

# ‘The Image of a Quest’: The Visual Archives of Rithy Panh

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*Cinema brings truth: montage against mendacity.*<sup>1</sup>

**S**HORTLY AFTER THE RELEASE OF HIS MOST RECENT DOCUMENTARY, *The Missing Picture* (*L'Image manquante*, 2013), Rithy Panh noted that in a world dominated by visible evidence contemporary histories and first-person narratives about the Khmer Rouge are full of ‘missing images’. The image is particularly salient in the context of recent Cambodian history, both for its glaring absence and its haunting proliferation in the Tuol Sleng genocide museum. The Khmer Rouge destroyed all but 30 of the 400 films made in the 1960s and early 1970s, the ‘Golden Age’ of Cambodian cinema, as well as nearly every actor and filmmaker to be swept up in its revolutionary path. Today, only a handful of films remain in any viable state of preservation, and the younger generations live in ignorance of their cultural heritage.<sup>2</sup> With the arrival of the

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Grâce au cinéma, la vérité advient: le montage contre le mensonge’ (Panh and Bataille 147).

Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

<sup>2</sup> Davy Chou’s *Le Sommeil d’or* (*Golden Slumber*, 2011) creates a historical mosaic of the Cambodian film industry using old film posters, interviews with surviving film stars, re-enactments, and footage of old theaters. Almost entirely absent from his film, however, are any clips from the remaining films. Chou, whose film could also have been titled ‘L’Image manquante’, says that this absence is deliberate: ‘in an environment where the image has become a given, accessible with a simple click of the mouse, showing a clip from a film people have never heard of would merely add one more image to the multitude viewers consume every day. Our project was the opposite: how do we reassign value to the lost and forgotten image?’ (<<http://www.lesommeildor-lefilm.com/#raconter>>. 12 Sep. 2014).

Khmer Rouge and the declaration of year zero, an entire people was emptied of its past, and the elimination of the Cambodian film industry is but one aspect of the larger, systematic ruin of Cambodian memory and humanity. Rithy Panh's project is to counter the lingering effects of this ruin, in other words, to restore Cambodia's lost memory, without which the country has no hope of imagining a future. In *The Missing Picture*, which took home the 'Certain Regard' prize at Cannes and was nominated for an Academy Award, Panh offers not only a first-person narrative recounting the experiences of his own family after Pol Pot took Phnom Penh, but also a meditation on the cinematic image as a historical and testimonial document: 'What I'm offering today is not an image, or the quest for any one image, but the image of a quest, the quest enabled by cinema'.

This paper will examine Panh's film in the context of his larger quest, that is, the multifaceted project of memorialisation that includes his other documentary films, co-authored narrative texts, and the Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center he opened in 2006, which is devoted to recovering and preserving the images and sounds of the Cambodian memory and to training the next generation of Cambodian archivists and filmmakers. In the twenty five years since he began filming, Panh has established himself as one of the most important chroniclers of Cambodian history, and his project reveals a commitment to the work of memory at the individual, national and transnational levels. In the first section, I present a brief biography of the filmmaker before introducing his first film (*Site 2*, 1989), and the four documentaries of interest here: *Bophana: A Cambodian Tragedy* (*Bophana: Une Tragédie cambodgienne*, 1996); *S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (*S21: La Machine de mort Khmer Rouge*, 2002); *Duch: The Master of the Gates of Hell* (*Duch: Le Maître des forges de l'enfer*, 2011); and *The Missing Picture*. In the second section, I focus more squarely on the role of the archive in Panh's quest. I turn first to the physical space of the Bophana Center, and second, to the development of an auto-archival impulse in *Duch* and *The Missing Picture*, Panh's two most recent documentaries. These films, which illustrate the extent to which Panh's cinematic project is concerned less with the truth of the Cambodian genocide than with the construction of truth, return not only to the Khmer Rouge archival footage present in both *Bophana* and *S21*, but also to these two films as archival sources. My goal is twofold. First, I will map out how, across these four films, Rithy Panh's project differentiates among archival documents (confessions and photographs, for example), archival footage, and the documentary film itself as archive. Second, I hope to demonstrate that in his continued engagement with these different practices, which intersect repeatedly throughout his work, forming ever more intricate patterns of testimony, Panh constructs a continually shifting cinematic archive that both complements and challenges traditional approaches to archiving and its use.

