

# Towards the Violated Face: The Mugshot of Bophana and the Cambodian Tragedy<sup>a</sup>

## *Perante o Rosto Violado: O Mugshot de Bophana e a Tragédia do Camboja*

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### ABSTRACT

Can a face in fact be totally annihilated? From this provocation, we aimed at the mugshot of Bophana, the guiding thread of this text. The essay tries to reflect on the vestigial testimony of her face based on philosophical concepts present in Lévinas and Butler, seeking a policy of images, especially those that expose faces and bodies victimized by violence. We also sought to understand the method of filmmaker Rithy Panh, who made an important documentary on the memory of the Cambodian genocide motivated by Bophana's photograph. By making the archival images of the extermination a kind of gravestone for the dead, Panh's method also approaches the epistolary gesture present in the elimination of Bophana and her husband, Ly Sitha.

**Keywords:** Rithy Panh, testimony, Khmer Rouge, face, trace

### RESUMO

Um rosto pode ser totalmente aniquilado? Com essa provocação, miramos o *mugshot* de Hout Bophana, fio condutor deste texto. O ensaio tenta refletir sobre o testemunho vestigial de seu rosto a partir de conceitos filosóficos presentes em Lévinas e Butler, visando uma política das imagens, especialmente daquelas que expõem rostos e corpos vitimados por violências. Também buscamos compreender o método do cineasta Rithy Panh, que, motivado por essa fotografia, realizou um importante documentário sobre a memória do genocídio cambojano. Ao fazer das imagens de arquivo do extermínio uma espécie de lápide para os mortos, o método de Panh também se avizinha do gesto epistolar presente na eliminação de Bophana e de seu esposo, Ly Sitha.

**Palavras-chave:** Rithy Panh, testemunho, Khmer Vermelho, rosto, vestígio

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MATRIZES

# A

<sup>1</sup>Rithy Panh (1964-) was one of the Khmer victims; his family was eliminated due to exhaustion and starvation in the forced work camps in the rural zone of Cambodia. At the end of Pol Pot's regime, Panh sought refuge in Thailand, later travelling to France and graduating in film from the Institut des Hautes Études Cinématographiques (IDHEC).

<sup>2</sup>When proposing the concept of the fissure-image we attempt to get closer to these images created in spaces of suffering (like Bophana's photograph) but that are, however, able to crack the temporality of their creation and testify against those who created them. The fissure-image is this apparition that awakens us when we decide to look at the images of history in order to extract some understanding, some knowledge, however incomplete and fissured it may be.

<sup>3</sup>The expression "despite everything" (*malgré tout*, in French), that sometimes appears in the text, is a reference to Georges Didi-Huberman's thinking, especially with regards to his great book *Images Despite Everything* (2003). In this work, for the author, the "look (their ethics but also their singularity) materializes from the incessant search for pieces of historical legibility in the singular sequence of four photographs taken by Alberto Errera in the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camps" (Lessa Filho & Marques, 2022, p. 7).

CAN A FACE, in fact, be *totally annihilated*? Before we can answer this question, we must define what is meant by annihilation, which is understood here as absolute destruction, a violating process of something or someone that is completely consummated, that time consumes with total fury, like a devouring *Chronos*. However, there are experiences that are, so to speak, *indigestible*. And ironically, from the bowels of time, they persist and endure; they return to demand from us, from viscera to vomit, a response to the violence that *returns* (revolts). In the face of history, traces, grooves, and remains testify to *what fails* in the processes of annihilation; something that *exists*, that remains cracking through the images, reports, gestures, as *they say*, despite the erasure imposed by historical violence.

Prompted by this question, we risk an attempt to write about the film by Rithy Panh (1996)<sup>1</sup>, *Bophana, Une Tragédie Cambodgienne*. On the one hand, a small image (just over six centimeters), fragile, a type of vestigial testimony of the face of a Cambodian woman, *like any other* Cambodian victim of violence imposed by the Khmer Rouge regime, of yesterday and today; and not *like just another* woman eclipsed by the totality of the regime, deleted by anonymity, because in the human face there is a type of silent eloquence that, despite not acting, *it acts all the same*, and for this very reason cries out to us through its presence, through its dignity.

Thus, we come before a *fissure-image*<sup>2</sup> (a mugshot of this young woman). A symptom of ingested violence, perpetrated in a more or less recent past. The fissure fascinates (how can one refrain from looking at it, despite everything<sup>3</sup>?); it is polarized to a small portion of the world, which, however modest it may be, gives rise to a story (when and why was the image taken?) of a memory or an archaeology – and over which subsoil of history does this fissure open before our eyes, this scar of the temporality of the suffering of a human face?

With a more or less black background – because we cannot say that it is completely grey or entirely black, because in this image too, its hues, its variations are sustained with difficulty –, a light seems to come from behind, this face looks at us, front on, in relative darkness. Her shoulder-length, black, lank hair is enhanced by the uniform the same color as the Khmer Rouge prisoners were forced to wear. Her oval face – an indelible mark of her genealogy – seems to bring out the rarefaction of her physiognomy: a dilated nose with irregular openings (and in the photograph the bone of the nasal cavity appears to be camouflaged by the light), arched eyebrows

and the intrinsic flaws of this beardless face which are also relativized by this light (the color of which, by all indications, is responsible for revealing the imperfections of any physiognomy), and then the eyes, geometrically irregular, which appear to confront the gaze of the photographic camera, a device undoubtedly activated by a perpetrator of violence; a raised gaze which, today, forty years later, is a trace of the testimony of this *suffering face* (Figure 1).

This mugshot of Bophana acts as an icon of the repression and dehumanization perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge. These eyes, without a doubt, that look straight onto the device used to take the mugshot, change object each time they are located in different contexts and in front of different people: they observe as victims in the panels of the *Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum* (which is where Bophana's photograph is located). They are illuminated by the contagion of the image of the young woman who comes to life. And yet, they remain in Tuol Sleng. "In these migrations of the image through different spaces and time", writes Vincente Sánchez-Biosca (2015), "there are so many other forms of memory management: from repression to art, from testimony to accusation, from biography to intellect"<sup>4</sup> (p. 345). Regardless of the wanderings that arise when confronting this image, something ruthless and wild remains constant: the gaze that founded it. Because this photo is an image of a perpetrator, that is, a capture, a theft, or a forced or consented surrender:

If the total destruction (of Bophana) was decided, something – miniscule – failed in the enterprise (of the exterminator): the survival of this image. From it, anonymous, others can be born. For an image always carefully guards, whether or not its author is aware, whether they know it or not, its reverse shot. In it, however, dwells, forever, the executioner<sup>5</sup>. (Sánchez-Biosca, 2015, p. 345)

Therefore, we cannot continue our attempt to write about Rithy Panh's film, *Bophana, Une Tragédie Cambodgienne*, without summarizing, as much as possible, the story of the life and death of this woman and her husband and obviously, inevitably, the filmmaker's life and method which, *contaminated* by this image, made Bophana a type of tombstone for the dead in Cambodia, and through her was helped to trace the painful journey about his own history and that of their country, both torn apart by the genocide.

