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The new post-Khmer Rouge women’s cinema, the horrific intimacy of autogenocide, and the ethics of un-forgiveness

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ABSTRACT
This essay aims, first, to describe the under-theorized recent remarkable renaissance of post-Khmer Rouge (KR) cinema generated by women directors, which emerged after the KR regime (1975–79) murdered nearly all filmmakers and demolished the entire Cambodian film industry; and, second, to analyze first- and second-generation post-traumatic autobiographical (or semi-autobiographical) fiction and non-fiction films that deal with the almost-taboo-ized issue of perpetratorhood within the family (or symbolic family). Defining the term autogenocide will serve as the basis for an analysis of two prominent films that render narratives of encounters with low-ranking perpetrators in the shadow of the ongoing controversy over the remit of the KR tribunal (ECCC) to try only high-ranking perpetrators. Sotho Kulikar’s fiction film The Last Reel (2014) and Neary Adeline Hay’s non-fiction film Angkar (2018) propose postgenocide ethics embodied on a spectrum of forgiveness from aporetic reconciliation to un-forgiving. It is through this latter inclination towards un-forgiving that second-generation women’s cinema subverts the first generation’s reconciled attitude towards the perpetrators, and, most importantly, the perpetrators’ denial and lack of accountability and atonement. Thus, the new wave of Cambodian women’s cinema advances the possibility of cinematic creation of ethical communities, moving Cambodia towards a culture of accountability.

This essay has two aims: first, to describe the under-theorized remarkable renaissance of post-Khmer Rouge cinema generated by women directors that emerged after the Khmer Rouge (KR) regime (1975–79) murdered nearly all filmmakers and demolished the entire Cambodian film industry. This recent new wave includes films such as Roshane Saidnattar’s Survive: In the Heart of Khmer Rouge Madness (L’important c’est de rester vivant, 2009), Lida Chan’s My Yesterday Night (2010), Sao Sopheak’s Two Girls against the Rain (2013), Marina Kem’s Bonne Nuit Papa (2014), Lida Chan and Guillaume P. Suon’s Red Wedding (Noces Rouges, 2014), Inès Soethea’s Rice (2014), Sotho Kulikar’s The Last Reel (2014) and Beyond the Bridge (2016), and Neary Adeline Hay’s Angkar (2018). Second, it aims at analyzing first- and second-generation post-traumatic autobiographical (or semi-autobiographical) fiction and non-fiction films that deal with the almost-taboo-ized issue...
of perpetratorhood within the family (or symbolic family). Focusing on films that present the survivors’ direct confrontations with low-ranking perpetrators (former neighbors or family members) carries ethical implications in regard to current Cambodia, in which the public sphere is replete with ongoing controversy over the remit of Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia for the Prosecution of Crimes Committed during the Period of Democratic Kampuchea (ECCC) to try only high-ranking perpetrators. Since 2006, the ECCC seems to have broken collective amnesia and repression of the trauma of the genocide through testimonies heard during the trials of the three high-ranking KR leaders, who were sentenced to life imprisonment. However, because of the decision not to try low-ranking perpetrators, the battle over Cambodia’s historical past and social-political future continues both in the public sphere and, remarkably, in women’s cinema. Does the spectators’ juridical imaginary enable the ECCC to function as an imaginary replacement for the vast number of low-ranking perpetrators who will never be tried?

The first part of the essay will define the term autogenocide. Based on the Derridian conception of forgiveness, in the next two sections I will analyze two prominent films that render autobiographical (or semi-autobiographical) narratives of post-survival confrontation with low-ranking perpetrators that depict the extraordinary situation of the horrific intimacy enabled by the autogenocide: Sotho Kulikar’s fiction film *The Last Reel* and Neary Adeline Hay’s non-fiction film *Angkar*. Analysis of the confrontations with low-ranking perpetrators that the films present will reflect on the differentiation between the first- and second-generations’ negotiations with the Derridian conceptualization of forgiveness/reconciliation. In the conclusion, the ethical questions that these films propose and the filmmakers’ inclination towards un-forgiveness vis-à-vis the perpetrators will shed light on the contribution of women’s cinema to advancing the cinematic creation of ethical communities, moving Cambodia towards a culture of accountability.

