

PERPETRATORS' TESTIMONY AND THE RESTORATION OF HUMANITY: S21, RITHY PANH

Joshua Oppenheimer

Rithy Panh (b. 1964, Cambodia) works as a film director in France, where he has lived since 1980. Following a screening in London in 2009 of his documentary film *S21: The Khmer Rouge Death Machine* (2003), Panh discussed his film with Joshua Oppenheimer.

Joshua Oppenheimer: About the production method itself: it's extremely interesting the way you use re-enactment and the way you elicit bodily memories and the way you develop [a] pretty and accurate and precise excavation of what happened and of people's memories through a sustained filmmaking method, which culminates in bringing the survivors together with their guards. I'd like to hear in as much detail as you can give us about the whole process.

Rithy Panh: 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 met 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 this film on S21.

Now, since this film has been made it's often the case... there are several films that have been made since where they bring the victims and the guardians together. But often also against each other's will. And that gives a kind of uneasiness when you see that kind of encounter between people. So although I understand what you mean when you use the term 're-enactment', for me it's not really that at all. It's not the right word for that. Maybe there isn't a word for it.

I met Paul, who does the re-enactment in the film, in his native village. And I understood that this man wanted very much to explain what he had done at S21. But he couldn't get round to explaining it properly, all his phrases were cut off. So at a certain moment I brought him a map of the camp. And so he said, 'oh yes I was a guard in this part of the building'. So then he was able to explain, but in doing that he made the gestures that you see in the film, which completed the phrases he couldn't discuss. And it's then that 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 words don't suffice to describe it. And also that violence may be so strong that the words become inaudible.

So it was then that I said to the guard 'you can use gestures, you can speak, explain it in any way you wish'. And then that I had the idea of taking the guard back to S21, which is now a museum of the genocide, and because the guard said that he worked at night there, I took him there at night. I asked at the museum how the building was lit at night – it was lit only by neon – so I cut all the other lighting and just put the neon up there. I sought to create an atmosphere, which recalled the situation, which the guard was actually working in. Sometimes at night they had the radio on with revolutionary songs so that's why the radio came into it, with the revolutionary songs.

JO: *So those songs were playing during the scene or added in the sound editing?*

RP: I made him listen to the songs, but the songs were put on afterwards in the edit. It's like giving somebody a foothold to get up a mountain. He needs to have these grips as he's going up in order to get to the top, in order to achieve what

he's setting out to do, which is to describe his own testimony. We found a little American munitions case, which was used as a kind of makeshift toilet in the cell, for example, one of the small bits of pieces that were in the cell which were still there. It was just placed in a corner, not knowing what the guard would actually do with it. So everything that could be found from that period – to recreate that period – was placed there at this person's disposal. Initially, they weren't put inside the cells because I didn't know exactly where they should be, so I placed them outside. But as soon as he arrived, he knew exactly where everything should go, and also put them in a particular corner that he used to. I then simply said 'so show me your work, show me how you worked'. And that's what opened up the bodily memory, if you like, in a chronological way: There is an order in which things are done; so before you put on or take off the handcuffs, you have the business with the bar as well underneath, and so there's an order in which things are done, which he followed...

When these actions were compared with the notes, which had been kept by the Khmer Rouge within the prison, it was found that this was exactly the way these things were done. So I imagine that nobody else apart from the guards and the victims would know exactly what happened in that camp. Because in that sequence everything is brought together and encapsulated, it makes it even more violent. One thing that's very important in that particular sequence is the way in which it was filmed. The moral perspective of the filmmaker at this point is very important, and it's necessary to have that moral perspective before, not while you're filming it. So you've got to be very careful that you don't topple over from the point of view of the guard to the point of view of the victim and... we're kind of captivated by the violence of the gestures. When he talks about the violence that he's meeting out, he also talks about seeing the others sleeping on the floor in the cell. And if the director is excited by that violence, he'd be following it always, but happily we didn't follow the violence all the time.

So it was instinctive to stop, to hold the camera at the door, not to follow in. Otherwise we'd be walking over the prisoners, if you like. And would knock over into the side of the guards. This is something that I realised after shooting. I instinctively didn't walk over the prisoners. If I had done, 'who would I be?'

