



Memory and Trauma of the others in the cinema of Rithy Panh: The trilogy on the S-21

*Memoria y Trauma de los otros en el cine de Rithy Panh:
La trilogía sobre el S-21*

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to analyze how the trilogy of the S-21 by Rithy Panh unravels the legacy of the genocide carried out by the dictatorship imposed by Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge Regime in Cambodia between 1975 and 1979. Thus, the goal is none other than follow the reconstruction of the collective memory carried out by the Cambodian filmmaker, studying the mechanisms and cinematographic techniques that he uses to fulfill his misión, as well as the results to wich his proposal leads him in his search for lost images.

Resumen

El presente trabajo de investigación tiene por objetivo analizar cómo la trilogía del S-21 de Rithy Panh desentraña el legado del genocidio llevado a cabo por la dictadura impuesta por Pol Pot y sus Jermes Rojos en Camboya entre los años 1975 y 1979. Así pues, la meta no es otra que seguir la reconstrucción de la memoria colectiva llevada a cabo por el cineasta camboyano, estudiando los mecanismos y técnicas cinematográficas de las que se vale para cumplir su misión, así como los resultados a los que su propuesta le conduce en su búsqueda de imágenes perdidas.

Keywords

Rithy Panh, Cambodia, Memory, History, Trauma, S-21

Palabras Clave

Rithy Panh, Camboya, Memoria, Trauma, Historia, S-21

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1. Constructions from trauma: the cinema of Rithy Panh

However this war may end, we have won the war against you; none of you will be left to bear witness, but even if someone were to survive, the world will not believe him. There will perhaps be suspicions, discussions, research by historians, but there will be no certainties, because we will destroy the evidence together with you. And even if some proof should remain and some of you survive, people will say that the events you describe are too monstrous to be believed ... (Primo Levi, 2017: 1-2).

These words, quoted by Primo Levi, were spoken by the SS to Simon Wiesenthal on his arrival at Auschwitz and sadly exemplify the majority of genocides that have taken place throughout history. Violence, torture, trauma, irrational massacre to the extent of elimination never seem to be complete without erasing all trace of the victims, all evidence of their prior existence and life. Thus denying not only the guilt of the perpetrators, but also any cultural residue bearing witness to a suffering that ceases to exist once the extermination has been accomplished. A moment at which the focus seems to be on the survivors' need to recount their experiences in order not to be forgotten by history and, pending future court proceedings, thus do the little justice that the smallest and most isolated scrap of subjectivity has within its grasp. Memory then seeks to establish and extend itself and make itself known through the negligible evidence that may have survived a tragedy which, like a hurricane, has left nothing in its wake.

For, unlike the Nazi genocide, the possibility of resorting to the records is not always a valid option for the filmmaker willing to tackle the problems arising from historical reconstruction. This is the case with the genocide committed by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia between 1975 and 1979, where there is not even a consensus on the number of victims who lost their lives at the hands of the revolutionary army led by Pol Pot¹. Destroyed families and harrowing stories that

1 Although the figures vary depending on the source, during the 10 years (1970-1979) that the revolution lasted near on 1.7 million Cambodians, i.e. a third of the population, lost their lives (Aguirre, 2009: 37).

have hardly left any trace. For the evacuation of the city of Phnom Penh on 14 April 1975 marked the beginning of a period in which there was a break with recent history. The new regime, following in the footsteps of the Chinese cultural revolution, destroyed any sign of intellectuality alien to its radical discourse; murdering teachers, doctors and lawyers, and destroying any source of culture, such as schools, libraries and cinemas. All eyes were fixed solely on the greatness of the defunct empire of Angkor, which became the role model of an exemplary society that, on the basis of hard work, had managed to build the great temples of Angkor Wat still emblazoned on the national flag. With an eye to creating a great empire from scratch—for progress was seen as imperialist and invasive—the Khmer Rouge would revert the country to an agricultural society by evacuating all the cities and subjecting their inhabitants to draconian working conditions in exchange for little more than allowing them survive amid the many purges.

This is the context in which images were all but abolished, being reduced to those employed for creating propaganda materials that helped to sell the regime's goods abroad². Any other image that implied a link to the recent past was destroyed. To that explicit absence must be added the effects of the destruction of the few modern technologies existing in the country at the time. And what was the result? The absence of tacit memories that, if possible, makes it even more difficult to offer a detailed account of the experiences of a society that, far from remembering, has found refuge in a Buddhist spirituality in the quest for solutions to an omnipresent trauma³. This is the context in which Rithy Panh developed his first works, seeking both personal (banishing his own ghosts) and collective (in the form of justice in the framework of the new Cambodian state) redress.

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- 2 Rithy Panh himself expresses his disgust with the words of Chomsky published in 1980, in *After the cataclysm*: 'While all of the countries of Indochina have been subjected to endless denunciations in the West for their "loathsome" qualities and unacceptable failure to find humane solutions to their problems, Cambodia was a particular target of abuse. In fact, it became virtually a matter of dogma in the West that the regime was the very incarnation of evil with no redeeming qualities, and that the handful of demonic creatures who had somehow taken over the country were systematically massacring and starving the population. How the "nine men at the center" were able to achieve this feat or why they chose to pursue the strange course of "autogenocide" were questions that were rarely pursued' (Panh, 2013: 233-234).
 - 3 Surprisingly, the first history book about this period written by a Cambodian was published in Cambodia as recently as 2017 (Aguirre, 2009: 10).

Since he was the only member of his family to have survived, Panh was forced to leave Cambodia when he was 15, after having suffered the terrible living conditions that the *new people* had imposed. Following a spell in a refugee camp in Thailand, he obtained a French residence permit, after which he travelled to Paris to study cinematography at the Institute for Advanced Cinematographic Studies (IDHEC). In 1990, after overcoming a phase during which he had renounced his original identity, he decided to return home (11 years after he had left), with the aim of portraying the consequences of the Khmer Rouge's four years of misrule. As already noted, given the difficult circumstances in which documentary sources were practically non-existent, Panh was obliged to find other ways of digging up evidence of the past. Narrative would supplement the lack of images, thus necessarily surmounting the debate between Lanzmann and Didi-Huberman in a sort of fusion that gave precedence to the discourse of the eyewitness account over everything else. It should be briefly recalled that in the aforementioned dispute between the two authors, Claude Lanzmann championed the word, favouring the direct discourse of the witnesses, irrespective of whose side they had been on, for given that no image (be it an archive image or a recreation) is capable of telling a story with all its nuances and in its full complexity, there is no choice but to give voice to the survivors. In contrast, Didi-Huberman, as with Jean-Luc Godard, defended the utility of any graphic document, however fragmented or negligible, for describing the horror of the past. From this perspective, any image is valid for reconstructing history, without this meaning to say that any event can be reduced to the bare traces that it has left behind.

