

Rithy Panh (in collaboration with Christophe Bataille). *La eliminación*

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‘I want to understand, explain and remember, and precisely in that order.’ This is how the Cambodian Rithy Panh sums up the Project of suture that his film-making and writing longs for. It is only now, with the publication of *The Elimination*, that the dimension of his project can be fully grasped in its artistic singularity, almost always neutralised by the ethical and aesthetic tutelage of Claude Lanzmann. Panh always recognised the debt and celebrated the filiation, and here he acknowledges the mastery of Shoah again, his training in the possibility of ‘seeing through words’, in the corollary that perforates echoes and repetitions about the present time, in the potential of montage as a weapon of refutation, but it is worth also noting that which separates them, and that these pages again reveal with painful precision: Panh’s condition of direct victim –whom the dictatorship of the Khmer Rouge (1975-79) left with almost no family left–, and foremost of miraculous survivor, as in the particular Bildungsroman here narrated he details the forced renunciations that were dictated from the black hole to which a country in ideological fugue precipitated itself, a country which forbid glasses and specialist knowledge as well as fishing and agriculture with ‘individualistic’ aims while the population was fell prey of famine. In Panh, cinema (and writing) are foremost a means of salvation, a means of letting out the rage and the torment accumulated, and if *The Elimination* has been compared to works by Primo Levi, Robert Antelme or Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, that is, with

the memoirs of authors who have returned from hell, it should also have been related to that of Jean Améry, whose ferrous ideology of resistance and perennial witness is so close to Panh’s approach.

How to speak, write and shoot from the wound without letting oneself to be taken over by the demons, without giving in to dismay either. Such is Panh’s puzzle, the self-imposed task that in *The Elimination* presents us with a particular writing of disaster, fragmentary, unclassifiable, on the brink of disintegration. Developed in parallel to the shooting of *Duch, le maître des forges de l’enfer* (2011), Panh uses the intermittent tête-à-tête with the former responsable of torture and execution S21 – precisely with the absence, the X to which they all pointed at in *S-21, la machine de mort Khmère rouge* (2003) – to make of the book a crucible of times in which to encapsulate his own tale about the abrasive years of the communist delirium in Cambodia. Nonetheless personal memory is not the end, but another step, a key (if a master one) that provides valuable materials with which to force the new masks and subterfuges of those bosses and torturers who now shield themselves in abiding the rules and the service to the motherland. The rest of the voices that emerge and disappear are the ones by Duch himself and others, pure glows of grief that present brief witnesses as counterpoints or spell out terrifying Khmer Rouge slogans. The intertwinement and contrast of perspective and points of view literarily perform that which Panh had already outlined in

his austere cinematographic practice; that is, that ethics resides in montage. The shocks of montage, its passages and returns, delineate a politics and construct a combative hermeneutics about the displacements and slippages of language. ‘Duch has a weak point’, states Panh, ‘he knows cinema, he doesn’t believe in repetitions, comparisons and echoes.’

This is how, finally, the ethics and politics of forms are combined to produce a critique of the brutality of the Khmer Rouge based on the verification of the deterioration of a language or, rather, its cancellation and the emergence of a new one, a violent one. If the Nazis threw to the ditches their figures, the Khmer Rouge did the same with their ‘bits of wood’, both of them rejoicing in an abuse of power that even pretended to efface death. Hence the neologism that gave place to the machinery of the S21, *kamtech*, ‘to pulverise’, the annihilation to which Duch threw the children of the ‘enemies’ once these had already been executed: the order was to destroy and not to leave any trace. The limits of the language of the Khmer Rouge were, as Wittgenstein would have said, those of its revolution, its world, one where surveillance and interrogations were before

alphabetisation, but with the hindsight of time and the strata accumulated about recent history, it was Panh himself, precisely one of the survivors of that Cambodia, who came back to make executioners and victims pass through the tribunal of words, which were sought to be rehabilitated as a source of witness and confession. This is what the Cambodian film-maker has been attempting since decades, to allow protagonists ‘to explain themselves’, that someone like Duch ‘recovers his humanity through words’. While in his films Panh lets people speak and, by way of contrast with the veteran Lanzmann, doesn’t interrupt, hoping that the filmic dispositive will become a truth machine in association with montage – which may bring into play another witness or a sequence from the propaganda archive, in order to contradict fake or biased witnesses – it is in *The Elimination*, which transcribes his dialogues with Duch, that his arduous and steep creative work is most visible. Such back room contains: the doubts, the anxiety, the anger, the suspicion of following the game of the criminal, the shock at his laugh, which opens tremendous distances amongst men, that marks the fragility of his project and, at the same time, its absolute necessity. •