JO: *I want to ask you about the role of repetition in what comes out. I think sometimes in documentary where there's a kind of myth that the first take is the most authentic take, but, here, in a film about memory, that's often not the case.*

RP: You know, it depends, there are no cast-iron rules on this. There were times when I made just one take. Because you feel that there's no need to go beyond

that; the authenticity is there in that one take. And then there are times when you come back to it time and again, and some months afterwards you ask again the same question. It's not easy to testify to these things, above all when you are a former torturer. The answer that you get most frequently is 'yes, ok I was a torturer but I was following orders; so I did wrong but I'm not responsible'. You can't advance with that, so it takes time to let people understand that for them to bear witness is also take responsibility. There's no other road. If you want to come back to humanity, then you have to testify. The worst torturer is the one who doesn't recognise his act right up until death. Because of [one's] belief in humanity, the challenge is to bring the torturers back to humanity. And that's done by the action of testifying. You have to create the most favourable conditions for those testimonies, for those witnesses' statements to be made. One principle, which I state right from the beginning, is that I am not a judge and I am not part of any group. I was against them, the torturers who were participating in the film, and it was important that they knew what side I was on. And I said also that I would accept everything that they said, and would take everything in that they said. But on one condition that I do not find proof to the contrary of what they say. If that should be the case then I would start again from the beginning. That was the deal, because not knowing what happened in their heads, in their minds, in their gestures, I had to give them the trust; I had to trust them and what they were saying. And that's the other thing – there are words in this testimony, but there were gestures also. So when you talk about destruction and reducing to dust, these are not just words, there are gestures behind these words also. So when the words are not sufficient, the image behind the words gives you the force of the gestures, of the acts.

JO: *You suggested a kind of moral dimension to what it means to help the perpetrators and help the guards testify; in the sense that you suggested that it's the only path back to humanity. And what's interesting to me there is the state that they were in when you worked with them because there's a sense in which clearly, at least in the film, we see them repeating dogma, repeating slogans, repeating propaganda... And you hear them chanting all together, 'Determined, determined, determined', and so on. And so this question of dealing essentially with the question of their conscience...*

RP: You have to look at this in its simplest form, which is that the crimes would continue to be perpetrated if the torturers were not able to understand the sense of their actions. So what can the survivors do? You can condemn them for a hundred years, but that's not interesting.

JO: *So essentially what did you find the perspective and the feelings of these characters, Po, Hoi and the others were? Did you find that they were still indoctrinated? That they were still using the dogma, the propaganda to justify what they were doing?*

RP: They were through a period of denying their actions, they were denying the acts that they committed. So the victims also had a need for those testimonies, those on the other side, from the torturers, because if not, then the victim finds him or herself cast into a kind of position of self-pity ... I am not interested in recounting what I lived through myself under the Khmer Rouge. That's not of interest. What is of interest is that that should never be done again...

Primo Levi, when he returned to Italy, had the sense that if he told the story nobody would believe it, and Nath had the same feeling himself. That's why he took one of the men by the shoulder to show him the paintings that he'd done. He needed confirmation that these things had happened.

JO: *Just to be clear, that was during the production of Bophana, is that right? That Nath took one of the men to show him [these paintings] – that was in the previous film. And so there was already a connection between the survivors and the guards?*

RP: It wasn't an intended thing, it wasn't something that was wished to be created...

JO: *But I think it is really fascinating and important in that the film gives us a glimpse into a contradiction between belief and knowledge, a contradiction between what the guards believe and what is helpful for them to believe, to get through their daily lives, perhaps not in a fully human state. And it's most clear to me in that moment where they talk about the interrogations. It's clear that they believe, in a way, at least they claim to believe these confessions, that they force the prisoners to say. So they force the prisoners to lie, but then the lies become somehow things that they can believe in. And that's something that I find fascinating here, and I wonder if you could talk a little about this.*

RP: I agree with you, that's what comes out of the film, but it was something I didn't know when I was making it. But it's not a definitive work. You can't explain S21. It's like explaining genocide. So I don't know how to answer. The film itself doesn't give all the answers, it can't. But it gives suggestions; it leads us into a way of examining the origins of genocide and the acts of genocide.

Joram ten Brink: *In what way can cinema advance our understanding of violence? How and in what way can cinema advance our understanding of post-trauma, and the kind of relationship between victims and perpetrators?*

RP: Frankly, I don't know. I tried to paint – I am not good at it. I tried to sing – not good; I tried to write – not good...! Cinema came by chance. Something that cinema can do which literature can't do, in the same way for example, is when you have somebody in the film, as he does, say, 'I killed', and then there's a long silence before he says, 'and I take responsibility'. This is something you cannot do as easily, as powerfully in literature. You can write, you know, 'I killed', brackets, silence, and then 'I take responsibility', but you cannot make it as powerful a statement, and as simply put as that in literature as you can in film. And how do you, for example, describe in literature the scene where he goes through the gestures of his day, or his nights' work as a guard?