**Autogenocide**

The Cambodian autogenocide is different from other major genocidal catastrophes of the twentieth century (from Indonesia, Rwanda, and Sierra Leone, to former Yugoslavia) because the enemy was not a foreign other, but a member of the same imagined community, sharing not only the same origins but also the same ethnicity, language, and religious belief. In the Cambodian autogenocide, those whom the perpetrators wish to eliminate are not others whose strangeness makes them wary, but those whom the génocidaires know best: their family members and nearby neighbors. Thus, as the relationships between the survivors and the low-ranking perpetrators in the films that will be analyzed below prove, autogenocide is an intimate crime. It is inspired not by estrangement, anxiety, or ignorance, but by the closest possible relations and confidential knowledge. The victims—especially when naive, passive, and easily overpowered—arouse not empathy, but revulsion, and the perpetrator’s impulse is to first exclude them, similar to what one feels toward one’s abject or disease, and then to exterminate them. The complexity entailed within this convoluted inner differentiation between the perpetrator’s hated-other-within-oneself and the-self-devoid-of-otherness might be one of the causes for the KR’s policy of total elimination by smashing (*kamtech*) those others-within, labeled as enemy.

The American philosopher Claudia Card, analyzing the central harm of genocide as a form of “evil,” introduces into this context the notion of social death (2003). Her novelty
in putting social death at the center of genocide emphasizes the “relationships, connections, and foundational institutions that create community” (2010, 238). Robin May Schott further explains this notion:

The particular evil of genocide … is … “social death,” which … focuses not on the physical destruction of a group, but it harms the “social vitality” of the group, the relations of family, community, and intergenerational relations that give meaning to one’s identity and links one to both past and future. (2011, 10)

Undoubtedly, this view is amplified in the context of autogenocide. Forty years after the genocide, in which two million Cambodians perished, a quarter of the population at the time, the films show that survivors continue to feel the deep rupture of the social fabric. This feeling of “social death” is exacerbated because former KR cadres still exert considerable power in Cambodian society. They are to be found in all walks of life and in many cases lead their lives alongside their former subjects whose family members they may have killed.

Motivated by the epistemophilic urge to find the truth about the autogenocide as well as to raise the issue of low-ranking perpetrators’ accountability and responsibility, second-generation women’s cinema proposes a direct confrontation between the first-generation survivors and the low-ranking perpetrators. Transcending the differences between semi-autobiography and autobiography, between real and symbolic families, and between fiction and non-fiction films, both The Last Reel and Angkar tell a familial silenced story, based on the first-generation’s post-traumatic experience and exposed through the second-generation’s mediation, the intimate horror of the autogenocide enables various kinds of confrontation between both generations and the perpetrator. Made after the ECCC’s 2014 verdicts, in both films it is the woman filmmaker, a member of the second generation, who, following the encounter, proposes a negotiation with reconciliation. As will be described below, The Last Reel, embracing aporetic reconciliation, embodies one end of the reconciliation spectrum, while Angkar, spotlighting the arduous task facing the survivors in differentiating between their “camp-self” and “post-camp self,” embraces the other: total rejection of reconciliation.

**Un-forgiveness/reconciliation**

In his seminal work “On Forgiveness” (2001), Jacques Derrida puts forth a notion of forgiveness based on a radical purity. For Derrida, “forgiveness forgives only the unforgivable” and “forgiveness must announce itself as impossibility itself” (32–33). Striving to avoid the useful mystification, abusive rhetoric, in-authenticity, corruption, and trivialization of forgiveness, and the (mostly made by the nation-state) calculated transactions of reconciliation that inevitably entail conditions agreed to in advance, Derrida emphasizes the contrast between responsible ethics and irresponsible politics that stands at the heart of his thought:

Each time forgiveness is at the service of a finality, be it noble and spiritual (atonement or redemption, reconciliation, salvation), each time that it aims to re-establish a normality (social, national, political, psychological) by a work of mourning, by some therapy or ecology of memory, then the “forgiveness” is not pure—nor is its concept. Forgiveness is not, it should not be, normal, normative, normalising. It should remain exceptional and extraordinary, in the
Derrida stages the aporia between a conditional forgiveness, which he associates with reconciliation, and a pure forgiveness arising from a Levinasian unconditional ethical injunction. He stresses that pure forgiveness is an effect of relations and differences based on these poles, the unconditional and the conditional, and that these poles are heterogeneous, irreducible, and indissociable.