### The Evolution of a Quest

Rithy Panh was born in Phnom Penh in 1964. When the Khmer Rouge took over the capital in 1975, his family was stripped of their belongings and identity papers, and evacuated to the countryside as part of Pol Pot's radical collectivisation initiative. This was the beginning of the dehumanisation of the Cambodian people, a process that would eventually lead those deemed a threat to the new state to the killing fields. In 1979, having witnessed the death of his parents and siblings, Panh left Cambodia, spending some time in a Thai refugee camp before eventually making his way to France. In Paris, he studied at the Institute for Advanced Cinematographic Studies (*Institut des hautes études cinématographiques*), finding in cinema a means to break the silence that not only paralysed him in the years following his escape, but that for so long also surrounded the Cambodian genocide. Each one of his films bears the indelible mark of this moment in Cambodia's recent past, including, albeit indirectly, his 2008 adaptation of Marguerite Duras's novel *The Sea Wall* (*Un Barrage contre le Pacifique*). Though he still calls Paris home, Panh returned to Phnom Penh in 1990, where he now bases his production company, Bophana Productions, and where in 2013 he launched the Memory! International Film Heritage Festival with the explicit goal of bringing cinematic greats from the film archives to a new generation of Cambodian viewers.

Panh released his first documentary, *Site 2*, in 1989. The film explores the refugee situation following the Vietnamese defeat of Pol Pot through the experience of one woman living in a camp at the Thai border. It also announces the techniques that have become hallmarks of Panh's visual and narrative style: the use of silence, a preference for diegetic sound, an emphasis on everyday gestures, and a privileging of slowness, often communicated through long takes.<sup>3</sup> In *Site 2*, as in his other documentary films, Panh eschews the investigative for the meditative, generally leaving the viewer wondering where the film is headed. He pursues an unsettling combination of immersion—spending months on site, producing hundreds of hours of footage, and often creating a very intimate mise-en-scène—and distance, declining to appear as the agent of the film or to use his work to reveal an unknown reality to the viewer, thereby frustrating what Bill Nichols refers to as the latter's epistephilic satisfaction (Nichols, *Representing Reality*).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In one 8-minute scene, the camera follows the protagonist, Yim Om, through her dwelling as she straightens up, explains the rations distributed by various humanitarian organisations, shows the viewer the family bedrooms, kitchen, toilet, showers, etc. The scene is made up of just four takes, ranging in length from one minute to just over three minutes.

<sup>4</sup> With the term *epistephilia*, Nichols is referring to the viewer's desire to obtain knowledge from the cinematic experience. Extending the work of film theorists like Christian Metz and Laura Mulvey into the domain of documentary film, he argues that the documentary apparatus encourages the viewer to identify with the agent of the film, a subject position often occupied by

Seven years after the release of *Site 2*, Panh made *Bophana: A Cambodian Tragedy*, his third documentary and only investigative film. *Bophana* traces the love story of a couple of intellectuals from the provinces during the Khmer Rouge regime. But it is really the story of one woman, Hout Bophana, who was executed at the Choeung Ek killing fields after six months in the Tuol Sleng interrogation centre for writing love letters to her husband, a Khmer Rouge cadre. The film opens with an immediate reference to the materiality of the archive and of documentation: the camera is trained on a pile of papers stacked on a small table. This one pile—gathered somewhat haphazardly in worn folders, tied shut with string, notations in marker and ink scattered across the surfaces—stands in for the thousands of photographs, confessions, arrival and processing forms, and torture and execution orders that made up the archival organisation of the Khmer Rouge. But in contrast to the systematic administration of mass extermination, by which the Khmer Rouge transformed Angkar’s enemies into objects to be tracked from internment to interment, Panh uses the record to give voice and return humanity to one individual. This is evident as the opening shot transitions to one of a few men and women sitting around the table gently sifting through the various documents that together narrate the story of Bophana’s tragic death. In this film, the spectator is asked to ‘be with’ Bophana as she tells her story by way of the archives, to regard her not merely as a statistic, one of thousands of victims lost to a murderous regime, but as a woman with hopes and plans for the future, remembered fondly by those who survived her.<sup>5</sup>

The film contrasts the story of Bophana with a few survivor narratives, most notably that of Vann Nath, the artist who survived Tuol Sleng by painting portraits of Pol Pot. In one of the most striking scenes in the film, Nath walks a former prison guard, Houy, through an exhibit of his post-genocide paintings hung at the Tuol Sleng museum, explaining to the latter the various scenes of

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the filmmaker. The cinematic pleasure to be gained from this identification is tied then not to the idealized object offered in narrative cinema, but to the documentary’s promise to deliver knowledge. Panh’s refusal to assert himself as the agent of his films is, I would suggest, consistent with a cinematic project whose primary task is less to produce knowledge (though it does serve this function), than it is to question the way knowledge is produced. For more on how Panh’s films frustrate epistemic desire, see Barnes.