Thus, the aim of this paper is to unravel the cinematographic mechanisms that the Cambodian filmmaker employed to reconstruct his country's recent history by analysing the three films comprising the S-21 trilogy. Surmounting the Lanzmann-Didi-Huberman controversy, Panh used extant archive images, whenever possible, while resorting to the eyewitness accounts of victims and victimisers with a view to creating the most complete narrative possible. A narrative also supplemented by his own concerns, questions and rationales as a victim of the genocide which in the plot of his films departs from his own trauma, before gradually delving into the different stories narrating that of the rest of the victims. For Janet Walker, trauma films and videos are those that 'deal with traumatic events in a nonrealist mode characterized by disturbance and fragmentation of the films' narrative and stylistic regimes' (2005: 19).

2. *Bophana, a Cambodian Tragedy*

As noted by Annette Hamilton (2013: 176), the first film in the trilogy relies, in a way, on the familiar tradition of Western historical documentaries, especially as regards the use of archive images, the voice in off of a narrator and scenes of everyday life in Cambodia which serve an illustrative function in relation to the commentary. As to the content, Panh (2009:169) recounts how he discovered the story of Bophana and Ly Sitha in Élisabeth Becker's book, *Les larmes du Cambodge* (1988). *Bophana* involved reconstructing a character by following the trail that she had left during her life. Hers is a story of a love-struck young woman belonging to the *new people* who, after having been tortured and raped by the soldiers of General Lol Nol and now pregnant, tries to commit suicide. She is then separated from her husband and exiled to a village in the district of Barai, in the province of Kompong Thom. Afterwards, in one of the indiscriminate purges of the Khmer Rouge, her husband Ly Sitha is imprisoned in the Tuol Sleng detention centre, also known as S-21. Sometime afterwards, Bophana suffers the same fate, without either of them knowing about the imprisonment of the other. In S-21, Bophana is constantly interrogated and tortured, being forced to invent connections with the CIA and to betray friends and relatives as conspirators, before finally being murdered. Several photographs, some or other love letter and thousands of pages of forced confessions allowed Panh to penetrate the universe of this character and thus reveal the tragedy through individualisation. In this way, *Bophana* is primarily an attempt to rise above the numbers and approach the words. To substitute the rough, anonymous figures of death and destruction caused by the Khmer Rouge with words that narrate the story behind each character. To eschew the abstraction of anonymity as the first step to gaining a better understanding of the genocide or, in the words of the film's director,

Je me battraí toujours pour dire que les Khmers rouges ont anéanti deux millions de vies. Je préfère parler de deux millions de destins brutalement interrompus plutôt que de citer le chiffre de deux millions de morts. Avec le film Bophana, une tragédie cambodgienne, nous voulions montrer cette vie, ce destin. Le

film, c'est un peu ce message que nous voulions transmettre
(Panh, 2013: 169-170)⁴.

Thus, the task of telling Bophana's story becomes one of salvaging memory from oblivion through several discourses that give shape to the life story of the young woman⁵. Points of view that intercalate and are superimposed with propaganda archive images of the work camps or with photographs of the young woman herself, including the cold picture taken of her on her arrival at the Tuol Sleng detention centre. An image that solely represents her protracted forced confession and which methodically served to destroy her. As Duch, the prison commandant, maintained when discussing her case, '*Elle a répondu n'importe quoi pour inventer une histoire. Elle commence à croire des histoires qui peuvent être crédibles et nous arrêtons de la torturer*' (Panh, 2009 : 168)⁶. Visual and written lies that are flung at the spectator as a totality from which he should discern the logical evidence, based on the fact that a phenomenon as monstrous as genocide cannot be denied. The truth emerges from the contrast between the sources and their confirmation, whenever possible. And it is in *Bophana* where the painter Vann Nath, one of the main characters of Panh's films, is discovered as if by chance.

Vann Nath is one of the seven survivors of S-21. It was his profession as a painter that saved his life, since Duch, the prison commandant, entrusted him—along with a number of other artists—with the task of painting portraits of the leader Pol Pot⁷. There, he became an eyewitness of all the tortures carried

4 'I shall never stop striving to uphold that the Khmer Rouge annihilated two million lives. I prefer to talk about two million brutally interrupted destinies than to mention the figure of two million dead. With the film *Bophana, a Cambodian Tragedy*, I wanted to show this life, this destiny. The film is, in a way, the message that I wanted to convey' [our translation].

5 In this connection, it is also worth mentioning Catherine Filloux's play *Les photographies de S-21*, in which the photographs come alive to tell the story of the victims. A response, as with Panh's film, to the decontextualised photographic exhibition on Tuol Sleng at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMa) in New York (Um, 2017: 143).

6 'She would say anything to make up a story. She began to create stories that might have been credible and we stopped torturing her' [our translation].

7 Van Nath recalls those years, offering a detailed account of his time in prison, in *Dans L'enfer de Tuol Sleng: L'inquisition khmère rouge en mots et en tableaux* (Nath, 1998).



IMAGE 1

Vann Nath next to one of his works.

out by the revolutionary soldiers. Cruel images that never existed until, with the regime's fall, the Vietnamese authorities, implementing a propaganda strategy already employed by the Red Army after liberating Auschwitz (Sánchez-Biosca, 2006: 142), decided to convert the prison into a museum, commissioning a series of paintings from Nath, as an eyewitness, portraying the enormous suffering to which the prisoners had been subject. The artist's paintings thus become a link to a past in need of recording, a series of realistic representations that seek to bear witness to scenes of torture that cannot be expressed with such clarity in words or discourse. Given the lack of evidence, the trauma suffered seeks to express itself and to offer an account through a pictorial representation that reflects reality as accurately as possible. Images of past memories created from scratch which, furthermore, require a confirmation, insofar as the majority of the scenes depicted had been described to the painter by other inmates. In consonance with LaCapra, the memories of the eyewitness have faded, leaving it up to Nath to 'elaborate an accurate, critically tested secondary memory

based on the primary memory' (1998: 21). A task that Panh himself resumes in his film—which could be qualified as that secondary memory that the painter commenced—using it to document the collaboration between exact memories that can, thenceforth, be conveyed to all those who have not experienced such harrowing ordeals.

