

# Photographic and cinematic appropriation of atrocity images from Cambodia: auto- genocide in Western museum culture and *The Missing Picture*

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## ABSTRACT

As a harrowing sub-discipline of English and Comparative Literature, Trauma Studies is in need of geographical expansion beyond its moorings in European genocides of the 20th century. In this article, the authors chart the institutional and cinematic appropriation of atrocity images in relation to the Khmer Rouge's auto-genocide from 1975–1979 in Cambodia. They analyse the cultural and scholarly value of these images in conjunction with genocide studies to reveal principles often overlooked, taken for granted, or pushed to the periphery in photography studies and film studies. Through grim appropriations of archival or news footage to more experimental approaches in documentary, such as the use of dioramas, the authors examine the commercial and artistic articulations of trauma, reconciliation and testimony in two case studies: The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) exhibition *Photographs from S-21: 1975–1979* (1997) and Pithy Panh's documentary *The Missing Picture* (2013). The authors first focus on the relatively obscure scholarship devoted to contextualizing images from international genocides outside the Euro-American canon for genocide study in order to build their critical formulations; they go on to explore whether these atrocity-themed still and moving images are capable of defying aspects of commodification and sensationalism to instead convey positive notions of commemoration and memory. Finally, their contribution to this debate regarding the merit of appropriating atrocity imagery is viewed from two perspectives: 'commodified witnessing' (a negative descriptor for the MoMA exhibition) and 'commemorative witnessing' (a positive term for the Cambodian film).

## KEYWORDS

atrocities images • auto-genocide • Cambodia • commemorative witnessing • commodified witnessing • globalizing trauma studies • *The Missing Picture* • Photographs from S-21: 1975–1979 • photography

## INTRODUCTION

Inexplicable barbarism ravaged Cambodia during the late 1970s, leading to one of the most horrific genocides of the 20th century. This reality began with the proxy war fought between the superpowers of the US and the Soviet Union in Vietnam by their bifurcation of the region into hard line choices between capitalism and socialism. The US clandestine air bombing campaigns in Cambodia during 1974 exacerbated rather than ameliorated the perception of US imperial ambitions for Southeast Asia. Thus, as Cambodia's Marxist–Stalinist bureaucratic regime, known as the Khmer Rouge, rose to power, their revolution dragged Cambodia into an ideological battleground, with its conviction to destroy the country's capitalist infrastructure and the culture that sustained it. Only a decade earlier, the country had attempted to move beyond Empire –expelling France and its dignitaries, bureaucrats and military forces to mobilize for change after decolonization. This mobilization, however, manifested itself in unexpected ways, when in 1975, the Cambodian civil war broke out and decimated the lives of nearly 1.7 million Cambodians within four years, while thousands of others, scattered across the globe, remained in exile or forced migration.

In this article, we will reorient previous readings on two seminal visual references that bear witness to this auto-genocide – where fellow Cambodians exterminated other Cambodians at the behest of the Khmer Rouge. Such extreme human viciousness in Cambodia over 40 years ago still demands our attention, critical engagement and empathy. However, in many of the photographic treatments that seek to represent this auto-genocide, providing testimony seems disingenuous or lacks knowledge of the country's history, and even, in some cases, reveals Eurocentric readings of this indexical material. Recent cinematic treatments have been more authentic, although they still employ commercial grids of accessibility. Such appropriation of atrocity images prioritizes trauma, reconciliation and testimony for Cambodians, first, and the international community, second. Thus, our case studies involve what we believe are two entirely different approaches to atrocity material, realized through the use of two different visual mediums to orientate response: photographic imagery in the Museum of Modern Arts (MoMA) exhibition *Photographs from S-21: 1975–1979* (1997) that focuses on 22 prisoners from a Cambodian torture centre in Phnom Penh; and cinematic imagery in Pithy Panh's experimental documentary *The Missing Picture* (*roub pheap del bat bong*, 2013).

Unlike more ahistorical readings of Panh's *The Missing Picture*, with claims to its powerful art cinema techniques – what Robert Greene (2014) calls 'this artful, deeply felt attempt' to capture trauma – we understand and engage with ethnic Cambodia's culture differently, aware of its aesthetic valences but also its enduring testimony that constitutes a way towards recovery. In perhaps a more flippant disregard for Cambodia's traumatic history under the sadistic and efficient killings orchestrated by Pol Pot and his death squads, Susan Kismaric, Curator of Photography at MoMA in the 1990s and thus responsible for exhibiting these *photographs as art* provides an unpersuasive rationale for why the show went ahead. Interviewed by Jacqueline Sischy (2009), Kismaric claims that the *Photographs from S-21* exhibition fits into a precedent for what she labels 'a curatorial approach as seen in the 1995 MoMA exhibition *The Silence: Photographs* by Gilles Peress, which shows his documentary shots of the Rwandan Massacre'. We question this logic by analysing whether imagery of such ethnographic atrocity would be better served in a history museum or back in Cambodia rather than a modern art museum in New York City. In his review of the MoMA (1997) exhibition for *The New York Times*, Michael Kimmelman (1997) also remains reserved in his criticism of such commodified trauma, even describing the genocide as having commonalities to the Holocaust but he stops there, not willing to excavate or tangentially explore the origins of the Southeast Asian genocide. Instead, using our knowledge of Southeast Asian history and culture, we aim to synthesize Trauma Studies in order to debate why, to borrow from Rachel Hughes' (2003) excellent work on the *Photographs from S-21* exhibition, 'the portrait photographs have become the undisciplined envoys of Cambodia's traumatic past, circulating on a global scale and through various media' (p. 24).