<sup>5</sup> Panh makes the same demands of his viewer in *Paper Cannot Wrap Ember (Le Papier ne peut pas envelopper la braise, 2007)*, his documentary on prostitutes in Phnom Penh. In the book he published alongside the film, he identifies a tension between the anonymity of statistics and mass documentation and the intimacy of his approach, which seeks to create a *mise-en-scène* in which those silenced by numbers, NGO reports, politics, or as is the case here, the Khmer Rouge’s archival practices might speak: ‘...I wanted us to look at them with different eyes. A face, a voice, a name. To be with’ (17). In this, Panh’s strategic use of the archives, his reframing of its contents, echoes the endeavours of a number of contemporary artists who have appropriated the Tuol Sleng mug shots in their work, and who, as Stéphanie Benzaquen argues, remediate the material evidence in an attempt to ‘regain[] another form of bearing witness and deconstruct[] the perpetrator’s aesthetics and ideology...’ (210).

interrogation and execution depicted in his images. In each instance, he insists on the importance of fabrication in the creation of these paintings, at once testifying to the torture that took place in the interrogation centre and alluding to the impossibility of witnessing the events he documents. Nath neither experienced nor observed any of what his paintings portray; rather, he imagines these moments, drawing on the memories of what he heard (the cries of the infants and their mothers, for example, or the screams of men being beaten) and what he was told by other survivors. Nath's paintings counter the thousands of prisoner photographs taken at Tuol Sleng, images which show these men, women, and children first as condemned enemies of the state and then as corpses, thus entirely omitting their lives as prisoners, the details of which are not to be found in the Khmer Rouge archives, but have to be imagined by those who survived **[Figure 1]**. But with every painting, Nath also asks Houy to confirm that his images do in fact correspond to the reality of Tuol Sleng. Houy, who participated in interrogations, did witness many of the events Nath imagines, and his role in the film is to corroborate or deny Nath's testimony, to validate or challenge his memory.<sup>6</sup> With this encounter, the film also begins the dialogue between victim and torturer that would be central in Panh's best-known and most controversial documentary, *S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Panh says this scene is the result of an extraordinary chance encounter. Houy was only at Tuol Sleng that afternoon because the rain had prohibited the team from shooting at Choeung Ek, as was planned, and Nath, who was not scheduled to be filmed describing his paintings for two days—Panh says he deliberately kept the two apart out of respect—arrived unannounced to retrieve his paint brushes.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the controversial use of historical re-enactment in this film, see Boyle.



Figure 1. Reproduction rights: Vann Nath

*S21* opens with archival footage of the civil war that led to the defeat of then president Lon Nol and the Khmer National Armed Forces, of a victorious Pol Pot, and of the empty streets of Phnom Penh in the days following evacuation of the capital. A few lines of historical explanation are superimposed onto the images. In this film, which he shot over a period of three years, Panh brings Houy and Nath back together to continue the memory work begun in *Bophana*. The film orchestrates the encounter between victim and torturer, and between both and the archival documents available at Tuol Sleng. On a formal level, it also constructs a series of dialogues. Scenes in which the former guards re-enact their daily interrogations, for example, both call out and respond to scenes in which they read through the instructions for torture written on each draft of an inmate's confession. Scenes in which Nath and a few other remaining survivors recall the conditions of their arrest and the interrogations they suffered echo those in which they remember the executed through the images and words left behind.

Panh's goal in the film appears to be to create a situation in which mutual recognition between the victim and the torturer, the enemy and the ally, and the past and the future might be possible. What is less clear is the extent to which this project is successful: the former guards are able to confront the evidence of their wrongdoing but they are unable to accept responsibility for their actions,

much less to see these actions as criminal. As mere cogs in the killing machine, forced to obey orders or be killed, the guards claim no hatred or ideological motivation to explain their actions. Instead, they hide behind the Cambodian word used to describe what they did: *kamtech*, which means 'to eliminate'. Insisting that their task was to eliminate, rather than kill, the enemy, the guards allow themselves to continue denying the humanity of their victims. The *banality* of their evil is unacceptable to an exasperated Nath, who can conclude only that these are men who were—and remain—unable to think for themselves.<sup>8</sup>

This refusal to admit the reality of Tuol Sleng, to accept the responsibility for one's actions, is even more pronounced in *Duch: The Master of the Gates of Hell*, released nine years after *S21*. In this film, Panh interrogates the director of the interrogation centre, Kaing Guek Eav, alias Duch, who, in Panh's words, 'is not a monster or a fascinating executioner. Duch is not an ordinary criminal. Duch is a *man who thinks*' (Panh and Bataille 301). Duch is also the first Khmer Rouge leader to be tried and condemned by the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia. Once again, the importance of the archive is evident from the very first scene of the film. In this scene, which juxtaposes Pol Pot's triumphant vision for Cambodia with the condemnation of a top Khmer Rouge cadre, Duch stands alone in his cell, dressed in pyjamas and preparing his morning coffee. In lieu of diegetic sounds, Panh offers one of Pol Pot's celebratory speeches from 1975. The camera follows Duch as he walks to the barred window, where he drinks his coffee. In the background, Pol Pot lauds the clairvoyance and righteousness of the Cambodian Communist Party and celebrates the struggles that led to the victory of 17 April 1975. The image cuts to archival footage of a nearly empty boulevard in Phnom Penh, the camera advancing toward the Cambodian Independence Monument, and then to footage of Pol Pot and the other members of the Khmer Rouge inner circle clapping and smiling as they walk past a regimen of soldiers and into a large auditorium filled with young men and women, the future of revolutionary Cambodia. Some of this footage was used in *S21*; much of it will be used again in *The Missing Picture*. The image then cuts to the title shot, which gives us Duch seated at a desk covered in photographs and documents from Tuol Sleng, and which announces the work of this film, in other words, bringing Duch to confront the remaining traces of a past he helped to orchestrate **[Figure 2]**.

