



# The testimony of the enemy: the confrontation in the elaboration of the past in Rithy Panh

*O testemunho do inimigo:  
o confronto na elaboração  
do passado em Rithy Panh*



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**Abstract:** This article analyzes the film *Duch, le maître des forges de l'enfer* (*Duch, master of the forges of hell*, 2012), by Rithy Panh, based on the considerations of establishing a relationship with the enemy elaborated by Comolli in 2008. Within the narratives of catastrophes, in which a traumatic past must be dealt with, the testimony and the use of archives in the production of historical memories are mostly held from the victims' point of view. The film brings another perspective when facing oblivion through a dictator's word. Thus, the film must confront Kaing Guek Eav's discourse by creating situations in *mise-en-scène* and associations in its montage.

**Keywords:** documentary; aesthetics; memory; testimony; archive.

**Resumo:** O artigo analisa o filme *Duch, le maître des forges de l'enfer* (*Duch, o mestre das forjas do inferno*, 2012), de Rithy Panh, a partir das considerações sobre o estabelecimento de uma relação com o inimigo formuladas por Comolli em 2008. Dentro das narrativas das catástrofes, em que é preciso dar conta de um passado traumático, o testemunho e o uso de arquivos na produção de espaços de memória são feitos, em sua maioria, sob o ponto de vista das vítimas. O filme traz outra perspectiva ao trabalhar contra o esquecimento por meio da palavra do ditador. Cabe à obra confrontar como Kaing Guek Eav tenta tomar a palavra, usando para isso situações na *mise-en-scène* e de associações na montagem.

**Palavras-chave:** documentário; estética; memória; testemunho; arquivo.

## Introduction

Rithy Panh’s cinema, which begins in the late 1980s and continues to this day, recovers the period of the Khmer Rouge regime, a traumatic past in the history of Cambodia. Since the beginning of his career, the filmmaker faces a double challenge: he had to rebuild the country’s historical memory, which had been systematically eliminated by the Khmer Rouge regime, and to deal with the strong instability of Cambodian democracy, disturbed by the unchecked economic liberalism that, in its own way, continued the process of erasing the memory of the Cambodians. In Panh’s words (2013a, p. 68), there is a “bond between the absence of memory work and the contradictions that the Cambodian society faces today: the violence, the impunity, the fear.”

“The basis of my documentary work is listening,” states Rithy Panh (2013a, p. 66), who since his first film – *Site 2* (1989) – has become a “land surveyor of memories” of the victims and, later, of the executioners. In parallel with his work of listening, he devoted himself to collecting documents, photographs and films from Cambodian history before the establishment of the Khmer Rouge and the material produced by the regime itself<sup>2</sup>. The collected testimonies and archives constitute the material for a double work of elaboration – historical and cinematographic – in which the filmmaker, similarly to a historian and an archivist, starts listening to the witnesses and analyzing the documents through different operations in *mise-en-scène* and montage. The invention of a properly cinematographic method to deal with this traumatic past will allow the filmmaker to “produce a historical memory” (LEANDRO, 2016, p. 1).

This analysis of the procedures in *Duch, le maître des forges de l’enfer* (*Duch, master of the forges of hell*, 2012) considers how the film, when working with the dictator Kaing Guek Eav’s testimony, participates in this broader work of elaborating the Cambodian traumatic past done by Rithy Panh throughout his cinematographic trajectory. The text “How to film the enemy?” by Jean-Louis Comolli (2008), serves as a theoretical and practical framework for analysis, besides offering two important beliefs: 1) about the political use of documentary cinema to “treat the political scene according to a realistic aesthetic, bringing it back from the spectacle sphere to the land of men” (COMOLLI, 2008, p. 124); and 2) that in which the filmic dispositive would account for the meaning of a political scene commanded by those who do not

<sup>2</sup>In 2006, Rithy Panh founded Bophana: Centre de Ressources Audiovisuelles, in the capital Phnom Penh, where the collected archive materials are available. The center also functions as a film school.

share the same ethical, aesthetic and political positions of the filmmaker, being this person or group called an enemy by Comolli.

The event that triggers Rithy Panh's cinematographic work of elaboration is the Khmer Rouge period, a totalitarian regime that remained in power from 1975 to 1979 and imposed a way of life for Cambodians who were forced to live in concentration camps and subjected to forced labor in plantations. Led by Pol Pot, also known as Brother Number One, this ultra-communist regime surrounded the senses of language in a totalitarian manner; forbade words; forced people to listen and see their unceasing propaganda through megaphones and movies; prohibited any form of individuality; arrested, tortured and killed those who did not obey in an attempt to eliminate ways of life, bodies and their memories<sup>3</sup>.

