused on that time and that place. He brings it into the present so that the past is not sealed over, or abandoned, or avoided, and he thrusts us as viewers into it, holding open the “hole in the Real” until we have to respond.

Each of the young filmmakers discussed above has emerged from this form of filmmaking, either directly or indirectly. They are joined together by a common historical heritage, both personally, as first-generation adults whose families experienced, suffered, and survived the Khmer Rouge events, and socially, insofar as they all know each other and are connected through Rithy Panh and the facilities and support of Bophana. Their visions are linked by a positive intention to move beyond that which must not be forgotten, and by attempts to recuperate what was of value in that which was lost. They recognize the years of suffering and tragedy but also seek to offer respectful recognition to a society and culture which was more thoroughly destroyed than probably any other in modern times. Like Rithy Panh, they do not use interviews or pose an authoritative interlocutor as an individual to whom the past must address itself. Rather, the stories they tell emerge from the direct experience of those bringing them into vision and voice, exchanged with one

²⁶ All information personal communication with Phally in Phnom Penh in July 2012 and email communication in September and October of 2012.

another as they move about the spaces of a society which is in the process of reconstructing itself. They do not seek to stridently condemn or express moral outrage, but place themselves as a new kind of witness, inviting new generations to acknowledge a re-emergent culture, building on the past with acknowledgment of the value of those who were there before them.

The specter of loss and the work of mourning hover over their films, but do not define them. Unlike the American films discussed by Renov, their film projects do not work through self-inscription or the exploration of individual subjectivity. While Davy Chou finds inspiration through the figure of his grandfather, this is more a linking gesture than an autobiographical exploration. The absence which they explore does not suggest a conditional self, figured against a ground of irreparable negation. Nor does the filmmaker stand apart from those who speak. Their works acknowledge their own difference from and yet continuity with a ruptured culture which needs to be recognized as both vulnerable and valuable. A new generation of viewers is invited into a shared space of recognition which asks that the Real be given no more than its due. They are not seeking to deny it, having learnt the lessons of Rithy Panh's cinema of witness as the source and origin of their own understanding of what documentary can "do." But rather they seem to be moving towards Nietzsche's perception: "We have art so we are not defeated by the truth."

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