Given that “the concept of the ‘crime against humanity’ remains on the horizon of the entire geopolitics of forgiveness” (30), Derrida claims that “forgiveness must engage two singularities: the guilty (the ‘perpetrator’ …) and the victim. As soon as a third party intervenes, one can again speak of amnesty, reconciliation, reparation, etc., but certainly not of pure forgiveness” (42). Elaborating and repeating this creed, Derrida contends: “Only the dead man could legitimately consider forgiveness. The survivor is not ready to substitute herself, abusively, for the dead” (44). “What I dream of, what I try to think as the ‘purity’ of a forgiveness worthy of its name, would be a forgiveness without power: unconditional but without sovereignty. The most difficult task, at once necessary and apparently impossible, would be to dissociate unconditionality and sovereignty” (52; italics in the original). Breaking what he regards as a dangerous cathectis, Derrida uses the metaphor of the abyss to indicate the site of responsibility. I suggest that this radical reworking of a basic Levinasian term, finally described as metaphor, is highly pertinent to the Cambodian autogenocide:

There could be, in effect, all sorts of proximity (where the crime is between people who know each other): language, neighbourhood, familiarity, even family, etc. But in order for evil to emerge, “radical evil” and perhaps worse again, the unforgivable evil, the only one which would make the question of forgiveness emerge, it is necessary that at the most intimate of that intimacy an absolute hatred would come to interrupt the peace. This destructive hostility can only aim at what Levinas calls the “face” of the Other, the similar other, the closest neighbour, between the Bosnians and Serbs, for example, within the same quarter, the same house, sometimes in the same family. Must forgiveness saturate the abyss? (49–50)

As the analysis below shows, although Derrida proposes a sharp differentiation between forgiveness and all related themes such as regret, excuse, reconciliation, and amnesty, what I call aporetic reconciliation, which characterizes The Last Reel, is derived from his argumentation in regard to the aporia that stands at the heart of pure forgiveness. Since for Derrida ethics makes unconditional demands, he argues that in politics the negotiation of the non-negotiable will lead to ethical responsibility. In other words, the aporia is the experience of responsibility. Thus, what looks like an impasse hanging over an abyss in relation to the aporia-based reconciliation in this film, in fact provokes thinking along new paths.

**The Last Reel: the fictional encounter and aporetic reconciliation**

Sotho Kulikar’s The Last Reel is a post-genocide melodrama that presents an intra-family encounter with the KR perpetrator. As such, the following analysis aims to question and demonstrate the different ways by which this new Cambodian fiction film, which stages the ECCC in the background, presents the ghastly tension embodied in reconciliation with the within-the-family perpetrator. Reflecting on fiction films’ ability to
express the collective unconscious, *The Last Reel* provides an imaginary dramatic resonance to the wide range of interconnected psycho-social taboos which, inevitably, are not accessible to non-fiction filmmaking.

The film’s plot presents Sophoun (Ma Rynet), the rebellious daughter of a tough army colonel, who, ignorant of her country’s past, lives her life for the moment, hanging out with a local gang and the “big brother” of the gang, Veasna (Rous Mony). When her father, Colonel Bora (Hun Sophy), returns home with another proposal for an arranged marriage, to a general’s son, Sophoun flees her home and seeks refuge in a derelict cinema. There, she is shocked to discover an incomplete 1974 melodrama from pre-KR times starring her mother (Dy Saveth). The cinema’s elderly projectionist, Vichea (Sok Sothun) tells her that this melodrama, entitled *The Long Way Home*, is about a prince who falls in love with a beautiful peasant girl, Sothea. On the day before their wedding, she is kidnapped by the prince’s evil brother, but a peasant wearing a mask saves her. The evil prince uses black magic to impede their long trip back home. Overcoming all kinds of dangers and obstacles, the girl and the masked peasant fall for each other, but as they near her home, she understands that she must choose between the peasant who saved her life and the good prince. She chooses the prince. Sothea is played by Sophoun’s mother, who was a film star during the pre-KR period but now suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder and is desperately ill.14 The projectionist, whom Sophoun mistakenly refers to as the director of *The Long Way Home*, tells her that the last reel is missing. Aware of her striking physical resemblance to her mother at her age, Sophoun is convinced that she can save her mother by recreating her on the screen. She insists on reprising her mother’s role and entices her close friend, Veasna, to play the masked peasant. With the help of Vichea, Sophoun re-makes the missing last reel of the film.