The film is 195 minutes of a one-sided interrogation. Rithy Panh never speaks directly to the subject of his inquiry, something he avoids in all his documentary work. Instead, he creates situations in which Duch must respond not only to his victims, through the thousands of pages of confessions and instructions for interrogation he encounters, each one signed with his name, but also to the

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<sup>8</sup> See Arendt.

former guards working beneath him. And throughout much of the film Duch resists, focusing instead on his role in the indoctrination of Khmer Rouge ideology, enumerating the various logistical decisions that went into running the centre, and claiming to have forgotten or never known the true suffering for which he was responsible. At one point, Duch speaks of the importance at Tuol Sleng of obtaining the confession at any cost. The irony of this is not lost on the viewer, who realizes over the course of the film that no confession will be forthcoming here.



Figure 2. Reproduction rights: Rithy Panh

By the time he embarked on *The Missing Picture*, Rithy Panh had already told the story of the Khmer Rouge, its victims, and its survivors from multiple angles. With *The Missing Picture*, he frames the story as an autobiography, finally contributing his own intimate narrative to the decades-long project of memorialisation. Indeed, if in *S21* the task was to bring the torturers and prisoners to confront the past, and in *Duch* it was to bring the Khmer Rouge to confront the past, in *The Missing Picture* it is Rithy Panh who confronts his own past. The film treats the psychological and geopolitical problems of mass slaughter through the mediation of clay figurines and in so doing proposes a new response to two questions that have motivated his project to date: How do you film the unimaginable, the un-representable? And how do you make a documentary film about the past when the only archives to consult are suspended between obliteration and obscene proliferation? Rather than tell the story through fiction, as he did in one of his earlier feature films, *One Night After the War* (*Un Soir après la guerre*, 1998), or through dramatic historical re-



enactment, as he did in *S21*, in *The Missing Picture* Panh constructs a visual metanarrative of his own artistic efforts, literally crafting new models of remembering. The film, filling the gaps in the historical evidence as well as in the filmmaker's own life, testifies to the need for the aesthetic to capture the enormity of genocide in its past and present manifestations and to the power of the artist, as melancholic witness, to counter the abstraction of violence (in statistics concerning the dead, for example) with singular representations of loss.

### **Archives and Auto-archival Cinema**

Before exploring further the ways in which Rithy Panh's quest involves creating archives and auto-archives, it might be useful to quickly define what we mean by 'the archive'. A most basic definition would posit the archive as a repository or collection, physical or digital, of documents, which understood loosely may include images, manuscripts, and/or cultural artefacts. The existence of the archive answers our desire to understand something otherwise beyond our grasp; it also increasingly allows for a meta-interrogation on how knowledge of the past is produced. In *Archive Fever (Le Mal d'archive)*, Jacques Derrida further reminds us that the act of archiving is 'the movement of the promise and of the future no less than of recording the past' (29). In this volume, Derrida identifies two mutually reinforcing principles at the heart of the archive as public institution and as body of evidence. The first, *commencement*, refers to the primary status of documents assembled in a collection. The second, *commandment*, is a nomological principle referring to the order and authenticity of the collection. As such, with the archive, we seek beginnings and legitimacy. But Derrida also returns to Freudian psychoanalysis in order to interrogate its presentation of the archive as embodying two conflicting forces: the death drive and the drive to conserve, the latter of which is linked to the pleasure principle. The themes evoked by Derrida's meditations are many, and each is relevant not only to the Khmer Rouge's documentation project throughout the 1970s, but also to current efforts to unearth and expand an archive of the Cambodian genocide: the relationship between the living and the dead; the role of ordering, preservation, and registration; history versus histories; authenticity and truth; the relationship between place and law; the tension between remembering and forgetting (and between visibility and invisibility, telling and keeping secret).