As the Cambodian filmmaker himself holds, it was chance and not his dramatic sense as a director that one morning, during the filming of *Bophana* at S-21, there was an encounter between Vann Nath and Him Houy, one of the most brutal former torturers at the prison. The confrontation between victim and perpetrator thus occurred in both a spontaneous and informal manner. With a strange intimacy fairly akin to paternal authority, Nath grasps Houy's shoulder and leads him over to his paintings with a sole objective in mind. It is the need to corroborate the truth of the brutal scenes portrayed in them which drives the artist to confront his former captor in that way. This confrontation takes place before a painting depicting a baby being violently torn from the arms of its mother, with following dialogue:

Van Nath: Cette image, c'est ce que j'ai imaginé, je n'ai pas vu cette scène, je ne sais pas comment cela s'est passé, je n'avais pas la possibilité de la voir, mais j'ai imaginé cela quand j'ai entendu les cris des enfants et dès mères, on emmenait les enfants là-haut. Ça, c'est correct?

Him Houy: Oui.

Van Nath: Ils se débattaient comme ça?

Him Houy: Oui.

Van Nath: Ne dis pas toujours oui! Il faut que tu en sois certain.

Him Houy: C'était bien comme ça.

Van Nath: Je ne te force pas à reconnaître ces faits....

Him Houy: Meme si tu me forçais, et, si cela n'était pas vrai, je ne dirais rien⁸.

8 V. N.: 'I've imagined this image, I didn't witness this scene, I don't know how it happened, I didn't have the chance to see it, but I imagined this when I heard the screams of the children and their mothers, we took the children up there. Is that right?' H.H.: 'Yes.' V.N.: 'They struggled like that?' H.H.: 'Yes.' V.N.: 'Stop saying "yes" all the time! You need to be sure.' H.H.: 'It was like that.' V.N.: 'I'm not forcing you to remember these facts....' H.H.: 'Even if you forced me and even if that wasn't true, I wouldn't say anything' [our translation].

The absence of photographs documenting the torture thus inverts the traditional roles at S-21. The torturer becomes the person being interrogated and the former prisoner becomes the interrogator, not obsessed with receiving a convincing reply, but with the truth, with the confirmation that the images created by him reflect a past reality and, therefore, serve as objects of a real memory with which to fill the historical gaps. Since Panh is well aware of this, he follows the encounter without intervening at any moment. Converted into a mere witness, he places the camera within inches of the two men, thus allowing their conversation to link to the images of the past reflected in the paintings. Nath looks weary, while Houy, feeling cornered when brought face to face with a past embodied by the artist which he cannot deny, laughs uncomfortably. Off camera, and consequently not included in the film, there was a strange moment when the former torturer alleged that he did not recognise the painter, in addition to denying having played any important role on the prison staff. He confessed to having killed four or five people following orders that, according to him, were irrevocable. Something that, as Nath recalled, was at complete odds with the confession that he had made after turning himself in, in which he admitted to having been responsible for the death of 2000 people (Nath, 1998:180). Nath uncovered all those lies, using his paintings to develop a discourse which he only wanted to be confirmed. The recollections of the memory of all those who had died obliged him to corroborate the fidelity of all those images, even that of the only depiction that he himself had witnessed. While keeping an eye on the puzzled torturer, he turns to the camera: *'Si Houy me dit que ça n'existait pas, je ne le croirais pas car j'y étais'*⁹.

As has been remarked, Nath only sought confirmation that his images were useful, that far from being products of his imagination, they represented a lost reality and, therefore, had become tacit evidence replacing non-existent photographs. Annette Hamilton (Torchin, 2014: 36) apparently suggests the same idea when noting, 'Vann Nath's palpable desire for confirmation from Him Houy of the paintings' fidelity draws attention to the lack of photographic or filmic images.' It was the lack of graphic evidence that had encouraged the painter to reproduce them and which makes them valuable as documents. Therefore, I do not believe,

9 'If Houy had told me it had never existed, I wouldn't have believed him because I had been there' [our translation].

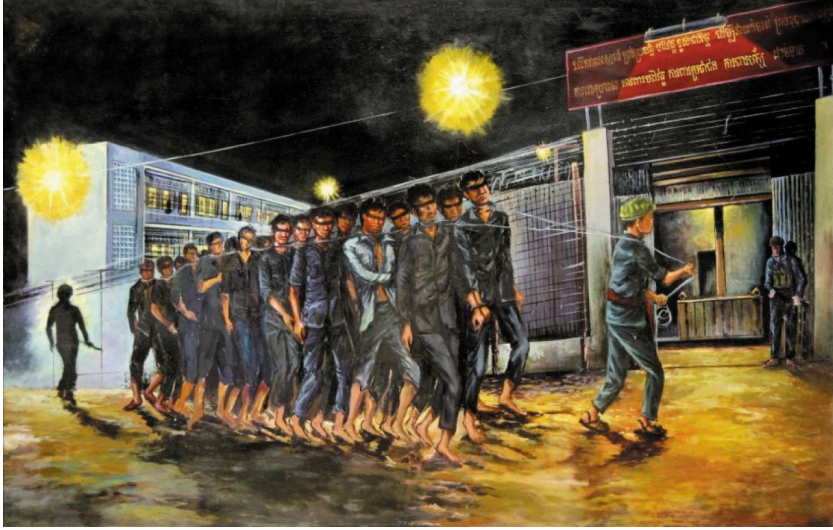


IMAGE 2

Painting of the arrival of prisoners at S-21 by Vann Nath.

as some authors such as Deirdre Boyle (2010: 162) hold, that the fact that there are representations of this type in the Cambodian case is solely due to a more permissive culture with respect to, for instance, those of the Shoah in European culture. To my mind, the answer is linked much more closely to the need to bear witness by creating images that are remembered in one sole way, thus eschewing the subjectivity of representations created by a word-based discourse. Hence the need for images, like those produced by Nath, to be confirmed by the other party. As Panh himself remarked on the sequence, '*J'ai compris plus tard que la volonté de Nath était d'amener l'autre à témoigner pour que les faits ne soient pas détournés ou gommés. Le travail de mémoire est incomplet tant que les anciens bourreaux n'y ont pas participé*' (Nath, 1998: 15)¹⁰.