JO: *I'm curious – first, going back to the two scenes where Paul is showing us the routines of his day. How, you told me earlier that you did perhaps five takes of those, and it was maybe the second that was interesting. I'm interested in how those demonstrations, those explanations of his day, how they evolved, if you remember, over the course of your successive takes?*

RP: As soon as you grasp that the witness's statement is something very difficult for him to express, you do another take to see if there's any difference in the way that he recounts his day. When you do a second take in a documentary, it's not like fiction feature film, where you do the same thing again, the second time you don't repeat exactly. When you're making a fiction film you can say, you come from here, and you cross here, and then you move to there. And after the first take you can say, come back and do it again, but not so quickly. You can't do that with a documentary. In documentary, a second take is also a unique take. You have to have a progression in each take. When there's no further progression, you stop.

JO: *When you have multiple takes in a documentary, when you're asking people to remember, are you working through different layers of resistance also? Different layers of fear, different layers of forgetting, as well. People forget. How did you find the two scenes with Po which are really fantastic scenes, and how did you feel the build-up to those worked? To that kind of precision and cohesion?*

RP: First of all you need a lot of patience. You need to be very, very patient. Also you have to know the subject very, very well. And don't forget that the whole

team, the whole crew, has lived through the genocide. Po could not speak to this film crew in the way that he might be able to speak to a British journalist, for example. Because he knows that the whole crew knows the things that happened. You have this one subject, and you have to have several witnesses around that one subject, all arriving at the same point. It took three years for the registrar who noted all the names, and for Hoi himself, to acknowledge that there were children who were killed in these camps. In order to facilitate that it was necessary to find witnesses from the Khmer Rouge themselves who would say 'Yes, we saw this, we saw these children. But it didn't panic me or worry me too much.' The more I treated this subject, the more I became convinced that you cannot destroy humanity, you can't destroy a human being without leaving some trace of that human life. So it's for me to find those traces. I had to read everything, I had to look at everything that I could, to immerse myself completely in a subject that I knew at the beginning but had to know better.

JB: *The Khmer Rouge guards photographed every victim before they interrogated them. They kept an archive of photographs. You used the photograph as another layer in the film.*

RP: I was free to use all the forms, which memorialise things. The photographs, the archives, Nath's paintings, so I was completely free to use all of these different elements. The photographs are very important, because the moment that the photograph is taken is the first step towards putting that person to death. 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-humanise that human being, it's much easier for that machine to work effectively.

The Nazis in World War II were out to exterminate the Jews. Even if it was a Jew in Siberia, they would find that person and execute him, because that person was Jewish. The Khmer Rouge were killing 'the enemy' so you had to make a dossier, to take a photograph, to prove that person as being an enemy. So you then can prove you act in destroying an enemy. It's not only a question of de-humanising the victim, but also of de-humanising the torturer, the guard. It's for this reason that they took very young boys to be indoctrinated. And that's something which is very prevalent in communist regimes, which is to rewrite, endlessly, the autobiographical confession. So [in] each version of the confession, they've been submitted to torture. And after so much torture the prisoner begins to lie. And to denounce others. So very quickly your friends become in the end your enemies.

So what had been a group of your friends suddenly becomes a network, a CIA network, or KGB. And it's not finished because then it's important that you accept and believe that. And once you've accepted that, and believed that, you can be killed. It's for that reason that I describe the crime in Cambodia as a crime of genocide. It's not recognised as such as people who prefer to say a crime against humanity.

JO: *They're fabricating these confessions, or forcing people to fabricate these confessions, and to denounce people and to conjure whole networks of enemies. At the same time of course they know that they're doing that, and at the same time the regime – inevitably this happened with the Stalin purges, and also I suppose in Cambodia – it sort of cannibalises itself, because it ends up denouncing itself.*

RP: It's important to understand why the revolution happened. In China and in the Soviet Union ... The revolution was made in the name of greater justice. But when it goes bad, the revolution goes bad – when Stalin becomes Stalin and Mao becomes Mao. Why are you killing the people who supported you? And it's for that reason that you have to start creating dossiers and have confessions fabricated. The point of a revolution is to bring justice to everyone, otherwise it's not a revolution. For that reason the Germans had no reason, in the Nazi period, to make dossiers, because it was the Jews that they were after. They were killed just because they were Jewish.