<sup>4</sup>In the original: "En estas migraciones de la imagen por espacios y tiempos distintos hay otras tantas modulaciones de la gestión de la memoria: de la represión al arte, del testimonio a la acusación, de la biografía a la intelección". This and other translations, by the authors.

<sup>5</sup>In the original: "Si la destrucción total estaba decidida, algo –minúsculo– falló en la empresa: la pervivencia de la imagen. De ella, anónima, pueden nacer otras. Pues una imagen guarda celosamente siempre, lo sepa o no su autor, lo sepa o no ella misma, su contra-campo. En él habita todavía, y para siempre, el verdugo".

**Figure 1**  
The frontal mugshot of Hout Bophana



*Note.* From *Bophana, Une Tragédie Cambodgienne*, by R. Panh, 1996.

Thus, we will start with a brief biography of this young Cambodian woman (and everything that led to her becoming a symbol, today, of her country) and we will then discuss how the testimony image of Bophana can associate such concepts such as *the face*, *ethical violence*, *Illeité*, and *trace* and how her mugshot is configured as a *perpetrator's photograph*. And concomitantly with the analysis of the film *Bophana, Une Tragédie Cambodgienne*, we will reflect on the filmmaker's, Rithy Panh, method of thinking about the images and trauma. Therefore, we attempt to collect, from death, from the perpetrated elimination, the traces of the vulnerable alterities that emerge from the cinematographic work and expose the eloquent ethical demand for its living affirmation in the present.

#### **HOUT BOPHANA: A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF HER ELIMINATION**

In 1996, Rithy Pahn created their film *Bophana, Une Tragédie Cambodgienne*, which was the first cinematographic production in the Khmer language addressing

the genocide carried out by the Khmer Rouge dictatorial regime. Pahn was a survivor that was able to migrate to France after losing his family in the dictatorial work camps. Just as the British photographer Nic Dunlop was haunted during his youth by Kaing Guek Eav, the Duch<sup>6</sup>, based on a photographic register of Chan Kim Srung, the Cambodian filmmaker was also marked by an image, a *mugshot* (an identification portrait, like that of Kim Srung's) created by the S21 destruction machine and, from this face, he chose the guiding thread of *Bophana, Une Tragédie Cambodgienne*.

This portrait – the face of this woman –, like her biography, was discovered and reconstructed for the West in the early 1980s by the American journalist Elizabeth Becker of the *Washington Post* while she investigated the Tuol Sleng archives (also known as S21) and the confessions of the repressed victims. Guided by the center's archivists, Becker came across an unusual file where the incriminatory evidence was comprised of love letters. In her important book, *When the War Was Over*, Elizabeth Becker dedicated an entire chapter to this unusual set of documents and intitled it “The Romance of Comrade Deth – Destroying the Personal Life” (Becker, 1986, pp. 212-225). When Pahn became aware of this unique file, in which a paranoid conspiracy and a personal tragedy were so terribly combined, he asked Becker (2010, p. 80) for permission to elaborate a film script. In a recent book, Vincente Sánchez-Biosca (2017) wrote the following about Bophana:

In any case, the uniqueness of Hout Bophana is also due to other reasons, which the filmmaker brilliantly explores: firstly, the young woman embodied, in Pahn's eyes, the human, familial and cultural values of the old Cambodia of the 1960s, characterized by economic development, the attainment of a certain social well-being and access to a culture of Western accents, combined with Buddhist traditions, which is no obstacle to recognizing that the country also suffered the consequences of the corruption of Prince Sihanouk's government, repression and even torture practices... The filmmaker interweaves (*entreteje*) the main character's personal drama with Cambodia's history as two manifestations of the same unfortunate fate<sup>7</sup>. (pp. 154-155)

Bophana was an educated young woman, fluent in the French language. Her father adopted her cousin, to whom she would marry during the wartime. Bophana's life trajectory reflects, in some way, the fate of her own country. Her personal tragedy began with the start of a civil war, where North American bombings which began in 1969 (with the pretext of preventing the Viet Cong guerrillas from taking refuge in Cambodia) led to the coup d'état in 1970 of general Lon Nol, who defeated king Norodom Sihanouk. Both phenomena

<sup>6</sup> He was the head of the Tuol Sleng/S21, the biggest and most fearsome space for torture and murder in the Khmer Rouge regime. Rithy Panh made a film about him intitled *Duch, The Master of the Forges of Hell* (2011) in which he confronts him with photos of the victims, including the mugshots of Hout Bophana.

<sup>7</sup> In the original: “En cualquier caso, la singularidad de Hout Bophana se debía también a otras razones que el cineasta explotó con brillantez: en primer lugar, la muchacha encarnaba a los ojos de Pahn los valores humanos, familiares y culturales de la antigua Camboya de los años sesenta, caracterizada por el desarrollo económico, el logro de un cierto bienestar social y el acceso a una cultura de acentos occidentales, combinada con la tradición budista, lo que no es óbice para reconocer que país sufrió también las consecuencias de la corrupción de los gobiernos del príncipe Sihanouk, la represión e incluso la práctica de la tortura... El cineasta entreteje el drama personal de la protagonista con la historia de Camboya como dos manifestaciones de un destino desafortunado”.



resulted in the exponential growth and legitimization of the Khmer Rouge guerilla. Following the murder of her father during an ambush by the Khmer Rouge guerilla, the young woman was forced to flee at only 20 years old from the areas that were most torn apart by civil war:

on her solitary journey ... [Bophana] settles in the city of Kompong Thom, where she is raped by government army soldiers and becomes pregnant. In 1971, the doctors that attend her save both her and her baby, who Bophana leaves to the care of her younger sister<sup>8</sup>. (Sánchez-Biosca, 2017, p. 155)

<sup>8</sup>In the original: “en su periplo solitario, se instala en la ciudad de Kompong Thom, donde sufre una violación por los soldados del ejército gubernamental y queda embarazada... los médicos que la atienden logran salvarla, así como a su bebé, quien deja Bophana al cuidado de una hermana menor”.