The struggle between the drive to conserve and the drive to destroy, and between a past to conserve or destroy and a future to invent or foreclose, is already at work in the Khmer Rouge's own efforts to record the arrival of year zero and the construction of Democratic Kampuchea, which was of course dependent upon the destruction of the existing Cambodian society and its cultural markers. In the months following the takeover of Phnom Penh, for example, the Khmer Rouge filmed the demolition of the National Bank of

Cambodia, abandoned the National Library to pigs and other livestock, and turned a local high school into one of the most notorious and well documented sites of torture in modern history.<sup>9</sup> This tension is also indissociable from Rithy Panh's endeavours at the Bophana Center, the archive/gallery/training facility Panh opened with Ieu Pannaker, a pioneering filmmaker and the former head of the Film Department at the Cambodian Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, in 2006.

Plans for the Bophana Center began taking shape in the early 1990s and coincided with the advent of a number of other preservation initiatives in Cambodia, including the Cornell University Document Conservation Project, begun in 1988, and the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam), which was established by the Cambodian Genocide Program at Yale University in 1995 and which became an independent NGO in 1997. Each of these initiatives seeks to heal the wounds of the past by conserving and sharing the recent history of Cambodia. In contrast to the DC-Cam and the Cornell project, however, which have established extensive databases pertaining to the Khmer Rouge genocide and to Tuol Sleng in particular, the focus of the Bophana Center is the preservation of Cambodia's rapidly deteriorating film, television and audio archives. And while one of the explicit aims of the Cambodian Genocide Program is to make its database available in the prosecution of the Khmer Rouge war criminals and genocide engineers, contributing to transitional justice mechanisms in the country, Panh and Pannaker are motivated primarily by a desire to 'preserve Cambodia's audiovisual heritage and reinstate its importance, while contributing to a new momentum'.<sup>10</sup> The momentum they envision, though growing out of lessons learned from their country's violent past, is not bound to obtaining justice for its victims. Instead, the two filmmakers consider it their task to equip the Cambodian youth with the images and knowledge needed to express themselves as Cambodians, both with respect for and freed from the trauma of genocide. Panh notes, 'I believe more in pedagogy than in justice. I believe in working in time, in the work of time. I want to understand, explain, remember—in this order exactly' (Panh and Bataille 304).

On December 4, 2006, with the support of the Cambodian government and the Technicolor Foundation for Cinema Heritage (*Fondation technicolor pour le*

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<sup>9</sup> Of the first two examples, Panh notes: 'Years later, I saw some extraordinary archival images: some revolutionaries exploding the Central Bank of Cambodia. Only the edges of the building remain... The message is clear. There is no treasure, no wealth that cannot be destroyed. We will blow up the old world, and we will prove that capitalism is dust between four walls' (56); 'I remember other archival images of pigs wandering around the National Library of Phnom Penh, which had been emptied by the Khmer Rouge. They were knocking over chairs and trampling peelings. The pigs were replacing the books, and we had replaced the pigs' (85).

<sup>10</sup> <<http://bophana.org/fr/about/histoire-du-centre/>>. (Last accessed 30 Sep. 2015).

*patrimoine du cinéma*), the Bophana Center took up residence in one of the 1960s buildings typical in central Phnom Penh. Since its inception, the primary goals of the centre have been to provide a creative space for those who use archives regularly in their work, for example, documentary filmmakers and academics, and to develop local and international interest in the archiving of Cambodian culture. To this end, it not only provides free public access to the thousands of documents housed in its collection, but also encourages community participation through regular film screenings, concerts, art exhibits, lectures, workshops and conferences. Spatial configuration of the centre allows for individual consultation at the viewing stations located on the first floor while also encouraging visitors to engage with its collections collectively and in dialogue. Preserving the country's remaining audiovisual documents, Khmer Rouge propaganda footage included, is integral to the centre's commitment to understanding, explaining, and remembering the history responsible for shaping its collection. Providing free access to these materials informs its sense of promise or responsibility to the future.<sup>11</sup> The ethos of the centre echoes Derrida's claim that 'there is no political power without control of the archive, if not memory. Effective democratisation can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation' (4n1).

Equally important to the Bophana Center's pedagogical mission is its commitment to training the next generation of archivists, filmmakers, and technicians. The centre is active in the development and practice of physical and digital restoration techniques. While the archivists are working to expand and further digitize the collection, the filmmakers and film technicians support international directors shooting in Cambodia and produce their own in-house film and web documentaries.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the archival space is meant not only to educate Cambodians about the recent past, but also to train the next generation of educators. This is the future promise of and the transgenerational imperative behind Rithy Panh's quest. Bophana, the woman, was executed over 35 years ago, and her testimony is limited to the letters she wrote to her husband, for which they were both condemned, and the thousands of pages of confession

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<sup>11</sup> The mission statement on the website reads: 'Cambodian memories have been destroyed by three decades of war. Collecting film and audiovisual archives will help Cambodians to gradually restore this priceless heritage, and will enable them to understand their past, build their present and invent their future' (<<http://bophana.org/about/>>. 30 Sep. 2015). The Bophana archives include a collection of Khmer Rouge propaganda films recovered by the Cambodian Film Commission as early as 1979 and restored with the assistance of the French National Audiovisual Institute and the Technicolor Foundation for Cinema Heritage in France. The centre also offers 157 series of photographs of Cambodia (<<http://bophana.org/fr/archives/>>. 30 Sep. 2015).