The original film was shot at Tonle Bati, a lakeside site about thirty km south of Phnom Penh. At home, her mother for the first time tells her what happened later in Tonle Bati, which during the KR period was a labor camp they had been deported to. She and the director of *The Long Way Home*, Sokha, were in love, but someone informed the KR cadres that he was a film director and he was sent for reeducation. “Everybody knew he would be killed and Sothea died at the same moment,” she tells her daughter. “Your father saved my life. He was a KR cadre at the camp.” To protect her, he gave her a new name, Srey Mom. Sophoun, who thinks that Vichea is Sokha, her mother’s beloved, tells her that he is alive, but the mother recognizes Vichea as Sokha’s brother, who, by informing on Sokha to the KR, sent him to his death. At the cinema, Vichea confesses to Sophoun that the missing reel is in fact not missing. Confirming her mother’s tale, he tells her that his brother was the director, he was the scriptwriter, and that both were in love with Sothea. His brother played the prince and he played the masked peasant, and when he first saw Sophoun he thought it might be “a chance to re-make the ending in the way I’d always wanted” (i.e., Sothea would prefer the masked peasant over the prince). He tells Sophoun that in Tonle Bati he was tortured until he informed on his brother, Sokha, to the KR, but after his brother’s death he could not win Sothea’s love. Near the memorial stupa in Tonle Bati,15 where they reenact the last scene with Sothea/Srey Mom, Sophoun’s father (Colonel Bora) confesses to her that he was ordered to kill him: “I killed the one person, the only person, your mother ever loved and she does not know.” They both cry and Sophoun says: “Dad, it’s the past. Maybe she doesn’t need to know.”
At the premiere of *The Long Way Home* in 2014, after forty years Sophoun tells the audience that they shot a new ending and that *The Long Way Home* is a tribute to both the director, Sokha, who was murdered during the KR period, and the scriptwriter, Vichea (who is not present). A cut to Vichea shows him in the Buddhist temple he recently joined, where his hair is shaved before he prays at the *stupa*. The next shot shows Sophoun’s mother, Srey Mom, dressed as Sothea, looking at Vichea and silently participating in the ceremony. Then she is shown sitting in a canoe on the lake where in the past she used to sing. This new final scene is being screened at the premiere while the camera shows the entire family. They sit together and with tears watch the mother playing her role and hear the applause of the audience as the film ends.

As this detailed description of the melodramatic plot and its narrative trajectories reveals, *The Last Reel*, a film made by a second-generation director as a tribute to her mother, does not adhere to the Derridian radicalism. Rather, it proposes aporetic reconciliation with the perpetrators, based on irresolvable aporias. Negotiated through encounters with the perpetrators after thirty-five years, some of the past’s secrets are disclosed (i.e., that the father, Colonel Bora, was a KR soldier and that Vichea betrayed his brother to the KR), while other secrets are kept (that the father murdered the man his wife loved). In order to negotiate the inter-diegetic tensions that affectively and emotionally engage the spectator in the film’s ethics of aporetic reconciliation, *The Last Reel* constitutes a distinction between the two perpetrator figures—Vichea, who is defined as a one-time-event collaborator-turned-perpetrator and Colonel Bora, who, regardless of his remorse in relation to his family, expresses no repentance towards other victims and thus is represented as a KR perpetrator.

This distinction between the two perpetrator figures is set through flashbacks to the scenes of perpetration, that, similar to the entire film, are shot on location. Vichea’s torture is presented in hyperbolic visual and emotional intensity that unavoidably evokes the spectators’ identification and thus, subverting previous conceptualization, emphasizes collaboration as an enforced subject position. Thus, Sothea/Srey Mom’s presence at his initiation into Buddhism, after he revealed the secret of betrayal and murder, signifies the choice made by the “one-time collaborator” as a form of individual salvation. In contrast, the flashback to Sokha’s murder by the colonel shows him sitting near a desk, busy with his notes and indifferent to the prisoner being beaten. Though he says “I was ordered to kill him,” the next scene presents him at the killing field, at night. The anonymity of the victims and the routinization of emotionless murder (hitting the kneeling, blindfolded, and handcuffed prisoners from behind and leaving the place without looking back) characterizes the colonel as a heartless perpetrator who committed crimes en mass.

Thus, keeping the secret of murdering Sokha does not mean reconciliation with the past, but rather aporetic reconciliation. In fact, despite his confession to his daughter, the nefarious effects of his violent personality subvert any future normality inside the family. This is the most subversive element of *The Last Reel*. The film’s reflection on the horrific situation of a KR cadre who betrayed his own family means breaking social taboo and shame. However, keeping the remorseful perpetrator within the family and protecting the secret (the truth remains unknown to the mother and Sophoun’s younger brother) becomes more subversive in retrospect because of the ways the film represents the prevalence of KR ideology, values, and rhetoric in current Cambodian society. In the past, the shift in the positioning of the father as Sothea’s savior-turned-husband instead
of the man Sothea loved is made possible by the institution of forced marriage and his status as a low-ranking cadre. At present, the colonel’s behavior inside and outside his family is still powerful and violent (Figure 1).