On January 7, 1979, the regime was overthrown by the Vietnamese who occupied the country until the late 1980s. During this period, the Democratic Kampuchea<sup>4</sup> maintained its recognition and its chair in the United Nations (UN) and part of the country remained occupied by its army. The Paris Peace Accords, signed in 1991, also featured the representation of the Khmer Rouge and the word "genocide" was not even mentioned in the texts, nor were the extermination camps recognized by the UN. Defending reconciliation, the government newly formed in the 1990s will not arrest or try any member of the regime. This political attitude of the rulers of the country and the trauma experienced by the Cambodians – who, to a certain extent, wished to forget those horrors – created resistance to Rithy Panh's films. *Bophana, une tragédie cambodgienne* (*Bophana: a Cambodian tragedy*, 1996), the filmmaker's first movie to approach the Khmer Rouge regime more devotedly, lived with political currents in the country that advocated the closure of the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum<sup>5</sup>. The denial and risk of erasure, extreme during the regime, were still present. It was only on June 6, 2003 that the UN and the Cambodian

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<sup>3</sup>The regime created a division in the population between the Old People and the New People. The New People consisted of those regarded as bourgeois, intellectuals, professors and teachers, students, artists and landowners, who were supposed to be re-educated or exterminated. All the New People were removed from the cities and forced to live in the field and work in extremely poor conditions in the paddy fields. The Old People were formed by those who originally lived and worked with the land. He, following the foundations of *Angkar* (formed by many who studied in Europe), would aid in the reeducation of the New People. There was a strong official policing measure that led people to report each other if they saw any manifestation contrary to the regime. There were summary executions, but many were sent to torture and extermination centers, such as the S21.

<sup>4</sup>Democratic Kampuchea was the official denomination of the State formed by the Khmer Rouge members.

<sup>5</sup>The film tells the story of a couple who were part of the party cadres and was arrested for exchanging love letters (which was forbidden) and then tortured and killed in the S21 prison.

government signed an agreement to create a special court to try the former Khmer Rouge leaders, but this process only started in 2006, four years after the release of the S21, *la machine de mort khmère rouge* (S21: *the Khmer Rouge death machine*, 2002). Only five leaders of the Democratic Kampuchea have been indicted and arrested for crimes of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes: Nuon Chea, Khieu Samphan, Ieng Sary, Ieng Thirith and Kaing Guek Eav<sup>6</sup>. The latter, also known by the code name Duch, was party secretary and director of the S21 prison<sup>7</sup>. Central character of the film analyzed, during the recordings he was imprisoned and awaiting trial for crimes against humanity and war crimes.

### The device of the film

In the opening scene, Duch is in a cell, but he is still threatening, since there are cinematic strategies of the enemy that still accompany him; Panh presents these strategies to us in the first few minutes. Duch prepares a tea, walks to the window of his cell and drinks from the cup; in voice-over, Pol Pot's speech, and in the image, propaganda films. In this sequence, we observe the language used in speeches and the types of images that accompany them. Pol Pot's speech is rigid, saturated with watchwords (sacrifice, struggle, blood, the great victory, the April 17th). In the images, the emphasis is given to the Khmer Rouge leader who is received by his troops; then a large mass of workers in the rice paddy field and the choral propaganda music<sup>8</sup>. There is a fusional force in the song that will be incorporated at the same time into the figure of the leader Pol Pot and the idealized conception of *Angkar*<sup>9</sup>. In the propaganda films, the faces are never in focus, the intention is to create a plaid image of the Cambodian people. There is a center of attention in Pol Pot's figure, not in the uniqueness of

<sup>6</sup>In addition to Duch, Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan were sentenced to life imprisonment. Ieng Sary and Ieng Thirith died before the conclusion of their trials.

<sup>7</sup>S21 was a secret center for torture and extermination, located in the capital Phnom Penh, which caused the death of at least 12,380 people. At this place, the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum was created in 1980. There, before the regime, the Tuol Svay Prey High School operated.