<sup>12</sup> In addition to Davy Chou's *Le Sommeil d'or* (2011), which Bophana Productions co-produced with Vycky Films and Araucanai Films, see Lida Chan and Guillaume Suon's *Noces Rouges* (*Red Wedding*, 2012).

generated during her brief imprisonment at Tuol Sleng. After the film, naming the audiovisual resource centre after this tragic heroine shifts the emphasis from the anonymous mass to the individual story, framing our encounter with the archives as an intimate, personal one. At the same time, it ensures that the spectre of an individual lost returns not just as commemoration of one mortal life, but as an imagining or opening onto a collective future.

Finally, the Bophana Center embodies the idea that the archive is itself a site of reconstruction, determined by contingency and shaped by a particular perspective. Here, that perspective is one of loss and destruction. The documents preserved at Bophana, certainly the historical documents, have been selected because they still exist. They are not objective representations of Cambodian history and culture and do not collectively offer, as Dominick LaCapra has put it, 'the literal substitute for the "reality" of the past which is "always already" lost...' (92n17). Building a narrative out of these archival documents—in other words, attempting to produce some form of knowledge about Cambodia's past—is thus an exercise in filling in the gaps, inventing possibilities, orchestrating encounters—aesthetic, ideological, or interpersonal—and transforming lack via interpretation.

This is also the work of Rithy Panh's documentary cinema. In his films, Panh looks beyond the archive as a physical space or record in order to interrogate the idea of the archive as the source of a certain production of knowledge in the present, one that has specific implications for the imagining of a Cambodian community the future. So how do the archives figure in these works? Both *Duch: The Master of the Gates of Hell* and *The Missing Picture* offer explorations of the documentary film as an auto-archival formation, in other words, as that which responds not only to history and individual memory, but also to Panh's other documentary films, and to the space of the archives itself as the physical extension of the virtual dialogues that exist in and among these films.

*Duch: The Master of the Gates of Hell* was filmed during the trial of Kaing Guek Eav, which began on 16 February 2009, and as such, it serves as a sort of parallel tribunal, one indebted to but also independent of the juridical frame. Rithy Panh, who creates the situations necessary to lead Duch to speak, but who is himself absent in the film, says he seeks neither to understand nor to judge the man before him, but simply, 'to give him a chance to explain, in detail, the death process he organized' (Panh and Bataille 26). At the same time, it completes the work of *S21*, in which the former guards accuse Duch of orchestrating their actions but in which his voice is not heard. Like *S21*, *Duch* asks its subject to encounter and comment on the Tuol Sleng archives, and in many of the early moments of the film, Duch examines the images and interrogation documents, clarifying his position within the Khmer Rouge hierarchy and his relation to

those he identifies in the photographs and explaining his marginalia on the pages and pages of confessions.

Duch's monologues are interspersed with two kinds of archival footage. The first is Khmer Rouge footage, much of it also used in *S21*, *Bophana*, and *The Missing Picture*. The footage sometimes illustrates Duch's words, sometimes anticipates his testimony. At other moments, it has no relation to his words, which often fill the empty spaces between the abandoned buildings and emaciated prisoners seen in the images on the screen. At other moments still, the images slice into his monologue, interrupting in a flash the visual and thematic continuity of the filmed interview as if to draw attention to his hesitations and half-truths. These peripheral and fleeting interruptions not only question the mimetic notion that the image can speak for itself; they also undermine the narrative constructed within the film. The second kind of footage used in the film is footage drawn from Panh's own films, and most notably, *S21*. These clips are often in dialogue with Duch's descriptions, confirming but more often contradicting his narrative. The framing varies such that at times the viewer encounters them as any other clip, in other words, as interruptions in the diegesis, while at other times, the viewer discovers the footage along with Duch, who watches the film on a laptop. In those moments, Panh is filming his own films, creating formal and thematic loops within his project. He is also dramatising the impasses and contradictions that mar the different modes of testimony his films explore, and to the extent that he uses *S21* as an archival document, he is questioning the reliability of the record.

One example concerns the interrogation methods encouraged at Tuol Sleng. Duch watches a scene from *S21* where one of his former guards explains a technique of striking the abdomen with a wooden plank and then demonstrates an execution, ordered by Duch, of a prisoner who was tied to a wooden pole and shot with an AK47. Duch laughs in response and denies that such an execution ever took place. The guard, he says, has no proof, though he admits that he is also unable to substantiate his claims. In another clip, immediately following a take in which Duch claims to have directed but never participated in an interrogation, his being a theoretical and pedagogical labour, a guard recounts having witnessed Duch torture a prisoner during one of the sessions. Again Duch laughs, shaking his head. In many of the 'exchanges' between himself and his former guards, Duch relies upon a notion of truth that is at once absolute and variable over time. In other words, the truth that held between 1975 and 1979 is not necessarily the truth of the former guards in the early 1990s, nor is it Duch's truth today.