Interestingly, Panh's *The Missing Picture* (2013) manages to diffuse the negative associations of appropriating traumatic material for artistic reinterpretation by seeking a different form of engagement with the viewer. Panh does this through a hybrid visual approach – via the recontextualization of archival or news footage to more experimental approaches in documentary, such as the use of dioramas – to incorporate his personal history to reactivate memorialization for his own loss, and by extension the loss of other Cambodian citizens in the late 1970s. Whereas MoMA's *Photographs from S-21* is unconcerned with the historicization of Cambodia's traumatic history, the photographic images instead fulfil a brand of sensational photo imagery. Seen in this light, MoMA's reworking of the display of incarcerated prisoners as visual evidence perpetuates the commodification of Southeast Asian traumatic culture for an ahistorical photography exhibition alluding to those prisoners' eventual death sentences by the Khmer Rouge. In the context of these complex issues, the contradictions become detectable in the visual history of either 'fragmented reconstructed memory' (Um, 2006: 9) or merchandizing trauma. We shall map both trajectories in this article. Drawing on scholars of the Holocaust and photography – in particular Zelizer (2002, 2004) and

Crane (2008), as well as Cambodian genocide experts Chandler (1999a), Um (2006) and Hughes (2003) – we delineate, and then combine, these theories to our coinage of ‘commodified witnessing’ regarding *Photographs from S-21* and ‘commemorative witnessing’ through layered testimony that looks for a response to the auto-atrocity depicted in *The Missing Picture*.

## **SYNTHESIZING TRAUMA STUDIES AND VISUAL IMAGERY OF GENOCIDE FROM THE GLOBAL SOUTH**

We view Trauma Studies as a harrowing and important sub-discipline of English and Comparative Literature but an area of critical inquiry in desperate need of geographical expansion beyond its current moorings in European tragedies of the 20th century. Common to its disciplinary aims, grim forms of representation have been vital in explicating types of genocide, whereby photographic and cinematic imagery are used to summon subjective types of memory, recall or remembrance as reactions to forms of inexplicable trauma. Much of the most relevant material on Holocaust memorialization and remembrance through photographic images was produced by Barbie Zelizer (2002, 2004) and Susan Crane (2008), and through dialogue with this work, it is our hope that their perceptive analyses will guide our insights on the visualization of the Cambodian genocide.

If, for Zelizer (2004), the power of the photographic image is to reconcile certain memories, even the most painful in history, how do they work as legible representations? Can they be trusted, venerated or vilified? In clear prose, she stakes a claim that photography can ‘pattern ways, concretizing and externalizing events’ (p. 159) and we intend to unravel these patterns as pertinent to the Cambodian genocide. Zelizer goes on to state that representation in photographic form animates and activates memory, from the mundane to the incomprehensible. This activation of memory entails not just Zelizer’s formulation of photography’s documentary testimonial ability, but also photography’s medium specificity to conceptualize and historicize incalculable global events. Moreover, photography is exemplified by the nature of what it signifies, contests and enhances in terms of memory and history: sobering moments of cultural development fixed in the 20th century, fluctuating between enlightened civility (the founding of the United Nations in 1945) and unceasing global conflict (the two World Wars and the Cold War). Zelizer continues:

Modern culture’s capacity to freeze, replay, and store visual memories for large numbers of people – facilitated by museums, art galleries, television archives, and other visual data banks – has enhanced our ability to make the past work for present aims. Discussions of photographic memory thereby become at some level discussions of cultural practice – of the strategies by which photographs are made and collected, retained and stored, recycled and forgotten. (p. 161)

Highly relevant here is the emphasis on strategies of collecting images, which in this context speaks to archives of photographic and cinematic material mostly forgotten or previously unseen from Cambodia's auto-genocide. The French author Jean Lacouture has differentiated events in Cambodia from the European Holocaust, political purges and global genocides within history. His coinage of a subcategory called 'auto-genocide' (Chandler 1999b: vii) will be used as a key term in this article to stress the difference between the Holocaust in Europe and the human annihilation and cataclysm in Southeast Asia, both carried out with unimaginably huge death tolls, with the latter perpetrated by its own people purely on ideological grounds. In looking closely at Cambodia's desecrated history during the late 1970s, it is replete with lost inhabitants and the harsh circumstances they had to face: for instance, dislocation, migration, repatriation and resettlement. Today, much of the Cambodian diaspora has sought to reclaim and reconstruct their nation through returning to their homeland. Khatharya Um (2006: 9) elegantly describes those returning and their previous exilic longing that are also a part of remembering what gave rise to such a mass exodus and asylum to the West. 'In a context where rupture and entanglement, loss and remembrance, coexist in accustomed tension', Um observes, 'the notion of time and space must be spoken of in terms of memory and imagination.' If imagination is central to reconciliation, how far and what right do non-Cambodians have in such memory work, especially when it has such tragic content at its core? Due to photography and film's role as evidentiary media in the enterprise of documentation – both in fiction and non-fiction formats – and with their reproducible qualities in distribution and exhibition, they have the potential to be simultaneously infallible and dangerous in terms of appropriation and repurposing. In many ways, serious consideration of the image's power to convey traumatic events tends to be reduced to morally constrained and pragmatic views of the world. Yet it is precisely the capacity of photographic and cinematic images for representative memorialization in documenting the destruction of approximately 1.7 million Khmer people that makes the camera's visual commentary important in this context.<sup>1</sup>

More often than not, the compartmentalization of this type of investigation occurs in either canonical studies on auto-genocide or in a disproportionate regard for atrocity outside the Global North (Sarkar, 2009). As a consequence, the Cambodian atrocity often escapes larger studies and is labelled a 'minor' conflict/genocide in academia. However, we believe that examination of the issues of atrocity representation in photography and film will further contribute to the research in this area. Despite the academic hierarchy that puts scholarship on Cambodia as less urgent than mainstream studies of the Nazi Holocaust, the Balkan genocide and events in Rwanda, how should we proceed? What role does atrocity photography serve beyond awareness, as Crane (2008: 314) argues, when it perpetually depicts the suffering of an unwilling subject: 'Is arousal of outrage and disgust sufficient reason to introduce the images?' Despite what seems like turning a blind eye to these grim

matters of reconciliation, loss and ethically-specific genocide in Southeast Asia, why did museum culture during the late 1990s accept victimization in a photographic form; and why is Cambodia's most prominent filmmaker in the 2010s keen to reinterpret this horrific event in his home country through an experimental documentary approach?