From then on, the young woman, by her older sister’s side, survives by selling rice in the central market in the capital Phnom Penh. In May 1974, after also working as a seamstress for approximately one year in a center for widows called La Maison des Papillons run by Gaetana Enders – the wife of the man that had organized the devastating North American bombings, Thomas Enders – and carrying out translation work, Bophana happens to reunite with her cousin and childhood friend, Ly Sitha, who had converted and became a monk, at a cremation ceremony in Langka Pagoda<sup>9</sup>. Although the encounter was fleeting, passion was rekindled in both (Becker, 1986; Sánchez-Biosca, 2017).

<sup>9</sup>And as Elizabeth Becker (1986, p. 212) reminds us, becoming a monk was one of the rare options for young people that did not want to fight on either side of the war.

It is not until September 1975 that Ly Sitha reappears in Bophana’s life, when he visits her mother. Ly Sitha, once a monk, had now become *Comrade* Deth, the trusted man of Koy Thuon, a leader of the North Zone and responsible for the economy of Khmer Rouge. “His monk’s robes have been replaced by the black uniform and he is armed with a pistol.... This is when Ly Sitha’s mother, conscious of the danger that surrounds the young pair, decides to unite them in marriage”<sup>10</sup> (Sánchez-Biosca, 2017, p. 156).

<sup>10</sup>In the original: “Su túnica azafrán de monge sido substituida por el pijama negro y va armado con una pistola.... Es entonces que la madre de Ly Sitha, consciente de los peligros que acechan a los jóvenes, toma decisión de unirlos en matrimonio”.

Following the strict rules of the Pol Pot dictatorship and of the Khmer Rouge army, families were not allowed to gather and travel was prohibited, except in cases where safe-conducts were signed by the leaders. The fact that Deth held a high position in the party, led to his permanent distance from Bophana, leaving them both with the alternative of sending *secret love letters*, in which the feeling shared by the couple was evident.

The fragility that this young woman shows in front of her beloved, the regrets for her loneliness, contrasting with her apparent exterior strength in the face of the ordeal she has lived. Nothing encapsulates her mind better than the *secret love letters* that she writes, bypassing the ban. These are in tune with the former monk’s feelings. In these letters, Bophana takes refuge in the imaginary world of *Reamker*, the Khmer version of *Ramayana*, and attributes the personality of her



heroine to herself, Sita, the wife of the hero, torn from her lover's arms by threatening demonic powers. Following the epic poem's roots, Bophana's experiences take on allegorical colors in which the universe created by Khmer Rouges acquires a dangerous infernal face, which revives the childhood stories that were told to the children of her time. On his part, Ly Sitha's responses appear impregnated with literary evocations, no less strange to the society that surrounds them and in which he actively participates. In his letters he seems to seek asylum, sometimes quoting verses from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, sometimes bringing up the limpid couple of lovers painted in Edenic colors by Bernadin de Saint-Pierre in *Paul et Virginie*<sup>11</sup>. (Sánchez-Biosca, 2017, p. 156)

Following the fall of Koy Thuon, Ly Sitha/Deth's protector, a wave of arrests was unleashed in the party. Upon discovering and investigating comrade Deth's home, the Khmer Rouge police found five letters from Bophana, three photographs and a fake safe-conduct that Ly Sitha had used to travel by his wife's side and take her to the capital Phnom Penh (Sánchez-Biosca, 2017, p. 157). Inevitably, both Ly Sitha and Bophana were captured and made prisoners of the regime. Bophana was even named a *femme fatale* spy that had dragged her lover into a conspiratorial network.

On 19<sup>th</sup> September 1976, Deth was arrested, taken to *Tuol Sleng*, tortured like his superior, and finally *officially destroyed* (this was the term that the Khmer Rouge used when a prisoner was murdered), on March 18<sup>th</sup>, 1977 (Sánchez-Biosca, 2017, p. 157); whereas for Elizabeth Becker (1986, p. 221) his official destruction was conducted on March 10<sup>th</sup>, 1977. Bophana, in turn, was arrested on October 12<sup>th</sup>, 1976, accused of being at the behest of the Central of Intelligence Agency (CIA), and interrogated at S21 by her old literature professor, Mam Nai, the right-hand man of Duch who served in the genocidal army by the nickname Chan, according to Rithy Panh's (2004, p. 122) notes in the film script. Bophana was eliminated on the same day as her husband (according to the date defended by both Sánchez-Biosca and Rithy Pahn). And for about five months, Duch tortured her to make her assume the inexistent conspiratorial relationships on behalf of the CIA, even going so far as to writing instructions to her interrogators/torturers telling them how to conduct the sessions in order to obtain the "confession" that the charity institution that the young woman had worked at was, in fact, a space linked to the North American intelligence agency.

Bophana's last "confession", dated January 1977, declared that she had never loved Deth and that she seduced him with the intent of boycotting the distribution of rice (Becker, 1986, p. 223; Sánchez-Biosca, 2017, p. 157). This biography ends with the painful question asked by her: "After confessing all of these betrayals,

<sup>11</sup>In the original: "La fragilidad que muestra esta joven ante su amado, lo lamentos por su soledad, contrastan con su aparente fortaleza exterior ante el calvario vivido. Nada condensa mejor su estado anímico que las *cartas de amor secretas* que, burlando la prohibición, le escribe. Estas sintonizan con el sentir del ex monje En ellas, Bophana se refugia en el mundo imaginario del *Reamker*, la versión jemer del *Ramayana*, y se autoatribuye la personalidad de su heroína, Sita, esposa del hero, arrancada de brazos de su amado por funestas fuerzas demoníacas. Siguiendo los cauces del poema épico, las vivencias de Bophana van tomando tintes alegóricos en los que el universo creado por los Jemeres Rojos adquiere un peligrosísimo cariz infernal que reaviva las historias de infancia con las que fueron medidas las niñas camboyanas de su época. Por su parte, las respuestas de Ly Sitha aparecen preñadas de evocaciones literarias no menos extrañas a la sociedad que le rodea y de la que participa tan activamente. En aquellas parece buscar asilo: ora cita versos del *Macbeth* shakespeariano, ora trae a la memoria la límpida pareja de amantes que pin tó con edénicos colores Bernardin de Saint-Pierre en *Paul et Virginie*".



what does life matter?” (Becker, 1986, p. 224). Bophana would remain for another two months in Tuol Sleng, being forced to denounce friends and family as part of the spy network, and Duch, with total contempt after her official destruction, would note in his own writing that the young woman was nothing more than an ordinary whore (Sánchez-Biosca, 2017, p. 157).