The filming of *Duch* led to the publication of *L'Elimination*, a first-person narrative co-authored with Christophe Bataille, in which Panh reflects on the experience of confronting Duch, and of watching Duch confront the archival

evidence. In dialogue with these reflections are sections that recount Panh's own experiences in the period 1975–1979: the mass exodus that began within hours of Pol Pot's victory; starvation; the suicide of his father, who refused to eat in defiance of the Khmer Rouge; the loss of his mother; and his job burying bodies behind a rural hospital. This text then served as the basis for his next film, *The Missing Picture*, the narration for which is a work of prose poetry published when the film was released. Much like the work of Vann Nath, whose paintings fabricate visual testimony for events the painter never witnessed and in so doing tell stories of human life from within the confines of imminent death, the film counters the existing archival images with those that were never recorded. It counters revolutionary Cambodia, an ideal world of industrial progress and agricultural plenty, with the humanity denied the victims of the Khmer Rouge. Panh generates these missing images by assembling clay dioramas or, as with the clearing of Phnom Penh, for example, which is one of history's many 'missing pictures', by superimposing clay figurines over Khmer Rouge propaganda clips. In their study of human rights and life narratives, Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith focus on the ways in which narrating trauma allows marginalized peoples to 'remember "otherwise": 'through acts of remembering, individuals and communities narrate alternative or counter-histories coming from the margins, voiced by other kinds of subjects—the tortured, the displaced and overlooked, the silenced and unacknowledged—among them' (16-17). Panh's fabrications are stylistically and tonally incongruous, bringing brightly coloured, almost childlike clay figurines into dialogue with black and white archival images of Khmer Rouge brutality. But the story they narrate, a story that deliberately reinserts the memories, individuals, families and colour eliminated in 1975, remember this brutality 'otherwise', and thus 'enable new forms of subjectivity and radically altered futures' (17).

Another key component of remembering 'otherwise' in *The Missing Picture* involves addressing the relationship between the destruction of the Cambodian film industry (and of Cambodian culture more generally) and the use of the visual and of narrative during the Khmer Rouge period. The juxtaposition of fabricated clay figurines and Khmer Rouge footage implicitly questions the authenticity of the latter, suggesting that this archival footage is itself full of missing images and only telling half the story. Indeed, these juxtapositions effectively subvert the relationship between the authentic and the fabricated, claiming a genuineness for the clay figurines and clips of feature films from the 1960s that is denied the Khmer Rouge. Over one of the many propaganda images celebrating the organisation and efficiency of labour in Democratic Kampuchea, the narrator says: 'I see the revolution we were so often promised. It only exists in images'. Likewise, 'Pol Pot' is a myth that was forged in the wake of the

destruction of the Cambodian film industry: the only actor left, he was the star of every Khmer Rouge filmic endeavour, whether he figured in the footage or not.<sup>13</sup>

Recovering the material remains of the country's filmic archives, which is shown in the film's opening shot as a tangled mass of hardened, mud-caked film reels, is at once a theme of the film and the quest that the film performs. In multiple instances, it transitions from shots of the reel of film to the projection of its contents, bringing these images to life. The fossilized reels are not all lost, but penetrating the mystery and ignorance imposed by the years of war, violence, and neglect requires a slow and careful excavation. The film is submerged in this process of excavation, and in the memories that surface in response, and the scale of the task—its vastness and demand for attention to minute details—is suggested repeatedly throughout the film: in the three scenes where ocean waves crash over the camera, drowning the viewer not only in the return of childhood, but also in the enormity of the project at hand; in a scene of harvesting, which uses an extreme close-up to show fingers picking tiny seeds off a dried branch; and in the making of the clay figurines. One of the first shots of the film, another extreme close up, shows two hands slowly crafting a man out of a block of clay. The fashioning of these clay figurines involves its own excavation, a symbolic and material unearthing of the men, women, and children lost to sickness, overwork, famine, and torture [Figure 3].



Figure 3. Reproduction rights: Rithy Panh

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<sup>13</sup> In *L'Elimination*, he describes some of the footage with which Pol Pot's myth was fabricated: 'On Pol Pot's desk, deep in the jungle, sits Marx, Lenin, and Mao. A folder. Some pencils. Next to the desk we see an army cot and a perfectly folded *krama* [the traditional Cambodian scarf that became synonymous with the Khmer Rouge]. This is the simplicity and truth of the revolution' (95).