<sup>8</sup>Propaganda songs first appear together with the images of propaganda films, in which they function as a strong unifying element of actions, such as work in plantations, which points to a single direction: the construction of a new country. However, throughout the film, the songs approached out of the propaganda context, creating a turning point in the initial unifying intention for understanding a state of mind: the situations in which Duch talks about the ideology of the party, of how the killing machine functioned (the reports, the organization, the hierarchization, the control of deaths and the tortures), situations in which the instrumentalization of speech and actions lead to a closure of thought.

<sup>9</sup>Denomination of abstract and invisible force that refers to the Khmer Rouge's Party. The *Angkar* would absolutely incorporate all the will, the determination and the sacrifice of the Cambodians under his command.

his face, but in him as a model<sup>10</sup>. Still with Pol Pot's voice-over speech, we return to Duch: now he is sitting at a table looking at reports from prison S21. The montage alternates extreme close-up shots of his hands flipping through the files and close-up shots of his face; on the soundtrack, the Democratic Kampuchea anthem. The song remains in the background when we hear, for the first time, Duch's voice that reads *Angkar* slogans, true commandments that must be followed to the letter; otherwise, anyone can become an enemy of the party: "Practically everything belongs to the *Angkar*." "Learn to eat and work collectively." "No more individualistic feelings." "Abandon your property, your father, your mother and your family." "There is no sale or exchange anymore, no more complaints or lamentation, no more robberies or pillage, no more individual property." "Cambodians will keep their belongings in a small package." Control over life is total. Party leaders, like Duch, will take the role of educators and indoctrinators who cannot be questioned.

Deleuze (2007, p. 313), quoting the filmmaker Syberberg, says that "if Hitler is to be put on a trial by cinema, it must be inside cinema, against Hitler the film-maker." In this sense, the process of producing Panh's films must be in direct confrontation with the cinematographic practice of the Khmer Rouge propaganda films, their speeches and their images. They use watchwords, images of a mass of soldiers and workers, and the exaltation of a way of life that must be preserved with blood<sup>11</sup>. In addition to propaganda, there is yet another, even more cruel regime for producing images and speeches, aimed at controlling and policing: the photographs for identification of S21 prisoners, the reports and the records of executions. We consider it pertinent, therefore, to investigate the use of these archives, which, through their reutilization, assist in confronting the regime of visibility (and invisibility) promoted by the Khmer Rouge, namely propaganda and control.

Duch, sitting at the table, says: "The point for me was to adhere to the Party line, to accept that the prisoners were enemies, not human beings" (DUCH..., 2012). In a very short plan, Vann Nath's hands<sup>12</sup> hold a photograph of Duch during

<sup>10</sup> We shall recall the paintings made of Pol Pot's image face by Vann Nath, according to the survivor's testimony in the film *S21: the Khmer Rouge death machine* (2002).

<sup>11</sup> The national anthem of Democratic Kampuchea uses the word "blood" in several stanzas to celebrate April 17, 1975, date of the conquest of the capital Phnom Penh by its military forces: "The bright and scarlet blood flooded over the towns and plains of our motherland Kampuchea / The blood of our great workers and farmers / Our revolutionary fighters' blood, both men and women."

<sup>12</sup> Vann Nath was a survivor painter of the S21 prison and indispensable character for Panh's cinematographic work. He created several paintings portraying the terrible functioning of the prison. Nath had a crucial participation in Rithy Panh's filmmaking by enabling encounters between victims and executioners.

the period in which he was party secretary. “I was the educator. ‘Comrades, do not be sentimental! Inquire! Torture!’” (DUCH..., 2012). We approach his face in close-up and we hear the volume of Marc Marder’s soundtrack increase smoothly<sup>13</sup>, Duch proceeds:

I put the execution rhetoric in writing and brainwashed my subordinates at S21. I, often, promoted training sessions. This photograph where you see me in front of the microphone sounds true. Look at my face. It is not a sad face, but the face of someone eager to explain the essence of this rhetoric. (DUCH..., 2012)

The camera moves over a pile of S21 files; in each document, a small photography of identification in 3/4. Duch proceeds off-screen: “I was the person in S21 who spread the rhetoric of slaughter and of a dictatorship of the proletariat” (DUCH..., 2012). In the logic of his rhetoric, becoming an enemy is enough for death penalty, more precisely, for “destruction” or “reduction to dust,” meanings that the word *Kamtech* carries, according to the Red *Khmers*.