### ETHICAL VIOLENCE AND THE TRACE OF OTHERS THROUGH IMAGES

The Lithuanian philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas (1993), defines *trace* as a sign that “decomposes the order of the world”, that comes as an “overprint”, and exemplifies: “he who left traces because he wanted to delete them, did not want to say or do anything through the traces he left. He irreparably decomposed order” (p. 64). Since trace is therefore unlike any other sign for Lévinas, its significance does not reside in *making it appear* or even in *dissimulating itself*; it does not belong to phenomenology, but to that which interrupts it. And if there is a sign in the trace, this does not only lead to the immediate past but to a past that is more distant than the entire past and future, “to the past of the Other where eternity is outlined – the absolute past that gathers all times (Lévinas, 1993, p. 66).

Such a Levinasian outlook allows us *to face the images* of others, of *someone* who looks at us as a trace but who also throws us beyond, a species of inescapable appeal. It is presented as a face on display, not because it binds me to what appears but because it holds me hostage to what goes beyond the perceived form. Despite wanting to see, the trace *is up to me*. When the other person in the image looks at me, I am responsible for them without having to rationally assume responsibilities for them, since we are talking here of an ethical responsibility that goes beyond what I do.

Judith Butler (2017) recalls that Lévinas, in *Autrement Qu'Être*, says that suffering is the base of responsibility and that it does not exist without one being held hostage. The alterity as Another that is not “out there” but that constitutes me; yet it does not only constitute me – “it interrupts me, establishing this irruption at the heart of the ipseity that I am” (Butler, 2017, p. 66). It is also important to remember how the notion of trace is linked, in Lévinas’ thinking, to the concept of face. For him, the face is present in the refusal to become content, and therefore cannot be understood, encompassed.

The face refuses possession, my powers. In its epiphany, its expression, it is transmuted from total resistance to apprehension.... The expression that the face introduces to the world does not challenge the weakness of my powers, but the power



of my ability. The face, a thing among so many other things, traverses the form that contains it. (Lévinas, 1961/1980, p. 176)

Thus, insofar as the images are the result of processes that try to possess the other, take their expression, apprehending them (as in mugshots), on the other hand, the trace revealed in violent images, which are the products of violence, opens passages, cracks, to the ethical appeal of the face in what it says, what it expresses. Still a thing but uncapturable, the face traverses the form and transmutes otherness into the repercussion of significance, as something that resists and *speaks*. This difficult equation of the encounter with the face, whether concrete or through images, is challenged in the act of death, potential or real.

As such, Butler (2015) problematized the statute of ethics, not from the positive and commonplace manner in which the concept is understood: ethics can be associated with violence against otherness, including when an image or other word can generate a framework given a priori from a self that names and delimits others. As Butler (2017) questions: “would I be inclined to kill the Other if I did not already have a relationship with them? Is this Other fragile and so my desire to kill arises because of this fragility?”. And he concludes: “Or would I see my own fragility there, and be unable to bear it?” (p. 64).

The answer that Lévinas brings with the sentence “Thou shalt not kill”, expressed in the face, is positioned as an ethical commandment; it is face to face that the temptation to kill and its prohibition exist:

If the face is “accusatory”, it is in the grammatical sense: it takes me as its object, despite my will. This is the foreclosure of freedom and will through the imposition that is its “violent” operation, understood alternately as persecutory and accusatory... I am responsible for what the other did, which does not mean that I did something; it means that I suffer with what was done, and by suffering, I assume responsibility. I stop occupying my own place. (Butler, 2017, p. 66)

Thus, we reflect on how images can adhere to a fight for non-violence, i.e., an ethical battle against revenge, a form of *making* an image, of doing photography, filming the traces so that it becomes possible to meet and honor the face of the other even though it is too late for justice.

There is another fundamental concept in Lévinas’ thinking: that of *Illeité*<sup>12</sup> – the approximation of others to others, to these third parties, is capable of doing justice and interrupting the ethical violence that imprisons Bophana and the other Khmer Rouge victims and looking at the past again. As such, this essay

<sup>12</sup>The vocabulary comes from the Latin term “*jil*” (3<sup>rd</sup> person): Lévinas writes “*Illeité*” as a neologism, which designates the Other (3<sup>rd</sup> person) not as You or another alter ego, which would affirm the transcendence in immanence, but as absolutely another.



brings light to the images, the fragments of the love letters, and the faces and lives of those that the regime insisted on eliminating.

That, which in each trace of an empirical passage, in addition to the sign that it can become, retains its specific significance of the trace, is only possible because of its situation in the trace of this transcendence. This position in the trace, which we call *Illeité*, does not begin in the things, which, in themselves, do not leave a trace; they produce effects, that is, they remain in the world.... The *Illeité* of this He is not the it of the thing that is available to us.... The movement of the encounter does not add to the motionless face; it is in the face itself. The face is itself visitation and transcendence. But the face, completely open, can at the same time be in itself, because it is in the traces of *Illeité*. The *Illeité* is the origin of the otherness of being, in which the in-itself of objectivity participates, betraying it. (Lévinas, 1993, p. 67)

Indeed, in relation to this idea of Levinasian trace, *Illeité*, and ethical violence, we found equally stimulating perspectives traced by Carlo Ginzburg (2008) in his work on the (re)formulation of an *evidential paradigm*: this very old constellation of disciplines based on deciphering signs – and deeply influenced by the studies of Aby Warburg. Here, we propose a contribution from this perspective in light of the physiognomy of this Cambodian woman. Therefore, following Ginzburg, we want to insist here on the dimension of the expression of Bophana's face, that is, to try to grasp, beyond the immobile features of her mugshot, the movement of a subjectivity and, as such, place from the signs that manifest at the surface of her body and face the question of *individual identity* that expressed these signs based on traces and on indexical fragments (beyond her photograph, the story of her love letters to her husband and her arrest and subsequent murder), as well as the collective history of the entire Cambodian people who from 1975 to 1979 suffered immeasurably at the hands of Khmer Rouge and to whom the mugshot of Bophana, today, symbolizes something like a tombstone, like an inscription for the dead.

