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Book Review: *Perpetrator Cinema—Confronting Genocide in Cambodian Documentary*

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Perpetrator Cinema—Confronting Genocide in Cambodian Documentary
Raya Morag
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In *Perpetrator Cinema*, Raya Morag analyses the direction that Cambodian cinema has taken in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge (KR) era (1975–1979), where members of the art community, and invariably creators of cinema, were eliminated by the deadly policies of Pol Pot and his clique. This void, Morag comments, was quickly and effectively filled in the aftermath of the KR era, specifically in the 90s, in a unique turn of emphasis on the portrayal of the relationship between perpetrators and victims, in this case, involved in KR violations.

According to Morag, we live in what she denotes as a Perpetrator cinema age, where the focus has been on interviewing and creating documentaries about perpetrators—a clear shift away from the erstwhile Era of the Witness (or the victim/survivor) that marked the post-Holocaust period.¹ Peculiar to Cambodian cinema however, and as a further nuance to solely perpetrator-centred cinema, are the endless movie and documentary productions that place perpetrators and victims in direct confrontation with one another²—a feat which Morag alleges, Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* came the closest to achieving in the context of the Holocaust. Morag comments on how impossible a feat it was, since in the context of the Holocaust, perpetrators and survivors did not return to Germany while in the context of the Khmer Rouge, many perpetrators and survivors remained in the country of perpetration. Another reason, Morag avers, was that no creator of cinema thought of exposing such a potentially charged confrontation.³

An additional unique trait of post-KR cinema, says Morag, is how it explores the complexity involved in the formation and operations of the KR, bringing to the fore blurred lines between so called Big Perpetrators and perpetrators of lesser consequence. It equally bears upon how members were voluntarily as well as involuntarily made to join the KR resistance army. Other matters are also dealt with, such as how contentious it was to denote a specific post-KR era, since members of the genocidal regime continued to assert their political presence (and dominance) till recently.⁴ A limitation faced by Interview-based Big Perpetrator Cinema in Cambodia, and hence presenting the duelling between perpetrator and victim, is the ageing and dwindling population of perpetrators and survivors.⁵ Among the controversies broached in Cambodian Cinema is genocidal denial, when for instance, Ven Dara in *Bitter Khmer Rouge*

¹ Raya Morag, *Perpetrator Cinema: Confronting Genocide in Cambodian Documentary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 50.

² Ibid., 42.

³ Ibid., 50.

⁴ Ibid., 52–53.

⁵ Ibid., 56.

accuses the Vietnamese for the ills befallen on Cambodians.⁶ Morag also touches upon the absurdity depicted in *Bitter Khmer Rouge*, where the funerals of Ta Mok and Khieu Ponnary were organised in line with Buddhist rituals, rituals that they had once rejected and condemned by them as they acted in line with KR policy.⁷ *Bitter Khmer Rouge*, produced in the pre-ECCC (Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia) period, also hints at the scepticism aimed towards the setup of the tribunal as a forum to try the crimes of the KR regime to bring justice to survivors and their families.⁸ All these points refer to the breadth and depth of issues raised in contemporary Cambodian Cinema, which therefore provide a venue to deal with not only trauma and perpetration, but silence and wounds, all beyond the limited purview of the ECCC and other instruments and mechanisms of transitional justice.

In a separate theme in her work, Morag discusses the confrontation between Rithy Panh and Duch on one hand, and Theth Sambath and Nuon Chea on the other, both pairs having been perpetrator-and-survivor to each other during the KR era. *Enemies of the People* is a production that achieves the objectives of Nuon Chea's admission to guilt in the killing of Cambodians, unravelling the methods of torture and killing of low-ranking perpetrators through re-enactment of murder scenes. It also highlights the fear and denial of responsibility of perpetrators such as Sister Em, and provides an insight into the rampancy of cannibalism in the Khmer Rouge era where perpetrators confess to drawing bile from human gallbladders to prevent dengue.⁹ This film is another rendition of the emotion of resentment, as opposed to revenge and hatred, since in the expression of Theth Sambath's sadness when Nuon Chea is taken away, there is a transition into scenes of death and devastation from Tuol Sleng (S-21 prison) that fill the missing picture of Sambath's state of mind. Morag concludes that *Enemies of the People* seeks to avoid the western ethnocentric perspective of the Pol Pot regime's atrocities as another version of the heart-of-darkness trope.¹⁰