## **MAKING SENSE OF PHOTOGRAPHY'S TROUBLED HISTORY**

One of the two-pronged aims of this article is to analyse 22 mug shot images of imprisoned counterrevolutionaries, often wrongly charged with conspiracy against the state of Democratic Kampuchea in the mid-to-late 1970s. Many of these men, women and children were sentenced to a clandestine death camp called 'Secret Office 21', or 'S-21' as it later came to be known in the capital city of Phnom Penh. In Khmer, the 'S' translates from *sala* to 'hall' while the numerical '21' refers to *santebal*, or a compound term meaning 'security', 'special branch' and 'police' (Chandler, 1999b: 3). In photography studies, there is an inherent inclination when looking at these 22 photographs to contextualize both the meaning of the images and the culture that they represent – regulating them into a universally intelligible system of visual relationships. This often leads to a unilateral or Western approach to understanding what these pictures come to be realized as: tragic or genocidal events refracted through photographic imagery and a determinant of MoMA's 1997 exhibition. In light of this, these mug shots are more indexical frames of reference to visualizing (or representing) an historical epoch; yet the cultural specificity of these images by indigenous experts or specialists in South-East Asian history, as well as a closer examination of their historical context, are vitally important.

David Chandler, a leading Cambodian historian and expert on the country's auto-genocide, makes a startling parallel between the S-21 terror compound and the Nazis' use of archiving to efficiently manage its incarcerated prisoners in the death camps in Europe. Chandler (1999b: 7) writes: 'Although Democratic Kampuchea's economic and social policies do not fit into a fascist framework, the resemblance between S-21 and Nazi death camps is striking.' Allan Sekula (1986) also takes up an ocularcentric history by suggesting that the flow of processes that can be disseminated or interpreted in relation to history is pushed through a nodal point much like 'the flow of traffic', to use his metaphor, as ideas are organized into a traditional model of a liberal democratic historiography.<sup>2</sup> In other words, these 22 mug-shot photographs serve as an indexical tool, supporting a *given* history – documenting a period of strife that constitutes an historicized and politicized perspective on what took place under a Marxist–Leninist rule gone terribly wrong.

Focusing on these images from an historical–materialist approach challenges traditional or formalist assumptions regarding the role of photography as a medium of representation in the historiography of Western and non-Western modernity. In this sense, the S-21 photographic mug shots

elicit properties that seemingly become too allusive to their own history, or, perhaps, a set of photographs that can be posited or disregarded as ephemeral products to a finite rationality: the linguistic denial of trusting the excess of meaning in visual images in comparison to the written word. Although photographic images of imprisoned subjects contain more meanings and interpretations than can be accounted for, one such meaning is articulated by Jaime Baron, in his *The Archive Effect* (2014), where he describes audiovisual texts within the archive as ‘more unruly’ (p. 4). For Baron, ‘They seem “closer” to the past they represent and are potentially seductive in their seeming transparent textuality.’ Photographs continue to be regarded as an immediate and perhaps facile way towards representation of a past or at least of an historical moment. Moreover, what these theorists on photography suggest is that the medium is largely understood as visual signs that build on, or construct, a given reality.

One does not have to search very far to trace this phenomenon back to the inception of the medium itself in 1837. Photography ‘supplied the most powerful form of modern identification’ (Gunning, 1995: 22), in its ability to attach a specific body to a medium that contained both the individual’s likeness and a form of evidence in its indexical signification. Furthermore, photography’s mass circulation through its mechanical reproductive capabilities helped control and regulate the individual through its image within the modern state, returning us to its most heinous usage: indexing large swaths of the population, their fates determined by kangaroo courts and authoritarian regimes.

How do atrocity film or photographic footage become commemorative and prompt engagement (if not awareness) rather than producing anaesthetized violence or the commodification of human suffering in contemporary society? What is the cultural value in *representing* such horrendous events on film or in still image format? A growing number of critics maintain that visual imagery (films and photographs) in the public consciousness are determined primarily by the cultural nuances and meaning they acquire, but are often marred by subjective inequalities when interpreted across linguistic and national borders. They call into question the notion of photography, as Crane (2008: 311) phrases it, as a ‘universal language’ that every viewer can comprehend and respond to: ‘Does pain immortalized through photography “communicate” universally, and thus exempt the atrocity image from critical scrutiny?’ Moreover, many national images of atrocity have been used as pieces of empirical evidence, exemplifying how images of terror were produced in history, becoming material markers left long after the survivors have perished with their oral histories interpreted and reinterpreted, going ‘back and forth in the attempt to reconcile the fissures of dislocated lives, families and communities’, as highlighted in the Cambodian context (Um, 2006: 9).

Guided by the principles stated above, are atrocity films such as *The Missing Picture* or appropriated photographs in the context of the MoMA

exhibition, *Photographs from S-21*, capable of defying notions of commodification and cultural falsehood in the atrocity images' own destructive potency? If photographic imagery seems capable of resisting commodification, as in *The Missing Picture*, in other works such as *Photographs from S-21: 1975–1979* it seems unable to resist monetization. Therefore if one decouples aestheticization, or the more empirically based phenomenology of the photographic image, these images become less about what they are saying and more about the absence of their inherent meaning – the politics behind the Cambodian atrocity. Hughes' (2003: 33) description of victimhood encapsulates this more precisely: 'As such, artefacts like the S-21 portraits, which are both representations and residues of bare life, develop a curious status as heritage artefacts of global interest and "culture memory".'

Drawing on the formulation above, although moving beyond its Agambenian tone, how then could reproducible images ever possibly contribute to a concrete understanding and collective memorialization of Cambodia's brutal genocide? Indeed, Panh's atrocity documentary and MoMA's atrocity photographs offer a possible *heuristic* purpose, whereby a reconciliation and investigation can take place, but there is also a paradox – the easy appropriation of these filmic and photographic forms facilitates, as it were, the art world's desire for the most provocative images, or commodified witnessing. 'Like colonial spoils, the photographs from S-21 are of "exotic" temporal, geographical and culture origin ('year zero' Cambodia, the Cambodian genocide)' (Hughes, 2003: 36). In a wider assessment of the global value of these S-21 photographs, Ivan Karp and Corinne A Kratz in their Preface to their edited book *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations* (2006) highlight what they see as 'international connections and global orientations [which] had become increasingly central to the circumstances and practice of museums since the 1990s, in ways that sometimes seemed to differ from the international associations that had long been part of the museum world' (p. xvi). These contemporary perspectives on the globalization of cultural artefacts mean that we must be cognizant of 'the flow of commodities on a micro-level that need to be thought of in relation to the territoriality of production networks and the outwardness of different global products, even global issues, to emphasize their material and symbolic value' to different indigenous and international publics (Wagner, 2015: 233). MoMA ultimately neglected balancing these parochial encounters, and what these cultural artefacts represent, as localness became an asymmetric consequence of the globalization of genocide.