These initial scenes stress the authoritarian movement of the dictator and already indicate the main procedures of Rithy Panh to displace his testimony: the reutilization of propaganda films, photographs of identification and images filmed by the filmmaker in his work of memory surveying based on his relationship with the victims and the executioners he had been filming since the late 1980s. Therefore, Panh will operate both with the reutilization of Khmer Rouge-produced images and with the reutilization of his own work of elaborating the traumatic past, made in and out of his films. From the reutilization of these materials, the dispositive of the movie is configured: Kaing Guek Eav, sitting at a table, tells what happened inside the prison based on the files<sup>14</sup> delivered to him by Rithy Panh. The situations created

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<sup>13</sup>The soundtracks of Rithy Panh’s films are composed by the American musician Marc Marder, who has the history of his family marked by the experience of the Jewish genocide. Marder creates distinctive melodic compositions that will affect the fruition ways of images. On the one hand, a soft melody that accompanies poetic or resistance moments; for example, Vann Nath’s appearance in the exercise of his painting work. On the other hand, a melody of a heavier tone that comes when Duch talks about the rhetoric of tortures and murders.

<sup>14</sup>Control reports of prisoners’ situations, lists of executed prisoners, photographs of identification, autobiographies and confessions written by prisoners against their will during torture, photographs of the Khmer Rouge party meetings. These materials were produced largely inside the prison S21 under Duch’s command. The device will also put Duch in front of the images filmed by Panh in his long work of listening to the testimony of survivors of the regime and of soldiers and officers of the Khmer Rouge who committed atrocities against the Cambodians themselves. This work of historian and archivist is held within his films – in particular S21: *the Khmer Rouge death machine* (2002), in a filming that continued for three years – and out of them, through his work in Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center.

by the use of the files in *mise-en-scène* and the associations between these various materials in the montage will confront the testimony and intensify Duch's ethical, aesthetic and political positions. We are interested in analyzing how Rithy Panh films the dictator and, within this process, how the filmmaker makes Duch speak, how he summons his testimony through situations and associations with archive images.

### **The film made by a pact with the enemy**

“How to film the enemy?” allows us to approximate Comolli and Panh's trajectories as filmmakers, in which we recognize a concern for knowing and understanding the political moment they are filming and, at the same time, continually reflect on the form of the relationship between filmmaker and filmed ones, between the film and the spectator, which is rethought with each new political moment and each new film.

Even if the enemy is exactly what he is, the talks are ongoing, there are pacts in sight, one must get in accordance with it and establish a relationship as with any other person filmed, friend or neutral. How to lead this relationship? This is what incites the filmmaker and shapes the film. The risks are, of course, less of hostility (filming would cease) than of connivance or complacency. (COMOLLI, 2008, p. 129)

In his text, Comolli resumed his work trajectory when filming the Front National (FN, now Rassemblement National), a far-right French party. He bets on the cinema as a possibility of getting to know his enemy by producing a time of experience that exposes the bodies and intensifies their appearances. The author describes excerpts from his films, reflecting on the FN's way of acting and his different choices for filming it, which have undergone variations according to each political moment and experiences of previous films. Most of the time, Comolli bets on an observation attitude, entrusting to the *mise-en-scène* of the FN members the intensification of their appearances, which the author calls “acting out”: the militant who sang a refrain about the blacks being lead with strokes by batons to the colonies silenced by the chief of staff, the verbal attack of a group of militant women to the Algerian woman, the irritation of Le Pen when being touched by his security. For Comolli (2008, p. 125),

to film is to go through a time of experience in which the relationship of the subject with his body and his word unfolds and at the same time intensifies. A dynamic of incarnation of the motives of thought becomes possible, recognizable. If the Other incarnates himself, for me, this happens, first and

foremost, in the movies. To add, filming it, body – gesture, word, movement, sinuosity – to the ideology of the other is evidently to represent this ideology with more force, that is, to maybe provoke a more lively reaction in the spectator, to provide him with more material to apprehend and more desire to fight.

The French political context is handled on its present, the FN occupies the public scene in a direct way: its members participate in electoral disputes, seek and build alliances within French politics in a pendular movement of “express-repress” and “hide-display.” The cinematographic work of filming the bodies demands an ethical attitude of Comolli, he defines rules for his own work, he chooses to avoid interviewing and intervening in the scene by the montage to not to fall into propaganda traps.

Similarly to Comolli in his way of filming the FN, Rithy Panh is interested in knowing and understanding the positions of the Khmer Rouge members and both will aim at the intensified appearance of the bodies of their enemies. But there are differences of aesthetic choices between the two filmmakers, which could not be otherwise, as they work with distinct political and material contexts and continually rethink the form of their films. We do not intend to approach these differences of choices, but to approach them in the defense of a pact with the enemy and a pact with the spectator.