10 'Later on, I realised that Nath's aim was to obtain the other's confirmation to avoid the facts being misappropriated or deleted. Memory work is always incomplete when the executioners refuse to participate' [our translation].

As a prelude to what would be his next film, Panh ends *Bophana* by following Houy through the passages of the former prison and the Choeung Ek extermination camp, a place where the prisoners of S-21 were murdered and buried in an assortment of mass graves. This change of scene does not only seek to contextualise the discourse, but also to produce it in its most natural form, unleashing in the interviewee traumatic recollections associated with the place, a technique already employed by Lanzmann in the opening sequence of his monumental *Shoah* by placing Simon Srebnika, the singing child of Chelmno, in a boat on the River Ner, close to where the concentration camp had been located. However, the novelty here lies in the fact that it is not the victim who is relocated in the memory space, but the victimiser¹¹, who is free to take the floor, thus raising new questions about guilt, the banality of evil and the different categories of victims. And, at any rate, as can be seen from the Panh's previous words, completing memory work by including the testimony of the executioner, which is unfortunately the only one available in many cases.

3. S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine

Departing from Bophana, *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (2003) was for Panh both a stylistic and formal cleansing ritual in his non-fiction films and the greatest exercise of remembrance since being premiered. This time, the focus is on the Tuol Sleng detention centre, where more than 17,000 died under the orders of the prison commandant Duch during the four years that the Khmer Rouge held sway in Cambodia. The work of the Cambodian filmmaker would therefore move away from the stories of specific individuals on whom he had dwelt in his previous non-fiction films towards the inner workings of the apparatus of terror in a concrete context. Thus performing an act of remembrance fairly similar to that performed by Lanzmann in *Shoah*, seeking to understand in detail how the concentration camps functioned through what

11 It should be recalled that the only interviews that Lanzmann conducted with former members of the Nazi apparatus were carried out with hidden cameras at their homes, the filmmaker promising his interviewees not to disclose their names in exchange for their testimonies. He did not keep this promise with any of them.

the French director, referring to the historian Pierre Nora (LaCapra, 1998) and in accordance with the concept proposed by Marc Augé, called '*non-lieux de mémoire*'. Augé defines non-places by opposition in such a way that 'If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place' (Augé, 2008: 77-78). With this definition, the anthropologist is referring to a place of passage and transience, a space of supermodernity in which 'There is no room there for history unless it has been transformed into an element of spectacle, usually in allusive texts. [...] Actually there is nothing to be seen: once again, the spectacle is only an idea, only a word' (2008: 103-104).

Lanzmann would appropriate this definition to include it in the context of the Holocaust. For the French filmmaker, *non-places* would be traumatic places with which to reconstruct the history of the genocide and which do not now look the same as they did when they formed part of the geography of death, as he himself remarked:

These disfigured places are what I call nonplaces of memory [*non-lieux de mémoire*]. At the same time it is nonetheless necessary that traces remain. I must hallucinate and think that nothing has changed. I was conscious of change but, at the same time, I had to think that time had not accomplished its work (LaCapra, 1998, 133).

Panh's research work, as with that of Lanzmann, was often based on gathering information in these *non-places*, primarily the Tuol Sleng detention centre. However, unlike the French filmmaker, he dispensed with the discourse of historians and experts, as well as with mere witnesses who might have offered a broader overview, to construct his film on the basis of the reencounter and dialogue between victims and victimisers. An option that, together with the blurred limits between fiction and documentary, earned him a fair bit of criticism, accusing him of a certain degree of ethical ambiguity in his treatment of different situations and, in turn, the provoked confrontation between the former and the latter (Hamilton, 2013: 185).

For one of the narrative techniques employed by Panh in his quest for the truth was recreation. This involved reconstructing the missing picture

which, upon prior agreement with the main characters, former Khmer Rouge who had habitually performed those actions in the past, was recuperated. This is achieved in the film through different kinds of acting out, thus going a step beyond the open debate in *Bophana* revolving around the scenes depicted in Nath's paintings. These representations are one of the cornerstones on which the exercise of memory is based. Getting the perpetrators to retrieve in the present traumatic moments of the past, which approaches the concept established by LaCapra, taking a leaf out of Freud's book, as acting out:

In acting out tenses implode, and it is if one were back there in the past reliving the traumatic scene. Any duality (or double inscription) of time (past and present or future) is experientially collapsed (LaCapra, 2000: 21-22).

For this part of the work relies solely on the recreation of these types of situations that allow for the development of discourses, whether they be measured or regulated, on a past event, or unconscious traumatic repetitions lurking in the shadowy recesses of individual minds. In Panh's own words,

It's up to the filmmaker to discover the proper balance. Memory must remain a reference point. What I'm looking for is comprehension; I want to understand the nature of the crime, not to establish a cult of memory. I want to avert repetition. [...] My documentary work is based on listening. I don't fabricate events. I create situations. Insofar as it's humanly possible, I try to present history that's congruous with everyday life and that each individual person can relate to (Panh, 2013: 74).

This is the main reason why, unlike conventional non-fiction works, the traditional question/answer dichotomy is renounced here. Instead, different issues are raised which then develop freely in such a way that the work of Panh, once the exercise has been displayed, is summarised by filming it from the most relevant angle. So, in this film it is possible to distinguish, in the acting out employed by the Cambodian filmmaker, two types of scenarios: those of creation and those of recreation.

With scenarios of creation I am referring to those situations in which, even though memory is at the fore, the action takes place principally through the elaboration of a discourse. Panh limits himself to raising an issue to particular characters in a specific place pertaining to the extermination carried out by the Khmer Rouge during their reign of terror. Thus, without hearing the voice of the director at any moment, we listen to Houy, the former torturer of S-21, speaking with his family about the need to confess his crimes in order that he might surmount them. In the same way as Nath is filmed working on one of his paintings depicting the arrival of prisoners at Tuol Sleng, while recounting his own experience.

