

October 2014

## The Missing Picture - Film Review

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### Recommended Citation

Zylberman, Lior (2014) "The Missing Picture - Film Review," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal*: Vol. 8: Iss. 3: 103-105.

DOI:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.5038/1911-9933.8.3.10>

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/gsp/vol8/iss3/12>

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# The Missing Picture - Film Review, Director: Rithy Panh, Documentary Cambodia/France, 2013

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Reviewed by Lior Zylberman  
Translated by María Belén Riveiro

“In the middle of life, childhood returns (...) I seek my childhood like a lost picture”, those are the opening words pronounced by Rithy Panh in *The Missing Picture* (*L'image manquante*). His film is focused solely on recovering that loss. However, we will soon realize that his childhood was not lost. The Khmer Rouge took it away from him between 1975 and 1979, in his native Cambodia.

Rithy Panh was born in Phnom Penh in 1964. At the age of 11, he had to abandon his birthplace. His family, like many others in every city, was displaced to the ‘rehabilitation’ camps in a forced evacuation. When the Khmer Rouge regime was overthrown, Panh escaped to Thailand, and later immigrated to France. In France, he enrolled in Cinema Studies, and built a career. While he embraced both fiction and documentary genres, his filmography has been centered on the regime of the Khmer Rouge. From *Site 2* (1989) to *The Missing Picture*, Panh has constantly put into practice several ways of representing the years of the genocide and its consequences. *S-21, la machine de mort Khmère rouge* (2003) is probably Panh’s most renowned movie. The film focuses on Tuol Sleng, the former school that was turned into a detention and torture center under the name of S-21. In this documentary film, Panh interviewed survivors as well as former torturers, and created conditions for both the victims and the perpetrators to spend some time together again. In 2011, Panh then went on to release a sequel entitled *Duch, le maître des forges de l'enfer*. In this film, Panh presents a long interview with Kaing Guek Eav, better known as Duch, the former director of S-21. The interviews took place in a prison while Duch was on trial before the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia for the crimes he committed during the reign of the regime. He was later convicted of crimes against humanity, murder, and torture for his role during the Khmer Rouge rule of Cambodia and sentenced to 30 years imprisonment, later extended on appeal to life in prison.<sup>1</sup>

In previous documentaries, Panh had chosen, in Bill Nichols’ terms, a participatory mode<sup>2</sup>. In other words, he interviewed several social actors, yet he remained behind the camera. Panh, the filmmaker, did not bring his subjectivity into play: he depicted experiences, created situations, but did not place himself in front of the camera in order to directly intervene to voice his own experiences as a survivor. However, he made a particular subjective turning in *The Missing Picture*. In this movie the story mainly revolves around the self: Rithy Panh. In its French version, while Randal Douc, an actor, tells the story, the texts are co-written by Panh and Christophe Bataille.<sup>3</sup> The story is about the childhood memories that the filmmaker has never buried. When evoking these memories, Panh not only remembers exploitation, hunger, and starvation suffered under the regime of Pol Pot, but he also remembers that when he was 13 years old, he lost his whole family in a short period of time. His brother in law was executed. His father decided to starve to death. His mother let herself die in hospital after one of her daughters, and Panh’s sister, passed away. In addition, Panh’s nephews passed away in similar conditions.

After the opening titles the camera is immersed into the water and comes to the surface again giving pictures of the sea. Water connotes birth, time, life, and transformations. All things come from the sea and return to the sea. There is no coincidence in the fact that towards the end of the documentary the pictures of the sea reappear. His childhood, Panh suggests, returns in the middle of life as in “water [that] is sweet and bitter”. After going through troubled times, Panh is now, at the age of 50, looking back to his childhood; or maybe, as he points out, his childhood is demanding his attention. The movie becomes the search for his childhood, a lost picture. Using water and clay, Panh creates his own men, his own actors, through this models of clay, Panh’s memories emerge.

The filmmaker asks us to believe him. He wants us to work with him, to believe that everything he is telling us is true. Briefly, he urges us to imagine. Panh does not have any actual pictures of his childhood; his memories vacillate, and he resorts to his imagination to rebuild them.<sup>4</sup> In this way, Panh undertakes the reconstruction of the days spent in the ‘rehabilitation’ and labor camp. At the same time he denounces the workings of the regime of the Khmer Rouge. The models made out of clay, painted and characterized as different people, are still, motionless, against a background of cardboard. Nevertheless, the camera moves around them, apparently bringing life to the inanimate. The story being told helps us combine all the elements

so that what is in our imagination comes to life. Panh acknowledges that his testimony is driven by a need: “They say [that] talking helps. You understand, you get over it.”

Nominated for an Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film in 2013, and winner of the award *Un Certain Regard* at the Cannes Film Festival of that same year, this movie suits clearly two purposes. On the one hand, and from a historical and political viewpoint, *The Missing Picture* aims at recounting the history of the Cambodian genocide, using Panh’s own life experiences to denounce the crimes. On the other hand, Panh creates an autobiography where the personal dimension meets the public dimension; in this way, the personal history converges with the Cambodian collective history.