In turn, Panh works with the elaboration of an event of the past, although he strongly focuses on the political life of the Cambodian present, since Duch’s judgment was transmitted by television and had great repercussion in the country.

My documentaries *Bophana* and *S21* were shown in Cambodia. Like me, the country was able to retrace its memory. I felt that these films had brought an end to an episode of my life.

After that, Duch’s trial began. It seemed distant to me. I believed I was at peace. I alerted the court judges, both Cambodian and international, in advance: The images will tell the story, I said; they will tell the world what the accused have done; they will show their arrogance, their severity, their lies, their methods, their tricks. [...]

I read the transcripts of the first hearing of Duch’s trial, and they tormented me. I realized that I could not keep my distance.

I did not try to understand Duch, nor was I interested in judging him; I wanted to give him the chance to explain, in detail, the process of death of which he was the coordinator. (PANH, 2013b, p. 16, our translation)

The concern about how the judges questioned Duch makes the *mise-en-scène* of the legal proceedings a problem to be thought of by the film. It is about calling into question past events, reflecting on how they are elaborated in the present of the political scene.

How to talk to the dictator? To resume Comolli's question (2008, p. 129) "how to conduct this relationship?". Rithy Panh knows that one must break with propaganda and control strategies. In order to confront Duch, it is necessary to have another ethical and aesthetic position that requires the establishment of a pact, the form of the relationship of the filmmaker with the one who was willing to participate in the film is put forth frankly and directly:

So I asked the judges for permission to conduct interviews with him. I met him in the visiting room and highlighted the two basic principles of my project: he would not be the only person to appear in my film – other witnesses, possibly contradictory, would be used – and every subject would be discussed frankly. In short, I said, "I will be direct and frank with you. Be frank and direct with me."

He answered me with a sort of sententious tranquility: "Mr. Rithy, we're both working for the truth." (PANH, 2013b, p. 16, our translation)

The film opens space for the dictator's testimony by placing him in different situations in the *mise-en-scène*, arranging a set of documents that will be in the shot along with Duch: party *slogans*, photographs of S21 prisoners, the reports written by him, the testimonies of his former employees, the testimony of the painter Vann Nath (these statements that were filmed by Rithy Panh are watched by the dictator through a notebook).

Subsequently, in the montage, the film builds associations with a wide variety of images that were collected or filmed by Rithy Panh in his cinematographic, archival and historical work. He will put on the scene his work of elaborating the memory of more than 20 years. Many of the images we see in *Duch* were filmed during the production of *S21: the Khmer Rouge death machine*, which lasted three years. In this period, the filmmaker holds meetings between survivors, executioners and the archives inside the former prison S21. Therefore, these images that we see in *Duch* are already crossed by a previous elaboration of testimonies held before the archives. Consequently, the appearance of a photograph of identification, for example, filmed within this context from situations created by the director in shoots

with the executioners and the survivors, has a quite different effect than if the photo were presented graphically in the film. The use of the image within the scene points to a sharing of the reflection on the past between those filming and those filmed. The memory reconstruction is shared.

[...] I used photographs. Archive books. Witness reports. The famous “Black Book.” I presented evidence. Compared images. Duch has a weakness: he does not know the cinema. He does not believe in the role of repetition, of intersection, of echoes. He does not know that montage is politics and ethics in itself. And that with time there is only one truth. (PANH, 2013b, p. 144, our translation)

The interventions made by Rithy Panh which participate in the production of this confrontation to Duch’s testimony will not break the pact established between the two, because they are not aligned with the resources of propaganda (also dispensed by Comolli), since they do not seek to convince the spectator of one single meaning.

We will analyze in the *mise-en-scène* the dictator’s body, face and gestures in the situations in which he is before the archives; in the montage, the sequence of shots of his body and opposing shots of the archives and the apparitions of the short duration plans. We are interested in how the continuous variations of these elements between Duch’s body, his discourse and the archives confront his testimony and intensify his appearance, reinforcing the senses of his political position.

### **Situations: the confrontation in the *mise-en-scène***

The film focuses on Duch’s body, seeking to discontinue an authoritarian movement that tends not to yield as his discourse finds no resistances. He struggles to remain in his place of model, but the distention of the time by which the interview takes place produces discontinuities. His speech and his programmed gestures cannot be sustained, because the film preserves the intensity of his breathing, his silences and his gestures. As in Comolli’s films, this attention to the body ends up inscribing in the scene the dictator’s acting out moments, exposing the violence of his testimony. It is the bet of the cinema in the production of a “time of experience,” the relation of extended duration with Duch transforms his hermetic place in open space, subject to variations.