## **DEHUMANIZATION BY THE CAMERA**

The Khmer Rouge or 'Red' revolution by the then State of Democratic Kampuchea left nearly 1.7 million Cambodians unaccounted for or murdered on the back of this ideologically based civil war. Dehumanizing practices authorized by the Khmer Rouge upended a once prosperous and rich



Cambodian culture, leaving many outcomes in its wake: the dismantling of private and public institutions (including all civic, social and private entities) and the dissolving of the urban cityscape into a squalid and uninhabitable environment. By levelling Cambodian society back to year zero during the revolution, hundreds of thousands of Khmer had succumbed to inadequate medical care, neglect, starvation and worse, sanctioned torture and systematized execution as agrarian subordinates, including a confirmed 14,000 prisons at the S-21 compound under this mass political sadism (Chandler, 1999b: chapters I–IV; also see Ebihara and Ledgerwood, 1994).

The textual aspects of images can prioritize the unimaginable horrors that awaited many entering Cambodian prisons, including gross humiliation, bodily and psychological torture, and even execution for thousands of internees. If atrocity images such as the ones from Cambodia can, as Crane (2008) warns, continue to frame the subjects as perpetual victims without agency, where do we begin to reassess their grimmer realities? To us, the answer lies in how the photographic medium is used. Our view, so far, has been to take stock of images that serve as cultural devices to help reconcile the immense trauma and loss the Khmer must have faced by auto-genocide and for those that survived.

In cinematic terms, however, Panh's own career reflects this search in his different cinematic approaches towards documenting atrocity locally, then projecting this genocide globally. For example, his first film *Rice People* (*Neak Sre*, 1994) is a docudrama and the first Cambodian film to be nominated for Best Foreign Film at the Academy Awards (1995) while his personal documentary *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (*La Machine de Mort Khmer Rouge*, 2003) reunites two former prisoners with their former captors in a confrontational and confessional mode of ethnographic remembrance. In his latest film *The Missing Picture* (2013), he attempts to circumvent traditional documentary modes for a more experimental one to summon the missing memories of his childhood and lost history within the archive of the Khmer Rouge, asking the question: what is absent in the available photographic evidence from that era? Yet, as this article will stress, the tendency of outside forces to reconstitute narratives of a personal as well as national form of systematic violence into commercial imagery is also problematic. It then seems that all lessons from the Khmer Rouge are often subverted by Western institutions' emphasis on iconophilia within the late capitalist visual economy.

## **THE MUSEUM AS A SITE FOR EXHIBITION AND COMMODIFIED WITNESSING**

In MoMA's (1997) exhibition, the museum staff published the following wall text to adorn its Khmer Rouge photographs:

When the Khmer Rouge fell from power in 1979, S-21 was converted into the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide. American photographers

Chris Riley and Doug Niven discovered 6,000 original 6 x 6 cm negatives in an old cabinet at the museum all that remained of the identifying photographs that had been taken of prisoners held at S-21 and recognized that these powerful images warranted viewing by a larger audience. The negatives were cleaned, catalogued, and printed by the Photo Archive Group, a nonprofit organization founded by Mr. Riley and Mr. Niven in 1993. One hundred pictures were selected for inclusion in the final printing, called the Tuol Sleng Photo Archive Project; many of these photographs, some of which were taken just after the prisoners had their blindfolds removed, are reproduced in *The Killing Fields* (Twin Palms Publishers, 1996). (Museum of Modern Art Press Release, 1997)

The concept of national recovery is a reoccurring theme in any culture's attempt to move beyond moments of strife, tragedy and marginalization. Despite all these precautionary warnings, there remains a Western desire to commodify and sensationalize the Tuol Sleng Photo Archive Project: pacifying Cambodia's images of historical encounter with auto-genocide to instead constitute them as trivial tokens of remembrance. The problem is that the people of Cambodia, its victims and survivors, had little control over the historical, social and physical expression of suffering outside their own sovereignty which is made apparent in the NGO – Photo Archive Group – handing over these sensitive photographic images to MoMA. Thus, only through people like Rithy Panh and the showcasing of his work through the international film festival circuit and distribution channels, do we find less uneven treatment of Cambodia's auto-genocide. Because of the lack of access to historical evidence, many Western institutions tend to dictate their own international responses and representations of the Cambodian auto-genocide. In particular, MoMA's appropriation of the S-21 atrocity photographs was put into a category of globalized and diasporic 'otherness', demonstrating that this museum valued consumption over traumatic or political reflections on Cambodia's history. This highlights what seems to be a constrained discourse in its 1997 exhibition of atrocity and the Southeast Asian story, a discourse that becomes an unfortunate reality in the presentation of atrocity imagery to a largely Western public audience, unclear about this auto-genocide. Hughes (2003) explores a similar angle in how cultural capital of these photographs influenced the photographic process, whereby the indexical relationship is given disproportionate attention and fails to explicate the cultural-political ramifications of the Cambodian civil war. Hughes calls this 'the abject artefact of memory; photographs from Cambodia's genocide', describing how the imagery connotes a 'memorialization of the Cambodian genocide' and the way it has been disseminated and reappropriated by institutions 'worldwide since 1994' (p. 23).

Thus, as these artefacts of atrocity in cinematic and photographic form somehow become reconstituted, couched or exhibited as 'art-within-fact' or vice versa, they also point to their instability and reproduction in

mass culture by ‘narrowing the “history” and the characterization (as part of a “vernacular” body of art) of the photographs’ (p. 38). Furthermore, US culture has been preoccupied with this factor largely because of the burgeoning market for appropriation of sensational or outrageous ‘objects’ in the 1990s, finding institutions and their staff focused on ownership and display of these types of photographs. This cultural outlook on the part of art institutions such as MoMA is rooted more often than not in increasing consumer logic as it is motivated by the curiosity, morbidity and potential novelty of such a macabre subject to entice visitors to the museum.