The product of those discourses becomes more interesting when different survivors of S-21 meet again, this time and unlike the confrontation in *Bophana*, in a voluntary manner. This allows more space for reflection and the reconstruction of a common account in which the archives that miraculously survived take centre stage. The photographs are dusted down and the prisoners' files are taken out of the large filing cabinets as an excuse to inquire into an entire past that had not been registered. Chum Mey, a former prisoner, chokes back the tears when returning to the prison because of the need to offer a true account that goes above and beyond the information contained in the confessions extracted under torture. Similarly, these documents are displayed before a group of former torturers and prison guards who reread the confessions that they forcibly obtained. A subdued confrontation when they are brought face to face with their former charges. The spotlight is once again placed on Nath's paintings, but far from the impulsive need for the confirmation of their fidelity existing in *Bophana*, here they merely serve as other archive images, being as with the photographs of the corpses taken by the prison photographer, the necessary nexus with the past. As Panh indicates, 'I infinitely admire the documentary work of Claude Lanzmann, which is based on speech and the organization of speech. The genius of his *Shoah* is that it lets the viewer see through words. But I believe that speech can be awakened, amplified, supported by such documents as have managed to escape destruction' (Panh, 2013: 72). In these conversations Nath, converted here into an impromptu judge who does not seek to condemn but to discover the truth, is the central thread insofar as Panh fully delegates to him. The words of bygone times, contained in the cold, routine reports written in ink, are going to be explained, amplified and

qualified by the discourse of today, thus putting different practices and methods, otherwise impossible to discover, on the record.

However, there are also what I call ‘scenarios of recreation’, which are where the real power of the film lies. As before, following the precepts of Lanzmann, Panh requests the former torturers and guards to recreate situations identical to those that usually arose when working at the prison. Acting out that not only serves to recuperate the past through the reconstruction of the missing picture, but also to delve into the trauma concealed in their own memories. For, unlike *Shoah*, the scenario does not only play a contextualising role that makes it possible to rescue memory from oblivion. A parallel could be drawn here with Abraham Bomba, the barber of Treblinka and one of the most memorable characters in Lanzmann’s film. To discover the discourse of the tormented barber, the director decided to interview him at a barbershop in Tel Aviv, allowing him to pretend that he was cutting the hair of one of his friends. On this subject, the French filmmaker had the following to say:

Why a barbershop? I thought that the same gestures could provide a support for the feelings, and that it would make it easier for [Bomba] to both speak and demonstrate in front of the camera. [...] the scissors allowed [Bomba] at the same time to embody his story and to [...] regain his breath and his strength, since what he had to say was both incredible and exhausting (Lanzmann, 2009: 622-623).

Lanzmann’s staging has, therefore, both the mission of facilitating a discourse in which his presence does not fade at any moment; even when Bomba hesitates, the filmmaker presses him to continue his story. Relationships between the place and the word which, as Lanzmann admitted do not have a documental essence *per se* (Chevrie, Le Roux, 1990: 407-425). In contrast, Panh’s approach is closer to an authentic quest for the missing picture. Steering away from the need for a cohesive discourse in these sequences, all he asks for is the reconstruction of the events, limiting himself to filming them with his camera without expecting a more detailed explanation from the character in question, beyond the words necessary to understand the sequence. To that end, he resorts to a location that, unlike those used by Lanzmann, still retains

its original essence, with the still visible implements of torture and blood stains on the floor, thus rejecting an elaborate staging for being unnecessary and false: ‘You don’t set up, you don’t try to use the location to depict what happened, to make it look like it looked, but in certain elements like the lights...’ (Oppenheimer, 2012: 253).

Panh thus reconstructs different images showing the routines of the prison guards. Actions repeated day after day which are recorded on what the Cambodian filmmaker calls ‘body-memory’ (Oppenheimer, 2012: 245). Repetitions of abuses and torture that are recreated exactly as they are described in the extant reports, especially the sequence in which the guard Khieu ‘Poev’ Ches plays himself as a young man overseeing some now imaginary prisoners. Shouting, insults and a whole series of automated movements that form part of a performance that goes beyond a mere demonstration of his former tasks, bringing the past to the present in an unadulterated manner that redefines the timelessness of this traumatic event. A recollection that is trying to be reproduced, not explained. Lanzmann analyses the aforementioned intervention of Bomba in *Shoah* in terms that are also valid for this moment featuring the prison’s torturer:

And from this moment on, truth became incarnate, and as he relived the scene, his knowledge became carnal. It is a film about the incarnation of truth [...]. The distance between the past and the present was abolished and everything became real for me. The real is opaque. It is the true configuration of the impossible (Liebman, 2007: 40-42).

This notion of the real is defined by a set of actions that surface violently to reveal a hidden trauma which, together with the discourse of victimisation of the torturers and guards in certain sequences begs many questions: how many beings fall into the category of victim; where does accountability end; in this case what does the alleged theory of the *banality of evil* imply; and, if during a certain sequence the spectator ends up identifying with the perpetrators, is it ethical? The fact is that on quite a few occasions the guards act like victims who only obeyed orders—issued either by the prison commandant Duch or by some other superior—to survive. An idea in line with Hannah Arendt’s famous

Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil, which has the following to say on the final allegations of Eichmann during his trial: '[...] he had never been a Jew-hater, and he had never willed the murder of human beings. His guilt came from his obedience, and obedience is praised as a virtue. His virtue had been abused by the Nazi leaders' (Arendt, 1963: 247). It is curious, however, that notwithstanding his approach, when talking about Duch Panh completely denies this type of theory: 'The banality of evil: a seductive formula that allows all kinds of misinterpretations. I'm leery of it' (Panh, 2013: 242). His mistrust of that theory not only seems to stem from having been a victim of the conflict, but also from a comprehensive study that he has performed on the decimation carried out by the Khmer Rouge and from his knowledge of the execution of orders coming directly from Duch. Shifting the concept, as the historian Raul Hilberg remarks when referring to the study conducted by Arendt on Eichmann, who here could be related to Duch, '*Elle ne comprit pas les dimensions de ce qu'il avait accompli. Il n'y avait aucune "banalité" dans ce "mal"*'.¹² (Hilberg, 1996: 143). Because apart from the case of the commandant of S-21, nor does it seem that the *banality of evil* concept can be applied across the board to the Cambodian genocide. For while in Germany '*le massacre [...] ne constituait pas une atrocité au sens classique. Il était infiniment plus, et ce "plus" résidait dans le zèle d'une bureaucratie très élaborée et étendue*'¹³ (Hilberg, 1996: 55), in Cambodia the Khmer Rouge completely dismantled the state apparatus on the understanding that it was controlled by a treasonous government at the service of foreign powers, the revolutionary army imposing a series of cruel and violent rules whose aim was to completely purge society in the quest for the utopia of the new Democratic Kampuchea. A situation that had nothing to do with Nazi Germany, where laws were enacted and enforced thanks to an extensive bureaucratic apparatus sustained by a large number of civil servants. In Nazi Germany, Hilberg notes, 'The machine of destruction was an aggregate—no one agency was charged with the whole operation. Even though a particular office might have exercised a supervisory ("*federführende*") function