### **RITHY PANH: THE MEMORY OF THE LIVING AS A TOMBSTONE FOR THE DEAD**

In his admirable book (a work that deserves to be placed alongside the great testimonials such as those of Primo Levi, Jean Améry, or Robert Antelme, to focus only on a crucial rant about the Shoah) *The Elimination* (2013), Rithy Panh offers us some terrifying memories about his childhood during

the rule of the Khmer Rouge regime. This book – written with the help of Christophe Bataille – ought to be read and understood as a fundamental need for a historical memory and above all as crucial complementary material of the filmmaker’s cinematographic work, because without the words of this text and the images of his films, the Cambodian horror would be unspeakable, unimaginable – because how could one believe in such a crime if there was no transmission of these words, these images? Thus, in a specific passage, Panh writes: “the dead are dead and have been blotted out from the face of the Earth. *Their tombstone is us* [emphasis added]”<sup>13</sup> (Panh & Bataille, 2013, p. 135).

“Their tombstone is us”. Words that echo at the same time for both their testifying and poetic force, transforming us (us, the living) into stelae, into the traces of others who are no longer, biologically, in this world, and words that require from us, the living, a fundamental ethical demand, a demand that knows how to encompass the dimension of this suffering and that also knows how to restore the dignity of the dead. But these words show, intensely, Panh’s own work as a filmmaker, archivist, historian, teacher; he follows in the footsteps of his own father Panh Lauv<sup>14</sup>, who was an esteemed Cambodian professor and intellectual until Pol Pot’s rise to power and genocidal regime: “I continue my father’s work. To transmit. To offer knowledge. I sacrificed everything for this work, that occupies my entire life. And I do not get used to it. Not to the images, nor to the words”<sup>15</sup> (Panh & Bataille, 2013, p. 160).

And how can we see the symptoms of this in a state of transformation, the signs of destruction and of what remains of it? How then can extermination be seen in its course, which remains only in testimony, in the verbalized memories of the survivors and executioners, in the traces inscribed in archival documents, as a way to show the world the marks of the crime? How, in fact, do we become accustomed to these images, these words of an immeasurable number of mutilated bodies? Because to show the marks of the crime it is necessary to work on memory, to transmit it despite everything, especially “a memory (which) has still not been sufficiently elaborated” since “the first trial of those responsible (for the Cambodian genocide) only began in 2009 and witnesses’ speech is still under threat” (Leandro, 2016, p. 2).

When his next film, intitled *S-21 – The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (2003), premiered seven years after *Bophana*, Rithy Panh noted passages in their notebook that indeed effectively show his vocation as a transmitter of memory, in which he recognizes very humbly that despite everything, memory should only be taken as a reference – still fundamental but nothing more than a possibility

<sup>13</sup>In the original: “los muertos están muertos y han sido borrados de la faz de la tierra. Su estela somos nosotros”.

<sup>14</sup>Rithy Panh’s father dies of starvation since he cannot condone the crimes and humiliations to which he was submitted by the Khmer Rouge regime. As the filmmaker himself affirms in his book *The Elimination*: “my father is a compass for me: a resister in his own way” (Panh & Bataille, 2013, p. 63). In the original: “mi padre es para mí una brújula: un resistente a su manera”.

<sup>15</sup>In the original: “Prosigo el trabajo de mi padre. Transmitir. Ofrecer conocimientos. Lo he sacrificado todo por ese trabajo, que ocupa mi vida entera. Y no me acostumbro. Ni a las imágenes. Ni a las palabras”.



of understanding the event, and for this it should not be raised to the level of a cult, of an absolute response to all questions since it is

the filmmaker who should find the right measurement. Memory should only be a reference. What I seek is an understanding of the nature of this crime and not the cult of memory. To conjure repetition.... The basis of my documentary work is listening. I do not fabricate events. I create situations. I try to frame the story, as humanly as possible, in the day to day: at the level of each individual...I have never contemplated a film as a response or as a demonstration. I think of it as a question<sup>16</sup>. (Panh & Bataille, 2013, pp. 67-68)

<sup>16</sup>In the original: "Es el cineasta quien debe hallar la justa medida. La memoria debe ser sólo una referencia. Lo que busco es la comprensión de la naturaleza de ese crimen y no el culto de la memoria. Para conjurar la repetición... La base de mi trabajo documental es escuchar. No fabrico los acontecimientos. Creo situaciones. Trato de encuadrar la historia, tan humanamente como sea posible, en la cotidianidad: a la altura de cada individuo... Nunca he contemplado un film como una respuesta o como una demostración. Lo concibo como un cuestionamiento".

The work of questioning is, above all, endless – as is the work of or about testimony –, meaning there are no easy or absolute answers but paradoxes, bifurcations; hence, without a doubt, the philosophical and poetic essence of Rithy’s films: a philosophical essence because his images are always dialectical, complex, and often perforated by a *voice-over* which attempts to deepen and anachronize everything, and a poetic essence because his work knows exactly how “to find the right measurement”, that is, it knows how to measure with the deepest delicacy the act of listening to the words of victims and also to respect the intrinsic duration of the breath from which the intonation of the testimony arises. Poetic content that never adorns the object of its construction with trivial phrases but knows how to touch the wound with the fundamental awareness of its affliction. And as Jacques Derrida (2000) writes, “all the responsibility of the testimony involves a poetic experience of language” (p. 181), a lesson which Rithy Panh apparently knew how to carefully extract.

Panh’s films may be understood as gestures where the humiliated films others who are humiliated, or where the humiliated films those responsible for this humiliation (an enemy or an executioner, for example). And always with the “exposure of the filmed face of humanity” (Leandro, 2016, p. 10) because, as Jean-Louis Comolli (1995, p. 55) says in *Mon Ennemi Préféré*, “cinema can only respond to war through a critique of war. The only thing left to cinema is to give a human face to the enemy”<sup>17</sup>, despite everything. Because Panh’s *méthode* resides in, in front of the perpetrators and their survivors, “filming their silence, their faces, their gestures: this is my method. I do not fabricate events, rather I create situations so that the old Khmer Rouges think about their acts. And so that the survivors can tell what they suffered”<sup>18</sup> (Panh & Bataille, 2013, p. 16). Therefore, his method is his mark, his inscription (his tombstone), but also his wound, the damage inflicted upon him, fossilized.

Concomitant with the reconstruction of the horror from the archives and testimonies, there is also the reconstruction of Rithy Panh himself over the ruins of

<sup>17</sup>In the original: “le cinéma ne peut répondre à la guerre que par une critique de la guerre. Il ne reste plus au cinéma qu’à attribuer un visage humain à l’ennemi”.