Since it unfolds a machinic and synchronous time tape with the lived time of the filmed subject, the cinema can record the passage from one state of enunciation to another, the rupture of a conduct, the point of imbalance of a body around a denial. (COMOLLI, 2008, p. 127)

Duch is seated at the table with some documents arranged in front of him. He shakes his hand and says, “Anyone who has been arrested by the Party must be regarded as an enemy. ‘Do not weaken on your knees.’ These are the words of the Party” (DUCH..., 2012). Gesturing his hand as if it was pushing the words from his mouth to enforce an order, he continues: “The Party is guiding you! That is me! Are you weakening? Why?” He leans forward from the chair and adds: “The Party is guiding you! I am the Party!” (DUCH..., 2012), moving his hand back and forth and pointing to himself at the height of his chest. He laughs loudly and says, still smiling: “Excuse me. I am acting like a big shot! Let us stop it now” (DUCH, 2012). He changes his expression, not laughing anymore, and looks out of the frame as if searching for something. In this scene, the attention of the camera to his face and his gestures provides his speech with a singularity and accentuates his responsibility in evidencing not only the content of his testimony, but in giving materiality to his prepotency and arrogance. If in his speech he denies, his acts indicate what is denied, as in the acting out of the psychoanalytic scene. It is not enough to extract a confession from him, which is not Rithy Panh’s intention, but rather to film his face, his laughter, his gestures, and the silence that follows. The hatred present in ideology is wide open in all these elements that are available to the spectator.

**Formalize the relationship, evidence it to the spectator**

In the middle of the film, there is a scene that subtly indicates the director’s presence and the type of relationship built between Panh and Duch, which is evidenced to the spectator. At the beginning of the scene, we hear Duch’s voice reading the confession of a prisoner, but his image is not in sync with the sound: he is sitting at the table and looks attentively out of the shot. Placing his reading glasses, he stretches his arm out of the frame, in the direction of his gaze, and another arm enters the picture and gives him a report: it is Rithy Panh’s arm. With the document in his hands, he looks at it and says: “he is not lying” (we hear this line simultaneously to the reading of the confession in off-screen). In one cut in the image (and not in the sound), the scene proceeds to a closed-up of his face, where he continues reading the confession, started in voice-over at the beginning of the scene. We know from the book *L’élimination* (PANH, 2013b) that during the long meeting sessions between Panh and Duch the director asked several questions to the dictator, but in the montage these questions were omitted. Although Duch’s line is directed out of the shot, where we know that Panh is, the choice of suppressing the questions throughout the film produces a greater openness to doubts and questions on the

spectator's part, since they could provide a direction to the meanings of Duch's testimony. This particular form of the relationship established between the two, present in the film, emphasizes the relation of the executioner to the archives and, at the same time, to the spectator. In this scene, Panh highlights the form of this relationship: "To formalize the relationship, to systematize it. That it be readable as such, that the political information of the spectator be also about the form of the relationship" (COMOLLI, 2008, p. 130). Not putting himself in the position of an interrogator, the director presents the archives to Duch from which he can talk about; more than questions, the filmmaker proposes situations that do not fail to interpellate the executioner, to deny his testimony and reveal his way of thinking.

The confrontation with the dictator is not between Rithy Panh (a debate much more explicit in his book) and Duch, but between the dictator and the previous work of elaboration of the past, in the construction of spaces of memory produced collectively along the course of the filmmaker's engagement. The elements that inhabit the work of elaboration are the victims' histories and images, the executioners and the survivors' testimonies, it is they that will inhabit the film and confront the dictator. Thus, Panh shows that his relation with Duch is not hostage to a memory that wants to judge its executioner, also moving the spectator away from that position.

**Associations: the confrontation in the montage**

The confrontation, begun in the *mise-en-scène*, continues in the montage by the association of shots and opposing shots of Duch and archival images – in other words, a sequence of shots that frame his face and his body and shots that frame reports, photographs, and videos (which he watches on the notebook). What appears in this opposing shot are images of the victims and voices of the survivors and former employees of Duch.