Although MoMA also showcases and celebrates cinema with screenings and archiving of films to demonstrate their artistic merit and cultural importance, the document and the documentary must primarily satisfy its ethnographic concerns, addressing, as Bill Nichols (1993: xi) puts it, ‘*the world in which we live rather than a world imagined by the filmmaker*’ (emphases in the original). The degree to which the documentary addresses, reflects, expresses and then interrogates the social world gives the documentary enterprise its prime authority and purpose. The representation of genocide in documentaries, as Fitterman Lewis (1998: 207) points out, is always fraught with the ‘paradoxical task of turning a horrific reality into an aesthetic object while still maintaining a social perspective’. She refers specifically to the challenge Alain Resnais faced when incorporating archival footage of Nazi concentration camps into his seminal film *Night and Fog (Nuit et Brouillard, 1955)* and how to turn these images of the Holocaust from ‘documentary evidence into living history and social action’ (p. 205) for the viewer. On repeated viewings or through mass dissemination, the ‘shock value’ of atrocity images can eventually wear off and even become benign, or worse, be appropriated for some other purpose or meaning to deny its existence (as Holocaust deniers have sought to do by appropriating and discounting similar imagery). Crane (2008) provocatively reasons that shock value itself does not lead necessarily to engagement or a better awareness of the historical circumstances of atrocity: ‘One can trust shock; one cannot trust falsely placed empathy, which unfortunately is how many people accommodate the shock’ (pp. 315–336). Constant exposure to atrocity photographs or newsreel, she argues, may make atrocity more visible through its documentation and representation but not necessarily lead to engagement or action.

Archival imagery also allows the viewer to regard it as an historical document – contained only in the past. Testimony, in the form of an interview, as in Claude Lanzmann’s film *Shoah* (1985) demonstrates how to bridge the past with the present by showing the effects and consequences those past events have had on its present-day survivors. This is what Nichols (1993: 174–191) terms the ‘embodied knowledge’ of the interviewee. The interview is another form of evidentiary evidence, deriving from the juridical system, where to give testimony is to bear witness to another form of asserting truth (Winston, 1995: 140). However, testimony can also

distance the viewer from the genocide event by an interlocking of factors – for example, the credibility of the witnesses themselves, the subjectivity and unreliability of recollection, the context of the interview within the documentary, and the subliminal aspects of an interview setting that can sometimes connote a ‘confessional box’ (Rabiger, 1998: 175), an interrogation or a series of sound bites strung together. Rithy Panh’s use of painted figurines in dioramas and archival footage in *The Missing Picture* (2013) circumvents these strategies of evidentiary evidence, and his film belongs to a recent trend of atrocity documentaries that strive to evoke, rather than represent, genocide and its cultural ramifications.<sup>3</sup> Panh’s film is concerned with memory of genocide and loss but utilizes expressive cinematic techniques to visualize *the absence* of photographic history as a trace of genocide within the ethnographic enterprise. More importantly, the film offers a strategy for bypassing the commodified witnessing of atrocity images that potentially reduces them to, as Crane (2008: 309) puts it, ‘atrocious objects of banal attention’ by providing a commemorative testimony that bears witness to trauma in a form that historicizes its imagery and seeks a form of recovery.

### ***The Missing Picture* as experimental testimony and commemorative witnessing**

The term ‘commemorative’ refers to honouring, or at least bringing attention to, in a reverent manner, a person or event from the past. While the debate over whether the display of atrocity images raises awareness in the viewer about the events depicted continues, or if the photograph itself, as an image taken out of context, cannot help but deflate the historicity of the moment it captures, Zelizer (2002) offers recourse to the making of and sharing of atrocity photography. She does this through her notion of ‘bearing witness’:

Defined as an act of witnessing that enables people to take responsibility for what they see (Zelizer, 1998: 10; also Irwin-Zrecka, 1994), bearing witness moves individuals from the personal act of ‘seeing’ to the adoption of a public stance by which they become part of a collective working toward trauma together. (p.698)

Our coinage of ‘commemorative witnessing’ therefore combines these two notions to express the use of atrocity photography as a means to not only pay tribute to the people and events depicted in these images, but more importantly as a catalyst for recovery. While commodified witnessing, on the one hand, drains the atrocity image of its historicity, leaving only its morbid contents on display – if not for an economic imperative then merely for shock value that further dehumanizes the unwilling victims depicted therein – commemorative witnessing, on the other hand, is the transmission and reception of the atrocity image; it is an action or step towards healing that addresses Crane’s (2008) warning about the ubiquitous use of making visible the ineffable.

Commemorative witnessing therefore is the ethical act on the part of the viewer to go beyond the image and seek understanding, engagement and action. Panh's *The Missing Picture* (2013) offers a form of commemorative witnessing as a personal response to and working out of the events he himself experienced and suffered. The documentary not only brings viewers' attention to those events, but also provides greater understanding and a critical engagement of those events through its experimental techniques, which we will now explore.

*The Missing Picture* is an experimental documentary that is a reflection of the director's own childhood memories, and by extension the experiences of the Cambodian general population under the regime of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge, starting in 1975 when director Rithy Panh was 13 years old; this traumatic event continues to impact on Panh's psyche almost 40 years later. The Cambodian filmmaker traces his family's forced evacuation from their home in the capital, Phnom Penh, into labour camps, situated in the countryside for the purposes of creating a new utopian, communist society, where eventually his entire family perished. Panh's father starved himself to death in the camp while his sick mother later allowed herself to die in a hospital after losing Panh's sister. Approximately half of the documentary consists of news and archival footage, mostly compiled from the regime's propaganda media system that constitutes the only remaining photographic and cinematic indexical traces of that era. Panh presents this indexical footage as incomplete and therefore problematic to the events it supposedly represents by framing the documentary around what it does not show. He juxtaposes this archival footage with his family story, depicted through his filming of hundreds of handcarved, painted clay figurines arranged in numerous expressive dioramas (see Figures 1 and 2). These figurines show 'expressions and experiences [of] women carrying fruit, kids playing with a dog and – once the army invades Cambodia's capital city – armed soldiers and starving, dying workers' (Lemire, 2014). The camera tracks and pans over these frozen tableaux, and the editing and sound design bring them to life.