Another novelty introduced by Panh in these films is to represent the standpoints and opinions of the dead—those who were tortured and/or killed during the KR perpetrations. This is achieved through the technique of inserting a voice that is not matched or identified with a corresponding physical presence in the scenes.¹¹ Morag extends this interpretation to reveal a connection between the realities of the KR where New People, those who now have voices but no bodies because they are dead, were 'no longer human beings' with the rise of the KR who placed the peasant and farmer class above them.¹² Moreover, in a move to oppose genocidal denial, Panh justifies his cinematic techniques and representations by saying that, "Thanks to cinema, the truth comes out: montage versus mendacity," and "Duch reinvents his truth in order to survive... I edit my film, therefore, against Duch. The only morality is the editing, the montage."¹³ The director of *About my Father*, Guillaume P. Suon also resorts to editing to reveal the incongruence between the perpetrators' detailed description of killing and their refusal thereafter to pin it down as a crime.¹⁴

A key take-away from Morag's *Perpetrator Cinema* is her reflection on Jean Amery's twist in understanding Friedrich Nietzsche's reference to "Ressentiment," which the latter associated with the weak, inferior and cowardly, or those who were not strong enough to avenge themselves. Morag suggests that Rithy Panh adopted Amery's more recent take than Nietzsche's draconian one. In *Mind's Limits*, Amery declared that "I rebel: against my past,

⁶ Ibid., 61–62.

⁷ Ibid., 65.

⁸ Ibid., 67.

⁹ Ibid., 71–79.

¹⁰ Ibid., 81.

¹¹ Ibid., 99.

¹² Ibid., 100.

¹³ Ibid., 104.

¹⁴ Ibid., 109.

against history, and against a present that places the incomprehensible in the cold storage of history and thus falsifies it in a revolting way.”¹⁵ Thus in *S-21*, one of Panh’s productions, he revives scenes unknown to many of past perpetrations in the precincts of Tuol Sleng, and clearly at the risk of being forgotten and erased from history. Ten low-ranking perpetrators are interviewed and made to re-enact the ongoings in the prison, including the torture they meted out on inmates—something they do with troubling ease, and in doing so, reveal the existing dominance of the past on their present bodily reflexes and state of mind.¹⁶ As a contrast to *S-21*, in *Duch*, Panh requires Duch to read the ‘confessions’ that he based himself on to torture and kill inmates of Tuol Sleng. Duch does so reluctantly, but at the same time, the ingenuity of this cinematic move is to compel him to admit to his responsibility—something he denies in various instances, including in one of his most theatrical and memorable moves in the ECCC trial.¹⁷

The duelling between perpetrator and survivor in Cambodian post-KR New Cinema serves to provide one more clue to the puzzle of genocidal tendencies, says Morag.¹⁸ Morag’s conclusion is that perpetrator cinema is neither a manifestation of transitional justice, nor one seeking reconciliation, but one of moral resentment.¹⁹ These are some of the ground-breaking epistemological achievements of New Cambodian cinema production, she adds. Morag thus discerns the phenomenon of ‘moral resentment’ where reconciliation and resentment, once deemed antithetical to each other, are harmoniously united.²⁰ Reconciliation, in Cambodian cinema, she says is not “antithetical to resentment, but complementary to it.”²¹ Moreover post-KR New Cinema highlights the How of the Cambodian genocide (as opposed to the more common Why), and provides a forum for retaliation by survivors, victims and their families in suppressing the widespread denial sounded by perpetrators.²² Morag ends on the note that Cambodian perpetrator cinema “is first and foremost a cinema of survival that keeps the wound open.”²³ *Perpetrator Cinema* offers important insights into the post-KR cinematic productions if one is sufficiently patient to plough through its complexity.

¹⁵ Ibid., 89.

¹⁶ Ibid., 92.

¹⁷ Ibid., 97.

¹⁸ Ibid., 49.

¹⁹ Ibid., 121–122.

²⁰ Ibid., 47.

²¹ Ibid., 43.

²² Ibid., 184.

²³ Ibid., 187.