If the images Panh is seeking to capture had been recorded through technical means, such as film or photography, reproducing them would have become unbearable for the viewer (and also for Panh). In this way, Panh’s film entails a challenge towards horror representations, noteworthy for its search for new expressions to represent genocidal violence. Resorting to another kind of representation, Panh makes bearable what would have been unbearable. According to Jacques Rancière, “the treatment of the intolerable is thus a matter of *dispositif* of visibility”<sup>5</sup>; as in *S21*, *The Missing Picture* adopts the same strategy: in the words of Rancière, “[t]he whole strategy of the film is to redistribute the intolerable, to play on its various representations”<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, and to anchor in reality his way of recalling his story, Panh resorts to records of an archive that run parallel to the story. In some parts, it is a story that suggests the images are propaganda material; and in others parts the images are superimposed one on the other (Figure 1). Seen as superimposed, the images help achieve a peculiar combination of imaginations: on the one hand, two resources are combined to create an image working as synthesis; on the other hand, the story being told informs us that the forced evacuation of the families in Phnom Penh happened as in this combination-superimposition Panh creates. He thus creates his own visual-historical archive.



Figure 1.

Panh also intervenes faintly on the screen in a repeated manner. In the beginning, for example, the screen shows Panh looking for “missing pictures” in a shed crammed with old film canisters, with a close-up on his eyes. Later on, he carefully breaks down the world made out of clay, to create a sequence where his image is out of focus, to illuminate the images of a child with whom he grew up. This helps Panh “find” his own childhood (Figure 2). “And my childhood returns. Now, it’s the boy who seeks me out,” Panh states, “I see him, he wants to speak to me. But words are hard to find”. The dialogue takes such a toll on Panh that his image remains blurred.

Although it is not his voice we hear, we instead hear Panh’s consciousness speaking to us. The tone chosen, the volume, calmed and intimate, are similar to a prayer and/or a confession. In this way, we can argue that Panh resorts to documentaries as a “therapy of self-examination”.<sup>7</sup> Michael Renov developed the idea of techno-analysis in relation to the potential of documentaries as tools for self-inquiry. Through his movie,

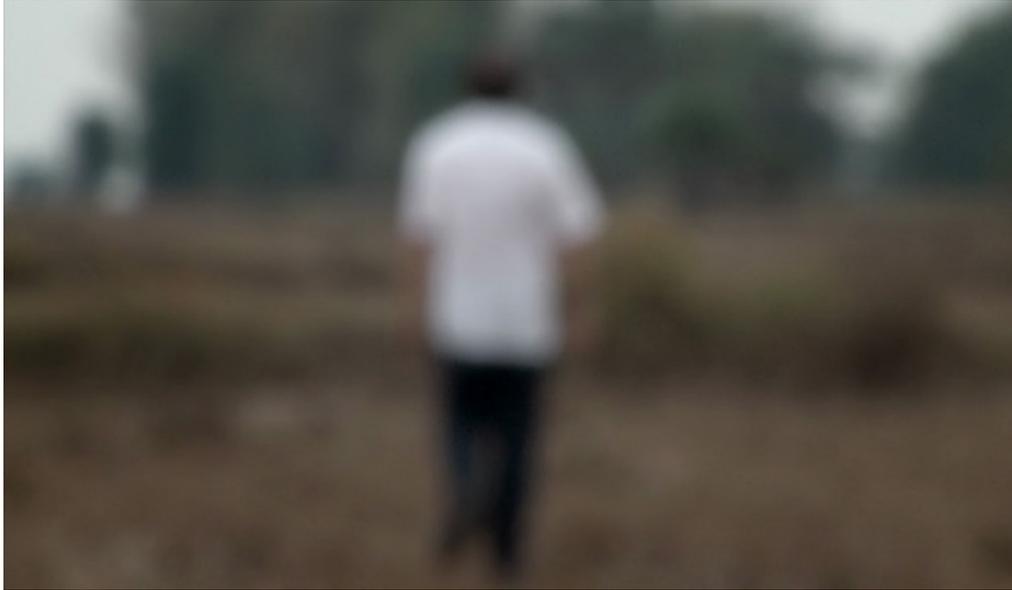


Figure 2.

Panh does not feel that his efforts have been in vain; his imaginative work has allowed him to state, finally, that “[t]hese pictures are not missing, they are inside me”. The sea returns as the final image, the camera immersed into the water and rising again to the surface: Panh is reborn, and the opportunity allows him to own his memories.

*The Missing Picture* should not be taken only as a movie sparked by a cathartic need. It is a creation of a committed filmmaker, searching for truth and justice in his homeland, Cambodia. Therefore, Panh explores and capitalizes on the opportunities offered by cinema to share and to present us a period in which he and his people suffered. Panh took the risky and unusual choice of visual treatment of his story to produce images of the unimaginable, the unthinkable. He tells a detailed story of the everyday life, and at the same time reflects upon political, social, and philosophical issues.

Title of the Film: *The Missing Picture* (*L'image manquante*); Director: Rithy Panh; Producers: Bernard Comment, Catherine Dussart, Martine Saada; Country/Countries: Cambodia/France; Year of release: 2013; Production Company: Bophana Production, Catherine Dussart Productions, Arte France.

### Endnotes

- 1 *Prosecutor v Kaing*, 001/18-07-2007/ECCC/TC, 26 July 2010; *Prosecutor v Kaing*, 001/18-07-2007-ECCC/SC, 3 February 2012.
- 2 Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).
- 3 Bataille, a professional writer, collaborated on the writing of Panh's memoirs, *The Elimination*. In fact, *The Missing Picture* is partly based on this book.
- 4 In a certain way, Panh's idea is similar to the one depicted in the sequence of the abduction of Albertina Carri's parents, which used Playmobil dolls in the movie *Los Rubios* (Albertina Carri, 2003).
- 5 Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (New York: Verso, 2009), 101-102.
- 6 Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*.
- 7 Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).