The clay figurines materially express how malleable people are under such extreme conditions and make visible their interior states and psychological conditioning: the viewer watches these figurines physically deteriorate when their characters suffer starvation, indignity and, for many, death or execution. As in other experimental documentaries that apply formalistic or expressive cinematic techniques usually reserved for fiction and experimental filmmaking modes for ethnographic enterprises, Panh's use of clay figurines not only serves the individual expression of the filmmaker but also examines the social subject in an innovative approach. The figurines serve multiple ethnographic purposes: at the outset, they remind the viewer that Panh has no photographic traces of his family's experience, that his trauma exists only in his memories, and the dioramas are a means of 'bringing back to life' these memories in the form of a visual analogy. However the figurines and



**figure 1.** The absence of personal history within the archive of official history from *The Missing Picture*.



**figure 2.** Figurine as visual analogy and metaphor from *The Missing Picture*.

dioramas themselves are not overtly realistic. Their handmade quality, as well as segments in the film that show Panh creating the figurines and placing them within the dioramas, reflect his own painstaking construction of these objects as a type of catharsis or working out of his memories into a present and physical entity. They also serve to evoke, rather than just represent, Panh's memories and experiences, thus creating a different engagement with the viewer. Rather than receiving seemingly unmediated photographic evidence, the viewer imagines what Panh's past experiences were like through the use of the figurines as a metaphor for individuals and the human condition.

Annabelle Honess Roe, in her book *Animated Documentary* (2013), explores how animation in documentary can function not only as a substitute for live-action photography but also how, through its own 'visual excess', it can 'evoke' the memories, feelings, subjectivities and psychological aspects of lived experience that cannot be photographed. While Honess Roe addresses animation specifically, the use of plastic media such as clay puppets in *The Missing*

*Picture* can serve a similar purpose in its own visual excess regarding its referent (p. 11). For example, Scott McCloud's (1994) writings on identifying with cartoon characters in animation can also be applied to Panh's figurines: 'Thus, when you look at a photo or realistic drawing of a face you see it as the face of another. But when you enter the world of the cartoon you see yourself' (p. 36). Panh's experimental use of figurines, and the superimposition of archival footage with his own personal stories enacted by these figurines, function on a more universal level of metaphor, engaging the viewer through interpretation, but an interpretation that insists on an *openness of meaning*.

The propensity to use archival or found footage and photographs as an indexical trace of a history is the ease with which these images supposedly make history not only 'perceptible' but also 'knowable' (Baron, 2014: 1) in documentary form. Panh destabilizes these notions through his juxtaposition, and sometimes superimposition, of propaganda footage from the Khmer regime with the figurines. The contrast between Panh's personal history depicted by the figurines and the official representation of the regime creates an irony that goes against the grain of what those archival clips purport to represent. This 'intentional disparity', as Baron articulates, of placing the archival image in a different context destabilizes the meaning of images themselves in which 'something old is given new meaning' in its reception (p. 6). The recontextualization of found footage also demonstrates how meaning is neither inherent nor stable in any image: viewers apprehend both the original intention of the found footage through Panh's explanation with voice-over and his interpretation of that footage through its recontextualization. His audience becomes critically engaged and thus more active through this dialectical relationship between the found footage as document and Panh's contextualization of it in his documentary.

Panh's boldest cinematic gesture throughout his film is using archival footage not as evidence of what happened but to reveal what is absent in those clips by superimposing the archival footage on the dioramas themselves. Panh, for example, shows his family as figurines leaving the capital of Cambodia while found footage of the empty streets after the evacuation is projected onto the backdrop of the diorama, creating a visual metaphor that expresses the absence of personal history within the archive of official history. In doing so, he 'thus creates his own visual-historical archive' (Zylberman, 2014: 104). Panh releases the archival images from their original framed constraints and intentions, and sutures them with the 'missing pictures' of his personal experiences expressed in his figurines through visual superimposition. This cinematic technique also allows the documentary to extend 'beyond individual narration and reflection, functioning as a cinematic witness as it counters silences, fills historical gaps, and provides a testimony that [is] polyphonic and collective' (Torchin, 2014: 32).

Finally, Panh's experimental approach manages to bypass morbid imagery of brutalization and victimization without the sensationalism of

the macabre that can occur in contemporary media's depiction of atrocity. '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 expression, Panh makes bearable what would have been unbearable' (Zylberman, 2014: 104). In a memorable sequence, through voice-over he recounts the fact that the regime did photograph executions, but if he ever found those images he would not show them, asking, 'What would a picture of a dead man reveal?' Instead, the viewer sees the execution enacted with the figurines. Panh calls into question whether, if his horrible experiences were indeed photographed, documented and discovered, should they remain missing? This issue concerns Panh both as a survivor of genocide and as a filmmaker. If the photograph perpetuates the indignity and dehumanization of the unwilling subject as a victim, both in the depiction of their suffering and the camera's ability to reproduce and capture that suffering, then perhaps the survivors themselves should be the ones to decide on their use in the public realm. Crane quotes JM Coetzee's (2008: 317) statement that 'Death is a private matter; the artist should not invade the death of others.' Crane here questions how one can bypass the perpetrator's gaze even when the photograph is used as evidence of that atrocity.

In *The Missing Picture*, the camera then tracks across a wall from the now S-21 genocide museum covered with images of the many individuals that were photographed shortly before execution, similar to the mug shots in the MoMA exhibition. It finally focuses on one particular photograph of a woman as the voice-over states, 'I prefer this anonymous woman who defies the camera, and the eye of her torturer, staring at us still.' Panh offers some agency to these anonymous victims and in doing so manages to begin to undo their potential photographic incarceration in an act of commemorative witnessing.