<sup>18</sup>In the original: “Filmar sus silencios, sus rostros, sus gestos: ése es mi método. No fabrico el acontecimiento, sino que creo situaciones para que los antiguos jemereros rojos piensen en sus actos. Y para que los supervivientes puedan contar lo que sufrieron”.

the genocide, over its fissure-images. A reconstruction that is only possible through this indelible work of investigation, of pouring over the smallest detail of an image, of a signature, of a word from a testimony – a gesture which helps, Panh tells us, to give back humanity in the very act of learning about the history of that suffering and even of giving back a part of a life defrauded by horror, turning investigative work, just like the bodies and memories of the living, into a *tombstone for the dead*:

But there is another tombstone, the work of investigation, of understanding, of explaining, which is not a painful passion since it fights against elimination.... This work does not exhume the corpses. It does not search for the bad lands or the ashes.... This work does not provides us rest nor peace, but it gives us back our humanity, harmony and history. And sometimes, our nobility. It makes us feel alive<sup>19</sup>. (Panh & Bataille, 2013, p. 135)

Rithy Panh is a survivor and therefore he is a witness in himself, who seeks other possible testimonies to spread the memory of the event they shared. Thus, he knows that for the testimonies themselves to be configured as a method, as a *lesson*, it is necessary to persist in the investigative work with the images, with the archives of horror, because no one ever testifies to themselves but always testifies to another, since the testimony

arises from an agonizing experience, experienced several times as unspeakable of and of which the testimony, from the position it occupied (actor, victim or observer), must give faith to the eyes of others, the eyes of the whole world. So, the testimony gives shape to what it owes – in the sense of an ethical debt – as well as to what it sees. The witness gives, owes, sees and offers faith based on the experience they lived, in whatever way they are involved, towards the other. They give their voice and their look to another, hence its fundamental conflict, its instability so difficult to measure. (Lessa Filho & Vieira, 2020 p. 136)

Indeed, Rithy Panh's method is excellent at capturing the memory of the pain and trauma of genocide, and above all, his best cinematographic works are great montage exercises. As such, in *Bophana*, the Cambodian filmmaker's method is also exercised by a dialectical montage which radicalizes the present itself by transforming it into the past, that is, it strictly follows the montage teachings of some theorists and filmmakers (from Walter Benjamin to Pasolini, crossing Sergei Einstein or Godard) who approached montage as a way of *unearthing* the past, of turning it over, in other words, to decipher its historical legibility. Or as Pasolini wrote in *L'Expérience Hérétique*:

<sup>19</sup>In the original: "Pero hay otra estela, el trabajo de investigación, de comprensión, de explicación, que no es una pasión doliente puesto que lucha contra la eliminación. Por supuesto, ese trabajo no exhuma los cadáveres. No busca las malas tierras o las cenizas. Por descontado, ese trabajo no nos proporciona reposo ni nos sosiega, pero nos devuelve la humanidad, la armonía y la historia. Y a veces también la nobleza. Nos hace sentir vivos".



From the moment of montage ... the present is transformed into the past (the coordinates were obtained through different living languages): a past that, for reasons immanent to the nature of cinema itself, and not by aesthetic choice, always appears as the present (it is, therefore, a historic present).... The montage then performs on the film material ...the same operation that death performs on life<sup>20</sup>. (Pasolini, 1976, pp. 211-212)

<sup>20</sup>In the original: "À partir du moment où intervient le montage ... le présent se transforme en passé (les coordinations ayant été obtenues à travers les différents langages vivants): un passé qui, pour des raisons immanentes à la nature même du cinéma, et non par choix esthétique, apparaît toujours comme un présent (c'est donc un présent historique).... Le montage effectuée donc sur le matériau du film ... la même opération que la mort accomplit sur la vie (quello che la morte opera sulla vita)".

Panh, in his act of montage, proposed an exposition of anachronies: images of a recent past that merge, that are dialectized with the off-screen narration of a certain present to make the images become more *legible*, more comprehensible to the spectator, that is, to our own actuality. It is then that the cinematographic montage of *Bophana* is converted into a dialectic exercise of that present (1996, the year the film premiered), capable of exposing, at the same time, its past (Bophana's face, as well as other destroyed lives between 1975 and 1979) and its future (a certain knowability, for future generations, of what happened in Cambodia dominated by Khmer Rouge). But the montage method used by Panh is also investigative par excellence, because to show a genocide you must know its marks, its fragments, make them visible in some way, make them, therefore, recognizable. Because Rithy Panh knows that in order to understand the past of this horror, it is necessary to reconfigure the present through an act of dialectic, anachronistic montage, making (as so well defined by Walter Benjamin) this image of the past be understood by the present as a crucial, defining event (Benjamin, 2007). In other words, the Cambodian filmmaker makes his cinematographic montage a re-reading of the past based on each present in which he presents himself, in order to reveal, in the space of the images, the space of his history, his politics.

Finally, because this investigative method is also an aesthetic and pedagogical method (Panh says he believes more in pedagogy than justice), which believes in "working with time over time" above all, the filmmaker's method is also a dialectic gesture with images and thoughts, because his films are "decanted by knowledge: they are all based on readings, reflections and investigative work"<sup>21</sup> (Panh & Bataille, 2013, p. 199).

<sup>21</sup>In the original: "Creo en el trabajo a lo largo del tiempo, en el trabajo del tempo ... se decantan por el conocimiento: todas se basan em lecturas, reflexiones y el trabajo de investigación".

### THE TRACE OF BOPHANA'S FACE AND THE MUGSHOT AS A PHOTOGRAPH OF THE PERPRETRATOR

In the mugshot that we present of Bophana, is it possible to reveal the humanity of her face, her physiognomy, without burying the affective marks and suffering from the moment this photograph was captured? With this *firāsa*



(Arabic definition for the details of a physiognomy), we will now try to get closer to the image of the young exterminated Cambodian woman with some concepts about the face, about trace, about the indicial thing that this face bears; and despite the historical and material violence that her face emanates, we also glimpse something of a clamor, of survival in spite of everything.