12 'She does not understand the scope of what he achieved. There was no "banality" in that "evil" [our translation].

13 'The massacre [...] was not an atrocity in the classic sense. It was infinitely more, and this 'more' lay in the zeal of a highly elaborate and extensive bureaucracy' [our translation].

in the implementation of a particular measure, no single organization directed or coordinated the entire process. The engine of destruction was a sprawling, diverse, and—above all—decentralized apparatus' (Hilberg, 1985: 55). A case diametrically opposed to the Cambodian genocide in which the decisions were made and implemented by the Angkar (the Organization) (Panh, 2013: 64).

At any rate, and in light of the fact that it is essential to draw a line between victims and victimisers, as LaCapra points out, cases such as this demonstrate the possibility that the latter were also traumatised, ambiguous cases located in that 'grey zone' mentioned by Primo Levi¹⁴ (LaCapra, 2000). In his *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi describes it as an essential part of the *Lager*, in the following terms:

The hybrid class of the prisoner-functionary constitutes its armature and at the same time its most disquieting feature. It is a gray zone, poorly defined, where the two camps of masters and servants both diverge and converge. This gray zone possesses an incredibly complicated internal structure and contains within itself enough to confuse our need to judge (Levi, 1988: 31).

Far from inquiring into this dangerous ambiguity, the Cambodian director takes a clear stance. Proof of this is that in all the recreation sequences, whenever possible Panh takes the trouble to distance himself from the filmed object with the aim of producing a feeling of remoteness and of making it difficult for the spectator to empathise with the perpetrator, since he is only interested in becoming familiar with the sequence, documenting it and avoiding any dramatic effect by availing himself of the medium's characteristics. He thus attempts to make his work as objective and documentary as possible. This is the reason why in the aforementioned sequence featuring Poev, even though the camera is next to him, it does not follow him as he continuously reprimands the imaginary prisoners:

14 Even though it is true that Levi employs this term to refer, as LaCapra remarks, to the Nazi policy of 'recruiting accomplices from among the victims', I believe that this also applies to all young individuals who, like Poev, found themselves trapped in an irrational system of terror and persecution from which not even the party's upper echelons were safe.

One thing that's very important in that particular sequence is the way in which it was filmed. The moral perspective of the filmmaker at this point is very important, [...] So you've got to be very careful that you don't topple over from the point of view of the guard to the point of view of the victim [...] And if the director is excited by that violence, he'd be following it always, but happily we didn't follow the violence all the time. So it was instinctive to stop, to hold the camera at the door, not to follow in. Otherwise we'd be walking over the prisoners [...] (Oppenheimer, 2012: 245).

However, although he considers that remembrance cannot be complete without the recollections of the guards, the mere fact of giving them the floor, opening up to their traumas in the way in which he does, is one of the most controversial aspects of this film. For while Lanzmann uses a hidden camera to film his interviewees, asking as a journalist all types of questions that allow him to gain a better understanding of the inner workings of the Nazi extermination apparatus, in Panh's approach there are no remarkable differences between the treatment and speaking time that he gives victims and victimisers, bringing them face to face to reconstruct the overall picture of the lost memory. For Jacques Rancière (Hamilton, 2013: 180), the use of recreation and imitation in *S-21* blurs the boundaries between victims and victimisers by using Poev as a cathartic element that frees him from the burden of the past, whereas in *Shoah* imitation is employed in an attempt to recreate the absolute distinction between them. According to the French philosopher, the different meaning given to imitation can be explained by the film's general purpose. So, while Panh's film is an attempt at reconciliation, Lanzmann's builds a monument to the irreconcilable and the indisputable.

Despite the fact that it should be noted that in its heyday 82 of the 111 guards at the prison were aged between 17 and 21 (Kiernan, 1997: 316) and that Panh's film undeniably depicts the figure of the perpetrator in a fairly accurate way, to my mind he does not for a moment accept the idea that the victimisers are also victims who were forced to commit unforgivable crimes, as they themselves hold. Far from entering into debates on this issue, the work that Panh, as a historian, performs focuses on clarifying past acts in the only way possible in some cases, i.e. through the words of the perpetrators, notwithstanding the new questions that this raises. According to Burucúa and Kwiatkowski

para acceder a la verdad del pasado, debe necesariamente cultivar el conocimiento que puede derivarse de las evidencias que han llegado hasta su tiempo. Solo dentro de los límites que fijan esos restos del pasado, y a partir del proceso de recuperarlos del abandono y el olvido, el historiador emprende la elaboración de un discurso sobre lo ocurrido. Ello no implica, en ningún caso, la necesidad de abandonar a las víctimas. Por el contrario, esa reconstrucción provisoria de lo acaecido a partir de la evidencia permite distinguir a perpetradores y víctimas, y llevará a reivindicar a estas [...], su inocencia queda realizada en la misma medida que la culpabilidad del perpetrador queda firmemente establecida¹⁵ (Burucúa and Kwiatkowski, 2015: 43).