### **THE MACABRE AS HIGH ART: APPROPRIATING A S – 21 IMAGES FOR MOMA**

There seems to be an interest in the macabre as subject matter during the 1990s by curators in the US and Europe. Unlike Panh's *The Missing Picture*, there is an affinity that often came about through visual art's closeness or relation to the lived situation or experience. Often pseudodocumentary work at this time, in keeping with trends and the pace of the rapidly changing art world and its marketplace, came to popularize 'real' death imagery. For example, *The Traces of Death* (1993) series fits into the 'shockumentary' genre: a term which belies its commercial appeal and repurpose through compilation or omnibus format of documentary and newscast films of real moments of death (acts of murder, suicide and fatal accidents) captured on celluloid or VHS. As if this material being marketed on its gory, inhumane and defaming nature is not disturbing enough, it also perpetuates the circulation of an unethical film practice that forms a *deaths' hit list* (see McMullan, 2015).



To put it more bluntly, the death obsession or necrophilia of the 1990s was also culturally ingrained in global cinema: for example, the Russian ‘necro-realism’ movement in cinema during the era of *perestroika* or the Mexican gothic of Guillermo del Toro’s *Cronos* (1993) to the gothic obsession of macabre and devilish netherworlds in the work of Tim Burton – each demonstrating how these morbid narratives and curiosities drove many artistic films of the period, and which *The Missing Picture* circumvents.

In this decade, this type of death imagery became popular content in the gothic cultural capital, which might have influenced curatorial methodology in the choice of putting images such as incarcerated (and later executed) Cambodians up for exhibition. One could say this resulted in the sensationalized display of the S-21 exhibition at MoMA. Put another way, Barbie Zelizer (2002) might consider that these atrocity photos at MoMA offer a vehicle by which individuals can continue to see shock and trauma. The images can then be regarded to attract the pleasure-seeking audience that seeks out history, trauma and genocide as a by-product of the US creative industry. Whether the curators at MoMA sought to address the atrocity images in a diachronic and art historical manner rather than explicate its relation to artefacts remains unclear. What is clear is the mode of production in this case, whereby the lack of sustained context (political and traumatic) signals our denunciation of such curatorial practices.

The Cambodian auto-genocide – and its record via these atrocity photos – was framed by an unsubstantiated wall text. In contextualizing the glib one-paragraph content, the use of the Khmer verb *chi-cho’an* (to exploit) helps to crystallize how manufactured remembrance via these atrocity photos struggled to emerge from the *death row* curiosity of the exhibition itself. Instead, we extract atrocity photos from the museumification of a genocide not externalized as an event in a way that allows us to recognize them as real, concrete proof of this horrific event in Southeast Asian history. In effect, what is troubling is how these images are aestheticized and have not been worked through, given their morbid content and the terms of their local/global significance. Thus at MoMA in this period there undoubtedly existed a hegemonic need to commercialize sites of memorial and commemoration – principles that have used and continue to employ the photographic form, constituting an industry in its own right and standard.

Donald Preziosi (2003: 3) further complements this assertion that institutional structures, such as that of the art museum, classify visual objects into their own hierarchical order and assigned cultural value. In his view, these photographic objects displayed by MoMA remain part of a material culture that can inevitably be turned from cultural artefacts to objects of art and artifice in a particular arrangement of a room, the slightest shift of the curators’ semantic language, the formatting of a catalogue, the type-font of the wall text, the style of a press release, or, more provocatively, the naming of the ethno-indexical artefacts of S-21 incarceration

photographs as art itself. Preziosi continues by stating: ‘Museums are our modernity’s paradigmatic artifice, modernity’s art par excellence, and the active mediating, and enabling instrument of all that we have learned to desire we might become’ (p. 15). From this passage, one can conceptualize the practices of museology and art history that aestheticize and turn evidence of a collective brutality into something vacuous by its installation, legitimizing and offering up the S-21 exhibition as a type of atrocity image experiment.

### ***Otherness as canonical device***

MoMA’s S-21 exhibition sets up an ethnographic type of the Other in which the exhibition legitimizes itself as ‘an injustice that must be seen or promoted on a mass scale’ (Smiers, 2003: preface). Yet, one cannot help but ‘see’ in 22 mug shot portraits – nearly two dozen men, women and children tortured and later being put to death – how these photographs, when exhibited at MoMA, lack an ethnographic essence. Rather, these objects suit an aesthetic installation of atrocity photography that poorly reflects this culture’s ethnic duress. Gaynor Kavanagh (2002) expands elsewhere a similar formulation by stating the following:

Working with memories can be damaging, artificial and manipulative to those involved. A museum with an unexamined understanding of memory can be working in ways that are patronizing and disruptive. It may be exploiting others in order to enrich its own agenda. (p. 120)

Even artistically, the photos repurposed at MoMA lack the expressive quality of an artistic portrait: the only aestheticized elements are the aged-look of the photographs, jaundiced and emulsified, emphasized by the starkness of the white walls, subdued lighting and minimal text. Some would argue that this technique introduces a metaphor to its visiting public that history can be frozen in a temporal moment with the aid of the photograph – tamed and, in this instance, representative of death itself; but it also trivializes atrocity as a form of ‘lite’ historical consumption that the Western museum-goer is accustomed to. While we would agree that most scholars ought to view this exhibition as pandering to low-level historicism at best – a new curatorial reconciliation for the use of such incarceration/atrocity images – the exhibition sadly leaves ethical, political and humanistic gaps, and fails to accurately explain Cambodia’s historical trauma *on display*. Moreover, it seems much of the S-21 exhibition mug shots of victims and their accounts go untold, and are at best left carelessly open to interpretation. In effect, these photos, if we borrow from Zelizer’s (2004) theories of Holocaust photographs are understood as ‘arbitrary, composite, conventionalized and simplified glimpses of the past’ (p. 162).

To posit a comparative assertion about these atrocity images housed at MoMA, the conceptual artist and appropriator of photographic images, Christian Boltanski, is well known for his use of Holocaust photographic

imagery (not unlike the Cambodian mug shots) as highly evocative and acclaimed subject matter. Yet, unlike MoMA and its question of what pictures of dead Cambodians reveals, Boltanski, and his art work, illustrate a *vested* cultural interest, one that is local–global simultaneously, and with a political message: a Jewish practitioner who uses his connection to atrocity and his biological roots in East European Jewry to lay claim to photographs as devices of remembrance, memory and trauma under the globalization of art.