One scene is particularly significant in portraying the colonel as a perpetrator, totally trapped by KR indoctrination embodied in his behavior and rhetoric: Escorted by an armed soldier, he enters the old cinema house in search of his daughter. When the soldier, who looks like a hit man, sees Vichea entering the cinema, he blindfolds him under the colonel’s order, ties his hands behind his back, and takes him to a deserted lot far from the city center. There, when frightened Vichea swears he has no information related to Sophoun’s whereabouts, the colonel threatens him by using a highly infamous KR slogan: “If I find out you know anything else . . . to keep you is no gain.” This scene, which in terms of mise-en-scène and action looks like a typical scene from a crime movie, exposes the KR mentality as having infiltrated every aspect of Cambodian lives and is strongly felt forty years after the genocide. Thus, while acknowledging the situation by which, in spite of admitting that the horror placed inside the family still prevails and its beneath-the-surface tension threatens to erupt, the aporetic reconciliation accepted by the colonel and his daughter becomes the only available option.

The Last Reel’s obsession lies in examining the contradictions that animated the manipulable, producible post-genocidal morality conceived as such by the new, young, generation. Struggling with the contradictions inherent to the Cambodian post-autogencide period, exacerbated by the intergenerational knowledge gap in relation to Cambodia’s history, The Last Reel aspires not to provide closure or cathartic relief, but—based on the “hysterical” text of excess in the film-within-the-film and melodramatic spectacle—a necessary historical truth. By establishing a more nuanced understanding of the genocide’s evils, totally unknown to the young generation, it transcends the horrific

Figure 1. The general at the stupa in Sotho Kulikar’s The Last Reel. Courtesy of Andy Brouwer (Hanuman Films).
situation of revealing a KR perpetrator within the family, thus producing and sustaining the contradictions that keep the fragile normalcy of the future.

It is worth noting here that melodrama and cinema melodrama research during the 1970s and 1980s (from, for example, Thomas Elsaesser 1972, to Linda Williams 1984, 1998, to Ben Singer 2001), point to the (American) genre’s traditional cinematic codes: imploding and dysfunctional families; suffering women; overwrought emotion; sensationalism, hysteria, and pathos; and moral polarization. Though it is interesting that the origin of the melodrama as a genre in the West was implicated in the class struggle, a thorough analysis of the difference between Western and the Cambodian melodrama is beyond the scope of this essay. However, acknowledging the intense and expressive forms of realism and affect in Cambodian melodrama, two major, interconnected differences that are crucial to defining the film’s relation to the past are immediately discerned: First, The Last Reel’s presentation of morality ruptures the Western melodrama’s moral polarization and defies a clear characterization of good and evil. Second, the film undermines the definition of victimhood. Focusing on actual as well as imaginary survivor-perpetrator encounters, The Last Reel proposes a melodramatic ethics that goes beyond victimhood and the spectators’ emotional identification with the victim.

The Last Reel’s excessive style and twisted symmetries and upheavals serve to present two families whose lives are burdened with secrets and deadly betrayals. Moreover, it attests to the power of cinema as a trigger for a drastic change in current Cambodian society. It is the film-within-the-film that forces Sophoun, her mother, her father, and Vichea to confront the secrets kept since the war. The film’s subversive stance also has to do with symbolic processes—the intimacy of horror enables on one side a literal fratricide (Vichea and Sokha), and on the other, a symbolic fratricide (the colonel and Sokha). Moreover, the genre allows for the collaborator-turned-perpetrator to be captured within a mirroring and doubling unstable dynamic that symbolizes the autogenocide: Vichea is his brother in the imaginary post-genocide life of the cinema (reshot in the last scene). The Last Reel proposes a familial intimate constellation that attests to the enormous unresolvable difficulties still taking place inside the Cambodian family. Overinvestment in horrific taboos and shame and the compulsion to break them mean, finally, that the ethics of aporetic reconciliation is the major venue the second-generation advocates for coming to terms with both the past and the future.