In this way, Panh attempts to contextualise the circumstances of each discourse. As in *Bophana*, one of the last sequences in *S-21* unfolds in the killing fields of Choeung Ek, a *no-lieu de memoire* par excellence in the film. Nonetheless, unlike his previous film in which a brief description of the last moments of the prisoners seemed to suffice, this time he seeks a more exhaustive explanation. To this end, he considers it necessary to recreate a more faithful and exact context, for which reason the sequence is filmed at night with several fluorescent lamps providing light, which was how prisoners were systematically killed in that place. Furthermore, instead of being on his own, Houy, grasping an iron bar, is accompanied by two other former Khmer Rouge guards who had been under his orders. On the edge of a mass grave he describes how the prisoners were killed, his discourse acquiring this time, thanks to the iron bar that he is holding, a trace of personal accountability which had not been present in *Bophana*, in which he had only admitted to killing

15 '[...] in order to access the truth about the past, he [the historian] has necessarily to cultivate the knowledge that can be gleaned from the evidence that has come down to him. Only within the limits established by those vestiges of the past, and through the process of recovering them from neglect and oblivion, can the historian start to elaborate a discourse on what happened. Under no circumstances does this imply the need to abandon the victims. On the contrary, that tentative reconstruction of events in light of the evidence makes it possible to distinguish between victimisers and victims, and will lead to the vindication of the latter [...], just as their innocence is enhanced, so too is the guilt of the perpetrators firmly established' [our translation].

five or six prisoners because Duch had been present and he had not had any other choice but to obey orders. At a formal level, Panh is aware that here the executioners are the main characters, rather than the absent victims. This is the reason why he dispenses with extradiegetic music—which in *Bophana* accompanies the images of mass graves—to avoid any excessive dramatisation the might make the spectator empathise with the executioners. Instead, there is silence broken only by the night sounds of the Cambodian jungle. Or in the words of Panh, ‘I film their silences, their faces, their gestures. That’s my method. I don’t fabricate the event. I create situations in which former Khmer Rouge can think about what they did’ (Panh, 2013: 7).

As to the film allegedly forming part of a project of reconciliation, it should be borne in mind that it was premiered at a moment when the Cambodian authorities were debating on whether or not to close the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum as a way of reconciling the country’s inhabitants with the events of a not too distant past. Over and above this, the Paris Peace Accords signed in 1991, in which the word ‘genocide’ was conspicuous by its absence, prevented the former Khmer Rouge leaders from being brought to justice (Hamilton, 2013: 174; Burnet, 2000: 39). The work of the Cambodian filmmaker is therefore a radical use of memory in opposition to a policy of oblivion. It is the knowledge of truth, its teachings, versus an institutional discourse that intends to turn the page on the past, without first understanding and specifying it. ‘I don’t believe in reconciliation by decree. And whatever’s too quickly resolved scares me. It’s peace of soul that brings about reconciliation and not the reverse’ (Panh, 2013: 246). Instead, as described by the philosopher and historian Tzvetan Todorov, among others, memory as a remedy for evil as the only possible solution, acknowledging the suffering of the victims and condemning the perpetrators in collective memory (Todorov, 2009: 295-296).

4. *Duch: Master of the Forges of Hell*

It was several years later before Panh made another non-fiction film about S-21. *Duch: Master of the Forges of Hell* (2011) is the last film in his trilogy dedicated to Tuol Sleng, focusing entirely on its commandant Kaing Guek Eav, better known as Duch, thus completing the snapshot of the detention centre

which began with the analysis of the victims (*Bophana*) followed by that of the executioners (*S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*). This last film is much more visually restrained than the other two, for it revolves almost completely around a conversation between the filmmaker and the former commandant. It is made up of different encounters on the occasion of Duch's trial, at the end of which he was sentenced to life imprisonment.

Following the postulates of his previous films, the Cambodian director is again invisible; he is the person who Duch addresses at all times but neither is he seen nor heard. This is possible due to the fact that yet again the conversation is not an interview between two men, but rather a set of evidence to which the former Khmer Rouge has decided to respond. Accordingly, Panh provides a large amount of material relating to the commandant's past: former slogans of the Angkar, photographs of the victims, prison reports signed by Duch himself and even fragments of *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*, in which the guards describe the tasks that they undertook under the orders of the commandant. All this material serves yet again as suggestive departure points through which Duch elaborates a calm discourse in which far from showing any sign of remorse for the actions for which he is about to be convicted, he elaborates on the issues in a cold and rational manner worthy of the mathematics professor that he used to be.

Formally speaking, Panh's approach avoids any intricacy that goes beyond the creation of a traditional archive of the interview; medium shots of Duch and close-ups of the different documents that pass through his hands. 'I use only two kinds of shots: head-on, and from a slight angle. The setup is rigorous. Austere' (Panh, 2013: 113). This time, what is important are the words and not the representations: the discourse of the former commandant of a prison of which Panh has already offered all the images available in the two previous films making up the trilogy. However, noteworthy is the use of certain archive images, most of a propagandistic nature, which overlap the somewhat nostalgic words that Duch pronounces. This technique is deployed in two ways: focusing on the former commandant, on the one hand, and on the Cambodian people as a whole, on the other. A good example of the first use is a short sequence a few minutes into the documentary in which Duch touches his head with his fist repeating the lifelong oath that he had made when joining the party. Panh takes advantage of this moment to show images of former commandant saluting in

the same way. By linking the past with the present the director prevents a series of contextualised images from sinking into oblivion in the archives, this time thanks to the intervention of Duch.



IMAGE 3

Frame of Duch: Master of the Forges of Hell.

With regard to the second purpose relating to the Cambodian people, the use of archive footage falls into two categories depending on their provenance: on the one hand, the product of the regime's propaganda, harmonious but sinister footage of the work camps that underscores the folly of the model of society imposed by the Khmer Rouge; and on the other, footage of the destruction filmed by the Vietnamese army after invading Cambodia in 1979. Images of suffering, famine and death that although it is true that they serve, in turn, as propaganda by legitimising the invasion, clash with and fully contradict

Duch's opinion on the success achieved by the new government of Democratic Kampuchea (Aguirre, 2009: 18). Panh resorts to these images to offer a non-verbal reply to the former commandant's discourse, distorting the present in black and white images that show a broader geography of spaces and beings than that of the four walls of the cell where the interview is conducted. Thus, the Cambodian filmmaker relies on editing to have the last word in a conversation in which the spectator does not hear his voice. An editing that is, at each moment, a new ethical judgement of Duch's apparent honesty and steadfastness.

Then I begin to edit my film. I edit the images and the sound. I cut him off. Duch reinvents his truth in order to survive. Every act, however horrible, is put in perspective, subsumed, rethought until it becomes acceptable, or almost so. I edit my film, therefore, against Duch. The only morality is the editing, the montage. I think about what he said to me: 'In every lie, there's some truth. In every truth, there's some lie. The two live side-by-side. The most important thing is that the prisoner denounces his collaborators' (Panh, 2013: 186).