As already exposed in the previous pages of this article, we know that one of the most well-known concepts, exhaustively worked by Lévinas, is the face, which, since *Totality and Infinity* (1961/1980) until his final interviews, the Lithuanian philosopher proposed that we think about from its ethical aspects that constitute our own humanity and in which the other precedes me and whose alterities are impossible to escape<sup>22</sup>. For Lévinas, it is the face that leaves men naked, not as a mere nakedness empty of meaning but one that frankly and vulnerably exposes us to an ethical outcry:

The way in which the Other presents themselves, having overcome the idea of the Other in me, we call it, in fact, Face. This does not consist in appearing as a subject under my gaze, in exposing itself as a group of qualities that form an image. The face of the Other destroys at every moment and overcomes the plastic image it leaves me, the idea to my measure and to the measure of the *ideatum* – the adequate idea. It does not manifest for these qualities but rather *kath'auto*. Expresses itself. The face, against contemporary ontology, brings a notion of truth that is not the unveiling of an impersonal Neutral, but an expression. (Lévinas, 1980, pp. 37-38)

The face, for Lévinas, must be understood beyond the concrete manifestation of the human face, being able to express itself many times in a kind of evidential paradigm (Giznburg, 2008) even before the concreteness of the human face, but transpiring to the multiple forms of otherness:

Its presence consists in undressing in a way that, meanwhile, already manifested it. Its manifestation is a surplus over the inevitable paralysis of the manifestation. It is precisely this that we describe by the formula: the face speaks. The manifestation of the face is the first speech. Speaking is, above all, a way of reaching behind the appearance, behind its form, an opening in the opening. (Lévinas, 1993, p. 59)

Thus, the frontal mugshot of Bophana (Figure 1), taken a few weeks before the total annihilation of the woman's life, is a type of naked materiality, manifested, *vocalized* (“the face speaks”), and which in the face of the horror caused by perpetrators could, as an image – that is, as material of fossilized time –, cross the temporalities of its destruction and reach our visual and historical field.

<sup>22</sup>For a better understanding between the analyses of mugshots and the concept of face by Lévinas, see the article “Da lágrima à resistência: o clamor ético das vítimas e a potência política do rosto exposto como imagem” (Vieira & Lessa Filho, 2019).



The pages of Roland Barthes' *The Camera Lucida* (1997), in which he theorized about photography and, above all for us, about this evidential (or trace) paradigm existing in an image that he named as *punctum*, are well known:

This time, I am not the one collecting him ... it is him who leaves the scene, like an arrow which comes to pierce me. In Latin there is a word to designate this pain, this sting, this mark made by a sharp instrument; this word would serve me, especially in so far as it already represents that idea of punctuation and the photos of which I speak are, indeed, as if punctuated, sometimes even mottled, with these sensitive spots; these marks, these wounds are precisely points ... for *punctum* is also a sting, a small hole, a small mark, a small cut, and also a throw of the dice. The *punctum* of a photo is this chance that, in it, stings me (but also mortifies me, wounds me). (Barthes, 1997, p. 46)

These marks and wounds of an image are what impelled Barthes to a gesture of writing about photographs (many times in his book, the illustrative photo is of pain or death), because at the same time *moving and mortifying*, it is the reason why we so devotedly push ourselves toward Bophana's face, this mugshot, this photograph, so small that *breaks out* in Rithy Panh's film and that is the spearhead of the text that is constituted here.

And beyond the indeclinable *punctum* of this photograph, the face of this young woman is that which Marianne Hirsh (2012) defined as a photograph of a perpetrator. Hirsh defines the act of taking a mugshot in two moments: (1) from the *gaze*, that is, the instant in which, while operating the photographic device, the agent of violence can register his perpetuating gesture, therefore the photographic act which will officially imprison both on the film and in the prison the individual photographed; and (2) the *look*, the countershot of the perpetrator's gaze, that is, the (often) confronting look of the victim that is discovered in front of a photographic camera<sup>23</sup>. The mugshot of Bophana, who wore black clothing, with the number three hanging around her neck, shows us the objectification of her life written in a perpetrator's photograph: her absolute innocence (after all, her crime was exchanging love letters with her husband, Ly Sitha, and wanting to be with him) perverted here, transmuted into guilt, into inexistent crimes; this image of a few centimeters that offers us the conversion of this young Cambodian woman into nothing but a traitor, which she never was – because not only was she innocent (untouched by political or ideological issues) but also because betrayal does not exist when the supposedly betrayed entity is a genocidal machine.

<sup>23</sup>Vicente Sánchez-Biosca (2019) expanded Hirsch's concept of perpetrator photographs, renaming it *perpetrator images* – after all, we know very well that it was not only in photographs that the perpetrators of violence recorded victims and their crimes.

Bophana's face deeply marked Panh and it was from the very experience of this mark, this laceration, which made the filmmaker turn his lament (for Bophana's face but also for the genocide of a large part of his people) into teaching. This means that Panh knew how to make this suffering face into an act of faith in the testimony, therefore a fundamental experience of reminiscence: to make the memory of horror rise so that it can be re-written, reimagined, and even reassembled indeterminately for the murdered human beings to be remembered, named, recognized both in the present and in the future.

And the reason why this fossil of the temporality of a suffering face was able to reach us (when it should have been destroyed with Bophana's own life) is that this revealed archive refused to become ashes, the absolute reverse shot of all the material evidence. Thus, with the transmissional simplicity of his words, Rithy Panh, in one of the last paragraphs of his memoir, appears to attempt to finish the work with a fair and painful measure about the recognition of the laceration of his own, Bophana's, and his country's history – and which is still what his cinematographic work, from the first moment, also offers us – but without ever abdicating his ethical responsibility and his honorific gesture to the dead: “I explained the world from before so that its bad side does not return. So that it may be in our memories, our books, in the flesh of the survivors, on the tombstones of the missing: and so there it will *remain* [emphasis added]”<sup>24</sup> (Panh & Bataille, 2013, p. 215).

Indeed, Bophana's face is a permanence, something which survived disappearance after all; and it is not a mere chance that the area designated to guard, preserve, and transmit the audiovisual archives of Cambodia is baptized with her name<sup>25</sup>, but a gesture to preserve her history in her own country and to honor and spread her memory across the world.

## FROM FISSURE-IMAGE TO EPISTOLARY GESTURE

The singularity of the letter is also its solitude: unique, each letter is an epistolary gesture which cannot be repeated. And from the most intimate essence of its solitude – because each letter is intended for those who are not there, who cannot be there, and who may never be there again before the eyes of the one who writes it, always offering it to the Other –, Bophana's letters are on their way to aspiring a presence – that of Ly Sitha. While solitary, unique, the epistolary gesture may therefore be in the “secret of the encounter” (Celan, 1960, as cited in Derrida, 2003, p. 13). This “secret”, here invariably mortal, could never be secret, because it has always been *shared* between Bophana and her husband.

