



**The Cinema of Rithy Panh:  
Everything has a soul**  
*O cinema de Rithy Panh:  
tudo tem uma alma*



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**Abstract:** Over four decades of making films, director Rithy Panh continues to expand the possibilities of documentary filmmaking. His traumatic experiences of the Khmer Rouge's dehumanising regime drive the creative impulse that makes him Cambodia's most famous director. This interdisciplinary collection elaborates upon the global geopolitical concerns such as migration, exile, imperialism, and gender that Panh astutely implicates within the specificities of Cambodian history. Not only does Panh expose the role cinema plays in reifying structures of oppression, he also shows how it might also produce a measure of redemption.

**Keywords:** Cambodia, Rithy Panh, Documentary, Genocide, Exile

**Resumo:** Ao longo de quatro décadas fazendo filmes, o diretor Rithy Panh continua a expandir as possibilidades do cinema documentário. Suas experiências traumáticas com o regime desumano do Khmer Vermelho direcionam o impulso criativo que o torna o diretor mais famoso do Camboja. Esta coleção interdisciplinar explora preocupações geopolíticas globais como migração, exílio, imperialismo, e gênero, que Panh astutamente articula dentro das especificidades da história do Camboja. Panh não apenas expõe o papel que o cinema desempenha na reificação de estruturas de opressão, mas também mostra como ele pode produzir uma medida de redenção.

**Palavras-chave:** Camboja, Rithy Panh, Documentário, Genocídio, Exílio

One anecdote in this collection tells the story of how a teenaged Rithy Panh once confronted a French bully with his fists. He realises then how the horrors he witnessed as a child in the Khmer Rouge's Cambodia, including the brutal death of his parents, had translated into a capacity to perpetrate violence himself. Panh finds an alternative conduit in filmmaking that enables him to confront his traumatic past and its consequences without resorting to physical force. This rich and wide-ranging collection attempts to span the complexity, sensitivity, and intelligence of Panh's oeuvre, a career that unfolds like a personal history as he discovers in cinema a creative tool for resistance, reckoning, and redemption.

Early in their introduction, the editors Leslie Barnes and Joseph Mai claim that "Panh is at once a Cambodian and a World filmmaker" (BARNES; MAI, p. 163-164, 2021), an ambiguous phrase which they do not expand upon. At first glance, this seems like a claim that requires problematising. However, after finishing the collection I was inclined to agree. Rather than referring to the contested notion of "world" cinema, this collection highlights Panh's extraordinary ability to express the universal through uniquely specific stories about Cambodia's turbulent history. Panh eschews sensationalism and shock tactics, opting instead for a considered and empathetic filmmaking approach that dignifies survivors and unflinchingly holds the perpetrators of violence to account without resorting to simple binaries and easy answers.

Panh's cinema entangles US foreign policy that enables the Khmer Rouge to take power, French colonialism, and even the complicity of early cinematic practices in the racialization, sexualization, and reification of the colonial subject. As a first-hand witness to the horrors of genocide that followed the Cambodian civil war, including life as a refugee in a camp on the border with Thailand, and later as an immigrant in France, Panh weaves his transnational experiences into a complex and personal philosophy of images and sounds. He embraces the complexity of historical atrocities, always ultimately zeroing in upon the embodied human cost: the people who are torn apart by global geopolitics, and how some lucky individuals might find a measure of reconciliation in creative practice.

Barnes and Mai cast the net wide, seeking out authors from different disciplines to tackle the breadth of Panh's practice, including historians, anthropologists, art historians, and philosophers. The first of four parts, "Aftermath: A cinema of postwar survival," begins with a chapter by Boreth Ly about the trope of "mad mothers" in Panh's films (LY, 2021, p. 17-31). Ly draws on *Rice People* (1994),