The result is a condensation of over 300 hours of interviewing in little more than 90 minutes. Unlike Panh's previous films, neither does this approach evolve nor does it follow the classic exposition, rising action, climax, falling action and denouement dramatic structure. Unlike his two previous films on S-21, nor does it include any powerful sequence that unifies and defines the full story¹⁶. Instead, its thematic progression focuses, from the start, on the character of Duch and his own words when confronted with the evidence. Only two brief sequences seem to break with this discourse, namely, two prosaic moments that seem to stand above the essentially human traits of the former Khmer Rouge. Appearing at the beginning and end of the film, respectively, they show Duch in his cell preparing coffee while listening to the radio and taking exercise in the morning. Both sequences reveal character traits of the individual that go beyond what he says, for instance when he is shown reading Stéphane Hessel's

¹⁶ As with the encounter between Nath and Houy in *Bophana* or with the acting out of the guard Poev in S-21: *The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*.

Ô ma mémoire, and which serve to flesh out the person. Images that Panh has employed less and less as his filmmaking has progressively distanced itself from contexts and realities to focus more on discourse. Suffice it to compare the amount of purely descriptive shots in his first documentary *Site 2* (1989) with *Duch: Master of the Forges of Hell* in which the words of the former executioner become the main thread of the plot.

As already observed, Panh does not intervene in the dialogue taking place on screen. By doing so, he avoids becoming involved in a discussion on a genocide that, unlike other filmmakers specialising in the genre such as Claude Lanzmann and Joshua Oppenheimer, he experienced personally¹⁷. An aspect that, according to LaCapra, distances him from the empathic roles of secondary witnesses as a result of a virtual experience, to invest him with the prominent identity of a subject that has suffered a specific and particular historical trauma (LaCapra, 2000). Dispensing with his screen alter ego, i.e. Nath, the painter, he disappears leaving the person being interrogated on his own, who can thus explain his ideas and feelings without anyone to contract him. In this way, he avoids verbal confrontation which is indeed present in *Bophana* and *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*. Except for the archive images, Duch does not have any counterweight challenging his arguments or accusing him of lying. Therefore, he does not perform a reconstruction of memory that seeks to recover the truth from the memories of the different stakeholders, but offers a snapshot of a character who is regarded as one of the people ultimately responsible for the running of the prison.

I'm not looking for objective truth today; I just want words. Especially Duch's words. I want him to talk and explain himself. To tell his truth, to describe his path, to say what he was, what he wanted or believed himself to be. He has, after all, lived a life; he's living it now; he's been a man and even a child. I want this son of an incompetent, debt-ridden businessman, this brilliant student, this mathematics professor so respected by his own students, this revolutionary who still quotes Balzac

17 On the intentions of the former, LaCapra has the following to say: 'While Lanzmann has little to say about working-through and seems to absolutize acting-out, it is nonetheless the case that he wants to put himself in exactly the same position as the traumatized victim who relives what he has not lived' (1998: 122).

and Alfred de Vigny, this dialectician, this chief executioner, this master of torture—I want him to answer me, and in so doing to take a step on the road to humanity (Panh, 2013: 4-5).

A humanity that seems to want to rescue Panh with the images of Duch in his cell. For, as he himself says, ‘He’s human at every instant; that’s the reason why he can be judged and condemned. No one can rightly authorize himself to humanize or dehumanize anyone. But no one can occupy *Duch’s place* in the human community’ (Panh, 2013: 57). That is apparently the ultimate objective of the documentary, viz. to get to know his point of view, his motivations, thoughts and experiences. ‘I continue my father’s work. I’m an intermediary. I pass on knowledge. I’ve sacrificed everything to this work, which is taking away my life’ (Panh, 2013: 194). To discover, to get to know, to document, to understand the phenomenon of genocide. To approach evil once the theory of its banality has been rejected: ‘No, we’re not all a fraction of an inch, the depth of a sheet of paper, from committing a great crime. For my part I believe in facts and I look at the world. The victims are in their place. The torturers too’ (Panh, 2013: 57).

Strong words that in the written form would break the silence that Panh maintains in the film. *The Elimination* (2013), a book co-authored by Christophe Bataille, is the filmmaker’s authentic testimony about what the making of the documentary meant to him. It is the only place in which he reveals his conversations and confrontations with Duch during the months of filming. In the book he also expresses his fears and doubts as a filmmaker when confronting one of the people responsible for the genocide that tore his country apart and destroyed his family, even going so far as to challenge his role in this period of reconstruction and redress.

After hundreds of hours of filming, the truth became cruelly apparent to me: I had become that man’s instrument. His adviser in some way. His coach. As I’ve written, I was searching not for truth but for knowledge, for consciousness. Let the words come, I thought. But Duch’s words always amounted to the same thing, a game of falsehood. A cruel game. Resulting in a vague saga. With my questions, I’d helped to prepare him for his trial (Panh, 2013: 17).



IMAGE 4

Image composed of two archive images used in the promotional poster of Duch: Master of the Forges of Hell.

5. Conclusions

Panh's trilogy dedicated to the Tuol Sleng detention centre reveals the legacy of the genocide carried out by the dictatorship imposed by Pol Pot in Cambodia, overcoming the lack of images reflecting that period. Belonging to the tradition inherited from the filmmaking of Claude Lanzmann, the Cambodian director constructs his films around the discourse of others, including the perpetrators, to complete the accounts of the victims.

While he never appears on screen, Panh's film directing always follows an approach in which priority is given to the quest for the missing picture. This method allows him to achieve new representations which are then validated by the traumatic memories of the survivors, despite the fact that they are not the original images that went unregistered or were destroyed. In his trilogy, he refined his use of the filmed word and created *mises en scène* with an eye to depicting these images, techniques influenced by the evocation of the past

and by acting out which would, in turn, influence other filmmakers such as Joshua Oppenheimer in his *The Act of Killing*. They would represent the climax of the filmmaking of Panh, who following this trilogy would explore new forms of creating images far-removed from the stirring and recollection of the memories of others to focus on his own past through those static clay figurines featuring in *The Missing Picture* (2014).

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