JO: *Can you talk about the impact of the film in Cambodia? I know it had an impact, and now Duch is about to go on trial.*

RP: When making the film I thought a great deal of the dead, of course. In making the film the dead were with me always ... the very fact that I am here, to a certain degree, suggests that somebody left a place for me. So my job is to transmit to the following generation what happened, but also not for them to feel guilty for what happened. Of course now the young who want to know what happened come and see the film. People are asking why certain grandparents are dead and others not, for example. If you don't explain they go around thinking that their grandparents committed a crime, and that's why they were killed. And they go around feeling guilty themselves for that. There was a young woman that I met who said she'd seen the film, which had made her suffer a lot, but at the same time it returned her dignity to her. And so that's why the film is made.

JO: *And so it had a specific effect on San Pan [the Head of State], didn't it?*

RP: San Pan had no need for the film to know that S21 existed, but he was able to use the film.

JO: *The film became known in part because when San Pan saw the film it forced him, in a way, or that's how it was reported, to admit the existence of the prison, which he'd never admitted before.*

RP: S21 is not a little studio in the middle of nowhere. It was a huge machine.

JO: *And so now the commander is going on trial, and you're making a film in Cambodia with some of the same people, is that right? Can you talk about that? Or do you not want to talk about it? Dutch trial starts on the 17th, right? And you're going back in two days time. So even if you don't know what you're going to do, and that's a familiar feeling...*

RP: Sometimes you have an idea and you want to make a film, which looks like your idea. It's not good. You can make a fiction film then. If you want to make a good documentary film, it's much more important to spend your time observing what happens, what people say, what people understand, what people would like to understand sometimes and what they cannot understand sometimes. That's why I don't know. Really I don't. I'm also afraid, sometimes I can't sleep at night. I spend money and no film yet...! [laughter]

JO: *Some of the relationships that we see in S21 were not intentional, you said, they began with your film Bophana. It'd be interesting to know more about your other relationships with the other guards?*

RP: Yes, first thing I would like to have is a Cambodian team. If I say 'kill', it's not the same meaning for you as it for me. I took five or six years to train a crew to do this film. It's very important. Everyone in the crew has the same desire. No vengeance (they're not after revenge). They want only to release something like a memory, a work on memory. That's all. So that's the first thing. The second thing is that I went to visit all the Khmer Rouge that my team could find. And I paid a visit to their village, to their homes, just to give them a signal that I know where they are now, who they are, and I will come again. I'm not afraid of them. I can come. In the first years we didn't shoot in S21. And I shot all over Cambodia, in different locations, but not in S21. And after that they respected you. They know who you are. That you speak the same language, that you can understand them. So you can start to work.

JO: Were you specifically looking for people, Khmer Rouge, who had worked in S21, or anyone?

RP: With the Khmer Rouge, they set up a system to produce files, many files, even on themselves. You take a file from Hoi, you have his address and you go to the village. You can find him. It's very easy. But the difficulty is if they accept or understand what you want to do.

JO: And then you had to build the trust to bring them to...

RP: No, to trust, it's not... Yes, we built together the trust, I cannot build it by myself alone. You know, everybody, even the perpetrators, need to speak, need to talk. Because now they have children, they have a wife. And how can you live if you don't talk about what you did? I don't know.

JTB: The first scene of the film is with the parents of Hoi. She says to him 'you have to go through the ceremony', because he says 'I have a headache, I cannot talk.' And she says 'you have to go through a kind of ceremony to move on'. The film is a kind of 'ceremony' for the perpetrators, that them to move on...

RP: Yes, it's really an invitation to speak.

JO: Except that Nath says 'I can't move on and I never want to move on. I want to, until I die, struggle to understand this', near the end of the film.

JTB: What was the dynamic of the group of guards, during the six weeks in S21; can you talk about the relationship during the shooting between those six or seven men?

RP: It's important to know that whilst taking the witness statements from these guards, they were done in different ways, different styles, but towards the end I decided to do a kind of collective memory. It's difficult, when you are face to face with one another; it is difficult to lie. Even if the junior guards still look up to Hoi because he was the chief. There's very little use of a throat microphone, or body mic in the film. On the one or two occasions that it was used, Hoi at one point forgot that he had a mic on. It was when he was away from the camera that he told the others 'say no more, because if you tell him any more he'll know what other things have been happening' and so on... That was accidental because he didn't know he had a mic on.