*Site 2* (1989), and *The Burnt Theatre* (2006), films featuring mothers who suffer psychotic episodes. Ly suggests that, in Panh's films, madness functions as a survival tactic when reality defies reason. Moreover, the 'mad mother' stands in for Cambodia herself, at once gendering the trauma of the genocide and entangling gender inequality within the filmic analogy. Joseph Mai (2021) follows with a thoughtful treatise on how Panh uses architecture in *The Burnt Theatre*. The film tells the story of a group of actors and dancers struggling to practice their craft in the ruins of the burned out Preah Suramarit National Theater, an architectural gem built after Cambodia won its independence from France. In Panh's hands, architecture functions as both the ruins of a nation and the creative resilience that surpasses it. The third and final chapter of this section, by Khatharaya Um (2021), tackles the "exilic conditions" (UM, 2021, p. 46) resulting from genocidal violence in two filmic contexts: *Exile* (2016) and *Que la barque se brise, que la jonque s'entrouve* (*Let the boat break its back, let the junk break open*, 2001). Katharaya analyses trauma through the private, individual lens of exile from personhood to which victims of the Democratic Kampuchean regime were subjected and the social aspects of destroyed and forcibly displaced communities. Katharaya points out the impossibility of forgetting trauma, how it returns consistently even after decades of attempted effacement. Temporality is ruptured as life goes on, but the past resurges with violent vigour. Cinema offers a salvation of sorts: while it can never erase the past or fix what is irrevocably broken by genocide, creative practice enables resistance and a means to reckon with history. Producing images allows Panh to survive alongside his trauma.

Part 2, "From Colonial to Global Cambodia" begins with Jack A. Yeager and Rachel Harrison's comparison between Margherite Duras' novel with Rithy Panh's screen adaptation of *The Sea Wall* (2008). The authors argue that Panh complicates the issues raised by Duras when he moves the narrative to a rural setting, shifting the site of revolution away from the city. He also casts a French-Cambodian actor in place of the ambiguous character M. Jo, whereas in Duras' novel his ethnicity is never identified. Panh's casting positions the character as a western educated Sino-Cambodian, a neo-coloniser that troubles the simplistic binaries of Cambodian-French animosity. Further, the European character Suzanne becomes a participant in the Khmer revolt, farming in the rice paddies and eventually donning the traditional clothing of local peasants. For Panh solidarity is not based on race and nationality, but on the common struggle against exploitation through community and collaboration. Jennifer Cazenave sets

out to characterise *Rithy Panh as Chasseur D'images* (2021), making a tenuous but productive link between Panh and Félix Mesguich, the French-Algerian cinematographer who called himself an image hunter. Cazenave describes how Mesguich's images from early cinema show the colonial project in action: the taming of natural habitats in the colonies, including the people who live within them. Cazenave turns to Panh's film *La France est notre patrie* (*France is our homeland*, 2015), where he repurposes colonial archive films to show how cinema and the colonial project are inextricably intertwined, racializing and sexualising the colonial objects of a western gaze. Panh generates a counter image of so-called civilized French culture. He cleverly uses montage to return the gaze of the other upon the coloniser, thus regenerating the agency and resistance of colonised folk. Panh reconfigures the language of cinema, so tied up in the colonial project, to expose and resist its problematic origins. In a fascinating study of *Shiiku, the Catch* (2011), one of Panh's lesser-known films, Cathy J. Schlund-Vials breaks down the transnationality of the film's source texts, from a Japanese short story by Kenzaburō Ōe, adapted for the screen by Nagisa Oshima in 1961, and finally re-situated by Panh into the Cambodian civil-war. The author examines Panh's strategy that shows the long-term human catastrophe from below following on from the usual war footage of bombing from above. Panh shows how the cost comes not only at the moment of impact, but in the reverberations that continue in subsequent years. As Schlund-Vials outlines here, Panh makes clear how the US bombing campaign, a so-called sideshow of the Vietnam war, radicalizes the local population and eventually enables the victory of the Khmer Rouge army. Closing part 2, Leslie Barnes (2021) draws on Marxist and feminist critiques of labour to consider *The Land of Wandering Souls* (2000), Panh's film about workers digging trenches and laying pipes for fibre-optic cabling that will enable superfast broadband. Barnes connects the diegetic temporality which takes place after the horrors of the genocide with the Khmer Rouge regime, suggesting that it is not only Pol Pot's rule that deprives Cambodian workers of a dignified life, but also the ravages of global capitalism that follow. The film exposes the brutal underpaid labour and devastating precarity of workers living on the knife-edge of survival. Panh finds glimmers of optimism in the women's ability to find dignity by supporting one another in small ways: "a lullaby, a consoling gesture, a word of advice" (BARNES, 2021, p. 109). In the face of relentless exploitation, these small actions are evidence of resistance, of solidarity, and, however tenuous, of the possibility for change.