In one of these sequences we have the testimony of an old S21 guard, filmed by Rithy Panh. He holds in his hands a photograph of Duch in front of a microphone and another of young men, an interrogation group. The man says, "I was the guard of a house. I saw Duch interrogate a prisoner. 'So, comrade, are you going to answer or not?'". In one cut, we have the close-up of Duch, who has his eyes directed towards the left corner of the screen; he watches on the notebook the testimony of his guard, which we continue to hear in off-screen: "The prisoner said, 'I said it all, Brother.' Duch hit him two or three times, and the prisoner fell to the ground. Duch left." We again see the guard, now on the notebook screen, through a subjective point of view of Duch (the back of his shoulder and face mold the bottom and the corner of

the image). The guard testifies before five former prison officials. He goes on: “Touy came. He told me to leave and entered the room. I, in secret, saw Touy interrogate him.” Now, the shot frames Duch with several photographs and the notebook in front of him, on the table. In off-screen we continue to hear the guard’s testimony: “Comrade, are you going to answer or not? If you do not answer, I will torture you.” At that moment, Duch starts shaking his head negatively and laughing ironically, says: “I will not accept this” (DUCH..., 2012). A very short shot that shows one bloody man being rescued by another flashes in the scene. We return to the image of the film and the continuation of the testimony of details of the torture. From the close-up of the guard that witnesses we proceed to a smooth panoramic movement that frames, one by one, the other guards who listen to his testimony. Another very short shot flashes; we quickly see a hand flipping through prisoner identification pictures, the camera stops in a photo in which there is a prisoner with a baby on her lap. In close-up, Duch comments on torture and denies his involvement, claiming to have interrogated only one person, Koy Thourn<sup>15</sup>. And then there flashes the shot of a hand touching plaques with photographs of prisoners who were killed during torture. The scene ends.

According to the established pact, Panh produces a scene in which Duch no longer has the control of the discourse, he has to confront the statements contrary to his testimony built by the shots and opposing shots, he has to face and react to them. When being contradicted, Rithy Panh puts him on a long shot, with the table full of files, his laughter vanishes: it, that was supposed to shut up his victims of terror, but it is his face that silences; the photographs that surround him, the dead ones, question him.

Of this scene, we also emphasize the use of shots of very short duration, that vary between two and five seconds, that flashed between Duch’s words, a procedure widely used throughout the film. These shots are small extracts from larger groups of images filmed by Rithy Panh, by the Khmer Rouge, and by the Vietnamese forces that overthrew the regime. These groups of images also appear in the film in shots of longer duration. However, we perceive a particular intention in using the short duration, as it produces an effect that cannot be completely interpreted by the spectator and, at the same time, intensifies our relationship with Duch’s words, without making from the images, illustrations of what is said. They are quite diverse images; among them and more frequently used, are images of Cambodians in the forced labor camps filmed by the Khmer Rouge. In one of these appearances, Duch

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<sup>15</sup> Koy Thourn was Pol Pot’s minister and after being accused of treason he was arrested, interrogated, tortured and murdered in the S21.

is talking about the interrogation of his school teacher Dim Saroeun, who suffered sexual violence under torture; a common history of thousands of Cambodian women during the regime. During his speech, the shot of women carrying stones flashes; one of them, without stopping her walk in the single file of workers, looks at the camera lens. With this movement, she faces her executioners and is singled out amid the collective work scene, a likely intention of the person filming.

This short-shot procedure is also used with Duch’s own images during his interview. In one of them, the dictator makes a hanging gesture in a two-second shot that flashes when he is talking about the loyalty of the rural children he taught to be torturers and executors. Once again, Panh emphasizes an acting out of the dictator.

These interventions through montage gestures are clearly proposed to the spectator, the relation is “formalized” by Panh when explaining that there is an interference in the dictator’s testimony. We believe that these interventions do not resemble a propaganda resource, feared by Comolli, since they indicate their own presence and do not contribute to clarify the meaning of the scene – on the contrary, the montage gestures can cause a strangeness in the spectator. Thus, the film demands the spectator’s engagement, because it produces no appeasement, either by means of a judgment or a accusation.