<sup>24</sup>In the original: “He explicado el mundo de antes, para que su lado malo no vuelva. Para que esté en nuestra memoria y en los libros, en la carne de los supervivientes, en las estelas de los desaparecidos: y que allí permanezca”.

<sup>25</sup>Founded in 2006, the Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center is the name of the research, conservation, and distribution center of audiovisual and cinematographic material of Cambodia. Its general director is the filmmaker Rithy Panh. The audiovisual center is an official member of the International Federation of Television Archives (FIAT) and the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAPF).

# A

## Towards the Violated Face

In a book about the work of Paul Celan, Jacques Derrida finds, in Celanian poetry, a *schibboleth*, a secret pronunciation that is always dated – because Celan always dated all his poems – and thus brings poetry closer to the letter (or in a more complex manner, understands all of Celan’s poetry as an interminable epistolary gesture) given the impossibility of both existing if not through the gesture of writing and given that the letter, both for the recipient as well as for the sender, will also be dated, inscribed in time. However, Rithy Panh, when inserting Bophana’s letters into a voice-over using archival images of workers in the rice fields during the Khmer Rouge time (Figure 2), not only aims to think of the question of (de)ciphered words but of the alliance itself that arose from those words as a sign of belonging to and the condition of return – because all letters are written to be read and to create another letter returned with an answer.

**Figure 2**

Workers in the Cambodian rice fields



Note. From *Bophana, Une Tragédie Cambodienne*, by R. Panh, 1996.

This dialectic montage which Panh creates fuses two moments of the same temporality because both Bophana’s narrated letters and the archived images used are contemporary, legacies of the same destruction. Superimposing Bophana’s words onto the archived images allows us to see a more amplified dimension of the violence occurred because a love letter was a gesture that was absolutely prohibited by the Khmer Rouge and Bophana wrote them, exposing herself both in the gravity of her heart and in risking her life, while the slave labor in the rice fields was the main motto for the people under the dictatorship of Pol Pot, who made the whole population work, inhumanely, in the countryside. These letters are a way of remaining in a world of deteriorated humanity, which is certainly the reason for the dialectic gesture by Rithy Panh when he contrasts the tenderness of Bophana’s words with the brutality of the mandatory manual labor: to look at the same time at what opens (the life that endures, resists) and what closes (the lives that collapse) during

that time, that suffering. – In other words, Panh knew how to extract the instant in which an epistolary gesture could at once be glimpsed as the inconsolable alliance of dignity and a counterpart to the violence of the forced labor.

Thus, in the documentary, in the voice of a woman, we hear words being pronounced in a voice-over which indicates to us that the narrated excerpts are from Bophana's love letters to her spouse:

To my husband who I miss so much...

How many tears will a woman have to shed the moment she is separated from her beloved husband after only spending two nights together... I lie and wait for your return. I have been waiting to hear from you... terribly... it has been eight days and I still haven't heard anything. I know and understand that you and our two families are worried because of my problems. But what can we do? It is our karma. (Panh, 2004, p. 118)

Then another voice-over, this time by a man, verbalizes Ly Sitha/Deth's response to Bophana's letter:

To my beloved wife...

I am going crazy. I am so worried about your situation that I feel tortured... As you know, you have been accused of serious crimes. On my knees, I implore that you do not give up. There are many changes in the ministry... several defeats... Angkar relieved me of some of my responsibilities, without a doubt because I am no longer seen as someone trustworthy.... I am lost; this is the only word I can use. I have no strength left.

From a man who bears this pain,

Deth. (Panh, 2004, p. 119)

The words of both are snatched away, transported, carried away – and are finally blurred by the cruelty of their murderers, which is what *physically*, definitively, ends the epistolary gesture. The letters are archives of the affection that the lovers experienced and at the same time the brutal annihilation that their lives experienced. Everything that was left to die survives this annihilation and it is for this very reason that we can read the unavoidable names and spellings of Ly Sitha/Deth and Bophana today as a kind of testimony, a tombstone for the millions of other faces and epithets exterminated by Pol Pot and his genocidal regime.

But there is, in the face of the brutality that these letters show us, this survival, this testimony of the temporality of that suffering. If we can, today, read (and hear) the letters exchanged between the lovers, it is without a doubt thanks to a legibility of history that Rithy Panh's film provides us, in the way in which



<sup>26</sup>n the original: “Exposition der Geschichte als Leidensgeschichte der Welt”.

Walter Benjamin (1985) writes in his *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* about the “exposition of history as the history of the sufferings of the world”<sup>26</sup> (p. 179). This legibility of history precisely offers us this complex process of perceiving the past that suddenly collides with our present, that is, survival (this indicial, tiny, trace thing) that is capable of brushing against our visual and historical field when we would never have imagined that this would actually occur, to then reopen, *clamorously*, the cracks in the “history of the sufferings of the world”.

### FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Trace is for many a mere superficial indication, a surface fact. However, if we agree to look at its fragility, this tiny thing, it can also be a manifest and migratory trace, a cry – ethical or historical – of an image emerged from the light of our visuality that resurfaces to *reveal* the visible points of a face, of a physiognomy whose features endure as survival and testimony to the violence perpetrated on them.

Thus, looking closely at its history and trace, we can perceive Bophana’s face embedded in the flesh – in the film – of her mugshot through the writing firmly recorded on the parchment of her skin. Our gaze is still on the arrival of the Illeité that does justice; Panh’s filmic offering positions us as the others of the other, with eyes searching for traces. Our ethical gaze betrays the past, tears with the silence of the victims’ screams; we update in the (un)archived alterities one of those who looks at us in their vulnerability. If with Bophana we escape the elimination of memory, before her face we seek to offer the other time of alterity, as well as attempt to constitute an albeit cracked writing gesture capable of dignifying, beyond Bophana and from Panh’s film, the lives and faces of those who were never named in the Cambodian genocide.

And if from the trace testimonies we dialectically tension the images of the cinematographic montage, what must be celebrated and *at the same time* reunited and repeated is, *at the same time*, what remains of these lives as history and memories that face annihilation, face the transformation of these human beings into a type of nothing, into a form of ashes. At the moment when they wrote their love letters (and with the intrinsic fear and trembling of this act), Bophana and her husband awaited the ashes of elimination. And today, before these images and these words, as well as before the discovery of the archives of the Cambodian genocide, we must guard them – in Illeité, as proposed by Pang – as a tombstone, this irremovable carving that names the nameless people of history, that dignifies them despite everything, almost as if taking them, in this gesture, from the humiliated land where their bodies and skulls were decimated to then reinscribe them, carved or not, in our longest lasting memory. ■



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