Stephanie Benzaquen-Gautier and John Kleinen (2021) claim that the Khmer Rouge set out not only to transform the language of Cambodians through political education, but also to materially transform individual and social bodies. Panh engages this embodied memory when he directs perpetrators to repeat gestures of abuse and torture to generate a “mechanics of violence” (BENZAQUEN-GAUTIER; KLEINEN, 2021, p. 118), thus creating a cinematic methodology that documents the remembered body language of perpetrators. In both *S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (2003) and *Duch, Master of the Forges of Hell* (2011), the recorded gesture becomes a means to retrieve the past and to overcome the rationalisation perpetrators construct for their crimes. This process of accountability through repeated gestures, the authors suggest, generates the possibility for forgiveness and a kind of closure for the survivors of unspeakable horrors. Donald Reid (2021) also teases out Panh’s ability to get perpetrators of crimes to return to their genocidal past. Duch refuses to accept responsibility for the well-documented torture and death of thousands perpetrated under his direction at the notorious S-21 security prison. Reid compares Panh’s retrospective project in *Duch* to French ethnologist François Bizot’s apologist account in his memoir of imprisonment and release at the hands of Duch, *Facing the Torturer*. Reid outlines how intellectuals in the west seek out a common humanity with war criminals, attempting to understand evil by looking within. As a victim of Khmer Rouge violence, Panh has no interest in identifying with mass murders: he knows first-hand that only some become perpetrators. As such, Panh seeks to revive Duch’s unshakeable belief in the ideology of the Khmer Rouge by asking him to recall and recite political texts while looking at photographs of imprisoned people and the documents he signed ordering their execution. Duch easily falls back into his performance as director of the notorious camp, thus revealing himself as he never did throughout his trial.

Western intellectuals, many of whom were blind supporters of the Khmer Rouge before the horrors of the regime became well-known, often seek to inscribe themselves upon events rather than focussing on the specificity and personal responsibility of mass murderers such as Duch. Raya Morag (2021) employs Auschwitz survivor Jean Améry’s notion of “moral resentment” (MORAG, 2021, p. 150) as a framework to interpret Panh’s approach in *S-21*, *Duch*, and *Graves Without a Name* (2018). Améry demands that time be annulled, refusing to allow temporality to get between a perpetrator and their crime. Given the political agenda of governments and trials to reconcile past

crimes through pardons, Morag leans on Jacques Derrida to show how pure forgiveness can only be bestowed from victim to perpetrator despite the latter's unimaginable crimes. Political or state-sponsored forgiveness aims only to return to social normality, whereas Derrida claims forgiveness only truly occurs when it is exceptional and inconceivable. Panh, Morag claims, approaches the criminals in his films with Amérian moral resentment as a strategy – returning them to the moment of perpetration.

The fourth and final section, “Memory, Voice, and Cinematic Practice” opens with Anthropologist Lindsay French (FRENCH, 2021, p. 161-172) comparing Panh's approach in *Site 2* (1989) to her own ethnographic study in the refugee camp. French's research focussed on the contextual politics of the camp and its effects on the long-term residents there. Panh highlights the embodied experiences of living in a camp over an extended period, expressed through the repetitive daily habits of one resident, Yim Om. The specificity of her experience, Lindsay argues, generates a shared understanding of the material consequences of history that might otherwise remain in the abstract reduction of grand narratives. Vicente Sánchez-Biosca (2021) argues that Hout Bophana, a woman murdered by the Khmer Rouge, becomes a “symptom of Rithy Panh's films and perhaps of Rithy Panh tout court” (SÁNCHEZ-BIOSCA, 2021 p. 175). Images of Bophana recur in Panh's oeuvre, often standing in for the missing image of dignity and the search for love in impossible circumstances of institutional dehumanisation. Simply asserting one's humanity becomes an act of profound resistance. Images of Bophana stand in for tragedy, courage, even of accusation: Panh places Bophana's mug shot in his filmic confrontation with Duch, her gaze transforming from victim to a ghostly denouncing witness. Panh's *The Missing Picture* (*L'image manquante*, 2013), argues David LaRocca (2021), challenges given presumptions about documentary films by intervening in the public archive and replacing it altogether with the clay figurines that translate Panh's memories of the genocide. The creative enactment of memory becomes a site of knowledge that exceeds the truth claims of the indexical, a method to revive private histories. The moulded clay of Panh's figurines transform memory from the specific, embodied experience of historical events into pictures that reclaim what is missing from the public archive. Soko Phay (2021) closes the collection with a thoughtful piece considering how *The Missing Picture*, *Exile*, and *Graves without a name* help reconstruct Panh's own identity, shattered by the trauma of his experiences. With its pulverising *kamtech* policy, the Khmer Rouge

regime attempted to leave no trace of either its crimes or its victims. Panh seeks to settle his restless spirit by generating images that resist this brutal erasure. This collection of diverse approaches affirms the compassionate and dignified power of Rithy Panh's films that leave impressions he could never accomplish with his fists alone.

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