JO: So what did you do? Did you do anything? Did you tell Hoi that you heard him telling them, did you intervene there?

RP: No, sometimes I shouted a lot... When someone continues to lie, I shout. Because I'm a human being like him. Sometimes people living around S21 heard me [laughs], because I shouted, yes. I shouted. I told Hoi not to try to hide things from me. You know, one time I was in the countryside, I rode with a group of the Khmer Rouge. The first day I went to this village, I found everyone. Who the killer was, who the guard was. There was only one survivor, who still lives in the same village. But this guy didn't want to talk to me, but each time he saw a Khmer Rouge coming, he spoke very, very softly. Next day I came to the village, nobody wanted to talk to me. So I know that one of the guys who is today a policeman ordered everybody to keep silent. And when I saw him, I said 'I know you ordered everyone not to speak to me.' And everybody came with machetes to surround us; you have to face that situation. But if you show your fear, you will lose control. Never show them that. Of course sometimes I'm afraid, like you. But you have to cut sometimes when you are making a film! I have 1,200 hours of rushes... At the end, over the last year, I concentrated the shooting on S21 for one reason: the Khmer Rouge continued to say that S21 did not exist. And maybe in 25 years somebody will be able to say that the genocide did not exist. You cannot say that it didn't exist when the S21 is inside the city, inside the Khmer Rouge organisation. You can't deny S21. It's inside your machine.

JO: One thing that strikes me about this film, and from what I know of your other work, is that you're dealing with places that are of such deep human significance that I want to say almost sacred. The locations themselves bear witness to so much that they become a kind of character in your film. Here it seems to be true in even The Burnt Theatre [France/Cambodia, 2005]. There are these locations that bear witness to something and what's really fascinating to me is how you use the location. You don't set up, you don't try to use the location to depict what happened, to make it look like it looked, but you bring in certain elements like the lights, as you said before, or a few props, or debris...

RP: When you want to make a film about location, or a film about human beings, it's very simple. If you want to make a film about dignity, about memory, you stay very close to people. You don't need to show it's a wide shot... Memory is like a territory and the surprise, with regards to Nath finding the pen on the floor in S21 building, is more than a coincidence after what you were filming. So the building, the location is part of the human story because it contains the memory.

JO: The film is made within a very difficult coexistence between people who are clearly victims, people who are guards and we invariably wonder – what are they thinking, why are they going through this? And you framed the film in a very precise way to say that we need this testimony, we need to show, to see what happened. What are the guards doing in being so cooperative with you, are they still indoctrinated and just showing you what they did because they want to, or are they...

PR: They cannot refuse to cooperate. Because I am here.

JO: In what sense?

RP: I was in Cambodia.

JO: But they could say, I don't want to talk about it, I'm not coming to...

RP: I'm still here. It was their responsibility to cooperate. How can you refuse? I don't know how. I'm back again. I know you. Maybe I will not make a film with you, but I know who you are. And until you die I know who you are. You cannot refuse. No way for you to get out. I know where you are, who you are. They have no other way to get out, the only one way to get out for them is through testimony. To testify. To cooperate. I am not a judge. But they have to cooperate.

JO: Did they feel intimidated?

RP: No. Why? They intimidate me with the machete. I have only a camera and microphone. No gun. Very simple, when I talk with them I look straight into their eyes, and explain what I want to do. There's no trap, nothing like that. One of the victim's sisters wanted to see Prakun, the torturer. I asked him if he agreed or not. He said 'ok', and after the confrontation, he asked me not to do it again. I respected it. I don't impose. 'You don't want to see her any more, ok. We stop there.'

Audience member: I'm curious about what your thoughts are on the forthcoming trials?

RP: I think justice cannot resolve the problem, only a small part of the problem. People have waited a long time for this tribunal to bring them a solution. But they will be disappointed. Because a tribunal cannot bring a solution to their ques-

tions. But we need it because a tribunal can recognise who is the victim and who the perpetrator, like the film does. At the beginning of the film, Nath says 'If they [the guards] are also victims, who is a victim? Who are we?' It's very important to recognise who the victim is and who the perpetrator is. In this way you can start to mourn. You can start to talk. It's also important for the tribunal. I support that, because I think that if you want to build democracy, it's not only economics that you need. You need also a state of love. If people who killed millions do not face justice, how can you put a guy who steals a bicycle in jail?