### **To understand and to confront, not to judge**

Rithy Panh (2013b) in his book asks himself what do the dead want: to take the executioners to trial or to understand what happened? The search for an understanding involves “reorganizing a counter-memory of the genocidal event” (ROLLET, 2013, p. 200), because the victims were forced to write lying biographies under torture. In *S21: the Khmer Rouge death machine* and in *Duch, master of the forges of hell*, it is not only survivors that are brought to reconstruct a memory of experience, but executioners will play a central role in building this counter-memory through their testimonies. The collaboration of the executioners differs both films from *Shoah* (1985) by Claude Lanzmann, who, in positioning himself alongside the survivors, “imposes that each spectator embraces the catastrophic caesura” (ROLLET, 2013, p. 202). For Rollet, *Shoah* would indicate the impossibility of sharing the extermination camp experience and this is precisely what Panh’s films attempt to prevent by establishing a relationship with the enemy in the shared construction of a memory. As Sylvie Rollet (2013, p. 209) reflects, “By not giving the executioners the space of a ‘fortiori’ trial nor the space of reconciliation and forgiveness, *S21* [but here I mention *Duch* as well] is limited to offer them the scene of a listening and, by the

same token, subvert the rules of totalitarian power.” The difficult task of constructing this space is quite different from the search for a supposed truth of the event, which could immobilize the thought on history. On the contrary, a continuous elaboration of the past is required. Panh’s attitude approaches, once again, Comolli’s propositions:

Describing to report is no longer sufficient. Pushing the lines to report, is not either. Reporting to preserve our good conscience and put ourselves on the side of the good ones? Reporting is no longer sufficient. Let us talk about struggle. Political struggle, that is, cinematographic melee – to expose, to explain, to put words and bodies in perspective, and no longer flat. Shooting with depth (of shot, of scene). Shot and off-shot. Visible and invisible. Focus, bring into focus. (COMOLLI, 2008, p. 134)

It seems to us that Panh’s political struggle lies in “filming with” the survivors and the executioners. The political use of the documentary seeks the engagement of its enemy, even though he can deny, lie or try make a speech. Anita Leandro (2016) approaches the dictator’s resistance in testifying, in taking responsibility and facing the glances cast by those who were photographed and then murdered. When Panh is questioned by Duch about the usefulness of showing him the photographs, the filmmaker responds that the dead hear the dictator’s testimony. “The act of witnessing is never solitary and results from an engagement before someone (Nath, Bophana, Houy, Duch)” (LEANDRO, 2016, p. 12). The film demands the dictator’s attention before the testimonies and photographs of the dead who are opposed to him. By agreeing to participate, he also is susceptible to the risk of the relationship.

Beatriz Sarlo problematizes the first person testimony, asking about how to exercise his criticism when he occupies a place of truth, entering in a “kind of interpretive limbo” (SARLO, 2012, p. 94, our translation). In the context of the trials of State Terrorism in Argentina, about the role of testimonies, this author states that “the important thing was not to understand the world of the victims, but to attain in the conviction of the guilty” (SARLO, 2012, p. 93, our translation). Despite the important and necessary use of the testimony in the legal field, emphasized by the author, it must not remain only as evidence – this position creates a temporality that is immobilized and is not put under review anymore. In other words, the past becomes something fixed. Márcio Seligmann-Silva (2008, p. 78) also comments about the testimony of catastrophes in legal contexts:

The theme of narrative of the trauma of historical catastrophes has led us, therefore, to move from the testimony scene to the legal scene. But will the latter be capable of allowing

the construction of the desired passage between individuals traumatized by catastrophe and society? Will it allow a reintegration of the past?

One of the most important elements for elaborating the past proposed by Panh is lost in the legal process, namely, the construction of this difficult relationship between those involved in the catastrophic event. “We, the victims, need the executioners. It is cruel, but that is the way it is. If a victim’s word is not confirmed by the executioner, it floats” (PANH; 2013c, p. 244).

In a close-up of his face, Duch says:

We arrested somebody, we did not tell anybody. We did not return the body to the relatives for the ceremony. There was no mourning. We did not say that the victim was to blame. There was absolutely nothing left. Thus, *Kamtech* means to destroy the name, the image, the body, everything. (DUCH..., 2012)

In the reading of Gagnebin (2009, p. 59) about Benjamin’s philosophy, the elaboration of the past must go through the recollection of the stories of “those who have no name.” For Seligmann-Silva (2010, 56), the ethics of Benjamin’s memory has a “double act: the destruction of the false order of things and, on the other hand, the construction of a new mnemonic space.” In bringing the dictator to testify about the catastrophe, the film not only reconstructs the memory of the past, but intervenes in the construction of the political scene by confronting his testimony. The film does not seek a confession, but makes him collaborate to avoid oblivion and produce a memory of those that he tried to eliminate.

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