The man created, emerging from the dirt that once buried him, is the negation of Pol Pot's 'man of metal', his 'pure instrument of the revolution' that was to be moulded by labour and communist ideology. And the shots that capture the fabrication process in the film demonstrate the care and attention shown in Panh's project to those once despised by their country. Like the shots of the ocean and the harvest, these images offer a metacommentary on the nature of both his quest and his method. In these moments, Panh is at his most reflexive, asking us to 'attend to the filmmaker's engagement with us, speaking not only about the historical world but about the problems ... of representing it as well' (Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* 125).

The work of Rithy Panh's films is to make claims for the truth-value of his fabrications while acknowledging that rendering truth in the documentary film requires creation and interpretation. The questions his techniques impose are not designed to encourage us to determine whether fabrication has taken place or to what degree. On the contrary, in the case of *The Missing Picture*, for example, he forces us to accept it. And we have missed the point if we come away from his work trying to puzzle out what the referent of a given assemblage is, or if we insist upon the relationship between his representations and 'what really happened'. This is perhaps most evident in his repeated use of certain archival images. The photographs and archival footage woven into Panh's films are often released from their immediate contexts in the assemblages he creates. In his *montage*, he contextualizes and re-contextualizes the archival sources, bringing different historical and emotional filters to bear on them, and thus casting them in different directions. And because he reuses the same images and footage across different films, they circulate, constituting different symbolic meanings according to their place in a given chain of images and in relation to the words that accompany them.

One example concerns a very brief clip of a man, woman, and boy being herded at gunpoint along a rural trail, most likely evacuated from their homes as part of an arrest or other relocation project [Figure 4]. The clip appears in three of Panh's documentary films—*Bophana*, *S21*, and *The Missing Picture*—but the viewer never knows its true source or significance, never knows what its true referent is. In fact, Panh's use of the footage seems to underscore the extent to which archival evidence can be manipulated to support conflicting claims. In the first film, the footage is accompanied by a description of Lon Nol's deposing of Prince Norodom Sihanouk in March 1970 and the arrival of civil unrest in the region where Bophana's father grew up. The emphasis is on the displacement of innocent villagers, victims of the struggle for political power between state forces and the Khmer Rouge soldiers, who were backed by the country's ousted monarch. In *Duch*, the footage follows a scene in which the former head of Tuol Sleng reads and reflects on a series of Khmer Rouge propaganda statements. His



narrative centres on the toxic class relations that perverted production and facilitated exploitation of the poor in the years following 1953, when Cambodia gained independence from France. He talks about his father, who was a shopkeeper working night and day to make others rich, and cites Mao's dictatorship of the proletariat.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, the emphasis in this scene is on redressing the wrongs of the bourgeoisie and putting justice into the hands of Pol Pot's revolutionary worker. The significance of the images on the screen thus shifts from innocence to guilt. The man, woman, and boy being forced along at gunpoint are no longer victims of war, but capitalist enemies. Finally, in *The Missing Picture*, the narration returns to the bombings, death, and fear of the early 1970s, but is immediately followed by a brief meditation on the ubiquity of the image and the slipperiness of its interpretation: 'There are so many images passing before us in the world. We think seeing them is possessing them'. The shifting relationship between archival image and narrative significance in these three films highlights not only the ways in which archival documents are transformed over time and according to their position within a given narrative sequence, but also the ways in which this transformation is shaped by individual analysis. Moreover, it draws attention to the instability of the historical record and of memory, which are themselves both full of gaps and omissions, and constructed through exclusion and excision.

In using and reusing the limited material to which he has access and in creating archival documents out of his own films, Rithy Panh brings the archival space into dialogue with the archival document and with cinema as both source and medium for such documentation. In so doing, he not only implicitly questions how knowledge of the Cambodian genocide is produced, but also offers alternative histories that critically examine the very sources on which they are based. Panh's image of the quest highlights the numerous potentialities of the photographic and moving image: 'between positivism and fantasy, between evidence and enigma, between truth-claims and lies "that tell a truth", and between [images] that note and those that connote' (Hayes, Silvester and Hartmann 113). Treating the archive as both a source of knowledge and a subject of study itself, Panh assembles filmic documents that sit deliberately between evidence and enigma, truth and fabrication in order to underscore the artificiality of the Khmer Rouge myth and the fragility of Cambodian memory today. Panh's quest involves creating new forms of and spaces for remembering—physical and cinematic—that resonate with other individual,

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<sup>14</sup> Mao's concept of New Democracy heralded an overthrow of both feudalism and colonialism that would not follow Marx and Lenin's claims about the subsequent establishment of a capitalist class. On the contrary, Mao's democracy would proceed immediately to a socialist coalition directed by the Communist party.

national, and transnational endeavours to restore this memory while acknowledging its inherent volatility and inevitable transformation over time.



Figure 4. Reproduction rights: Rithy Panh

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