Eroding the cultural specificity of Boltanski's work is how it becomes a commodity fetish and what was then a new institutional canon of fine art repositioned as 'real' atrocity photography. This fetishistic quality is then met with institutional responsibility and is expressed by Kavanagh (2002: 120), who argues that an artefact's public appropriateness needs to be carefully thought out:

There are hugely important questions that museums and museum workers need to ask themselves about any form of activity where they seek to work on that which is *private* primarily for a *public* agenda. If a museum is unreflective, unmoved or not humbled by this type of contact with people's lives then these are sure signs this is work with which it should not be engaged.

Private documents such as home movies and videos, family snapshots and letters that are meant for private or limited viewing within an archive, when appropriated for public consumption are 'unavoidably voyeuristic – offering us the pleasure of seeing something we were not "meant" to see – and may come with an ethical price' (Baron, 2014: 82). The framing of these identities as *only* victims, and not once as living Cambodians, with different lives, desires and agency, hopes and fears, elicit in these photos a misappropriation of personal identity that is further exacerbated by a public reception that reinforces and capitalizes on this misrepresentation, while these photographs constitute documents of the casualties of the Khmer Rouge's desire to exterminate all forms of perceived subversion. Paul Williams (2004: 235) addresses this notion by stating that 'primary images from Tuol Sleng [S-21] are estranged from their context and denied their role as guardians of memory when exhibited as art in the United States', foreshadowing issues of appropriation and aesthetic reconstitution by an art institution. In this case, the inconsistency of appropriation (or contextualization) of these photographs as they are disseminated through Western capitalist culture then functions as a visual record of a genocidal outbreak in 1975–1979 in one instance, while, simultaneously, these images are being reassigned a fetishistic quality in a visually consuming culture that emanates from the Global North.

After *The Missing Picture* screened at the 2013 Cannes Film Festival and received the top prize in the *Un Certain Regard* section, its own commodified witnessing (though positive) and commemorative witnessing makes palpable the paradox of handling such material. It was also nominated

as the Cambodian entry for Best Foreign Language Film at the 86th Academy Awards. Together with its distribution throughout the Western international film festival circuits, it manages to bypass this issue of 'other' in photographic representation, but as a film still functions as cultural commodity. One can argue that as a Cambodian himself, Panh has the licence to express his ethnocivic culture and its members, and that his work is an 'insider's view' rather than the encroachment of a 'salvage' ethnography from an outside party. Even when marketed in the Global North as a documentary about one experience from the Global South, viewers may at first see the Cambodian subject as an 'other', but eventually they can identify with the figurines as a metaphor of human experience and possibly relate it to their own experiences. Panh manages to avoid the sensationalism of 'real' death photography and therefore his documentary being potentially marketed as such; at the same time, he reminds his audience of the materiality of his images, while being culturally specific and universally symbolic in addressing atrocity at the same time.

## CONCLUSION

Cambodia in the 21st century has moved away from a culture of loss and powerlessness to a self-determined and resolute nation state concerned with reconciliation and remembrance. This universal project to heal the trauma of the Khmer Rouge is occurring in its dispersed populations living in geographical areas surrounding their homeland and in satellite communities abroad. Such an historical and difficult task of remembrance and mutual understanding in the face of large-scale victimization and death by the Pol Pot regime is partially waged on behalf of film and photographic images, as the terror sites of S-21 have now been converted into a genocide museum. This institution now deals with the stages of memory and murderous history of this regime, often represented through indexical photographic images. All this can be seen as the Khmers' vested attempt at commemoration. As we have asserted, Panh's documentary *The Missing Picture* is not only reflexive in its process of commemoration but also transcends autobiography into a collective/individual quest for truth and the reclaiming of a collective past. However, the frequency with which exploitation by *invested* 'third' parties happens (mainly largely institutions, museums and the occasional individual) is often through seemingly genuine, albeit, altruistic projects. This demand for acquiring such imagery is aimed less at the diasporic or traumatic elements that frame genocide, and geared more to commercialized intentions. Indeed, as we stressed in this article, MoMA sought to usurp such sensational imagery for different forms of marketable commodification. Thus, what the repurposed S-21 atrocity photographs constitute – death, misery, torture and archived victimization – becomes, in the end, a vacuous and disruptive facilitation on the part of a global *art* museum.

It therefore seems crucial that more research should be done to expand on the paradoxes of handling such ethnographically fragile

photographic imagery, one that represents civil war and human atrocity, while in the process, locating other strategies of representation and evocation such as *The Missing Picture*. One appropriate course of action for these Khmer images seems to lie in the decoding and organizing of the victims' photographs into a justifiable, heuristic and significant project for reasons of remembrance and loss, and not the circulation of S-21 atrocity images in an ambivalent institutional context. Such a project should be of paramount concern for contemporary art museums or film festivals and the material they collect or appropriate, especially given the sensitivity in handling such material currently available today. Sadly, until this practice of using atrocity photographs in easily obtained and exploitative ways is renounced, the Cambodian genocide of the 1970s will remain, in part, a fetishized collection of images owned by Western institutions.

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## NOTES

1. The current number of Cambodians who perished under the now defunct DR regime (during 1974–1979) is listed by the Cambodian Genocide Program at Yale University as 1.7 million. Established in 1994, under the umbrella of the Yale Center for International and Area Studies, it remains a key US research centre for historical documentation on genocides worldwide.
2. We find the notes from Allan Sekula's *The Traffic in Photographs* (1981) useful as he analyses hegemonic forces in the dissemination of images in contemporary culture.
3. Elsewhere, Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing* (2012) depicts the Indonesian genocide of 1965–1966 through a theatrical reenactment by three members of a death squad, while the Israeli-made *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) expresses Ari Foleman's recollection of his experiences in the 1982 Lebanon War and the Sabra and Shatila massacres, using CGI to overlay or animate interviews he conducted with his therapist and fellow soldiers (although at the end of the film he shows newsreel footage of the actual carnage from the massacre).

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