Angkar: the non-fictional encounter and un-forgiveness

In contrast to The Last Reel, Neary Adeline Hay’s non-fiction film Angkar proposes a radical Derridian conception of un-forgiveness. The film describes how after over forty years living in France (where the family fled following their stay of a few years in a refugee camp on the Thai border), Khonsaly Hay, the only survivor of his family, returns to the village of Ta Saeng (in north Cambodia), where he was subjected to four years of forced labor, starved, tortured, and survived day-to-day anxiety and near death. There, he meets the Old People who were his torturers; the camp’s guards, perpetrators, and collaborators (who participated in criticism sessions, supervised the hard labor in the rice fields, etc.); and the collaborator-spies (schlops). The filmmaker (and scriptwriter), a member of the second-generation who was born out of a forced marriage, accompanies her father. Acknowledging the suffering of her father caused by low-ranking perpetrators, the film
reflects on the two generations’ disparate attitudes towards the perpetrators, as well as on the intergenerational complexity triggered by this disparity.

Although other women directors’ films (such as Red Wedding) present scenes of confrontation with low-ranking perpetrators, Angkar is unique in that it is based on continuous meetings and confrontations. Neary Hay, being Khonsaly’s daughter, received the perpetrators’ permission to film the sequences of the meetings with her father during their visit to and stay at the village. Thus, the heart of the film is built on sheer verité scenes that she shot as the cinematographer, creating an unnatural eerie “home-movie-with-the-perpetrators” film.\(^{21}\)

This eeriness is revealed from the first minutes of the film. The opening scene takes place in almost total darkness. A blurred figure of a man shot from behind is seen walking, his white shirt illuminated from time to time by a ray of light (probably from a flashlight he is holding). His voice-over in Khmer is heard: “It was chaos. There were no ID papers any more, no legal system, no doctors, no property ownership, no intellectuals, no currency, no memories. The village was called Ta Saeng. I thought I would live there forever. It was year zero. The beginning of a new era.” Following a cut, the film’s title, Angkar (literally in Khmer, “The Organization”), written in huge red bold letters, appears on the entire cinematic screen. This design, I suggest, is an act of naming that stands against the supreme stratagem of the Communist Party to propagate its omnipresent terror by concealing the identity of its leaders. Only in 1977 were Cambodians finally told that Angkar, which was running the country, was in fact Cambodia’s Communist Party. Reflecting on the invisible leadership, this is also a meta-reflection on cinema’s power to disrupt the invisible. Since Angkar had no face and there were no posters of Pol Pot on village or town walls, the emphasis of the huge letters of “Angkar” is also pre-emptive of the film’s strategy of naming the perpetrators (especially those not seen in the film but known to be in the village, like the cannibals,\(^{22}\) the throat cutters, and the executioners). In this, the film meta-reflexively declares cinema’s powers in establishing a visual confrontation with evil. The red color refers of course to danger; thus, together with the act of naming, it serves to break Angkar’s terror, still felt in the village.

In its use of the red color, the film stages the intergenerational complexity by which the director expresses her full empathy with her father’s psycho-geographical journey-of-return, while simultaneously subverting his mindset in regard to the perpetrators. This complexity is worsened by the exceptional circumstances of shooting. In contrast to the confrontations in the films that interview Big Perpetrators like Nuon Chea and Duch (such as Rob Lemkin and Thet Sambath’s Enemies of the People: A Personal Journey into the Heart of the Killing Fields [2009] and Rithy Panh’s Duch, Master of the Forges of Hell), in this film the talks take place in the presence of many people, over food, drink, the sharing of memories, and laughter. Simultaneously, as the aged perpetrator’s following comment during a conversation that takes place in one of the first scenes, for example, proves, fear and uneasiness are still prevalent:\(^{23}\)

KHONSALY HAY. I heard you were a collaborationist spy.
PERPETRATOR. Yes. I was with Chorm.
KHONSALY HAY. Is the throat-cutter still alive? … What’s his name?
PERPETRATOR. Moeung San. The executions took place in the next village.
KHONSALY HAY. Yes. That’s right … Is the executioner still alive?
PERPETRATOR. Yes, today he is deputy head of the village.
KHONSALY HAY. Right now?
PERPETRATOR. Yes. But he is illiterate …
KHONSALY HAY. His name is Mei Sang, isn’t it?
PERPETRATOR. Moeung Sang.
KHONSALY HAY. Hmmm … Moeung Sang
PERPETRATOR. No one must know I told you.
KHONSALY HAY. Of course not.

Furthermore, Angkar’s poetics is grounded in both establishing un-forgiveness and the protagonists’ identities-of-return. Two cinematic strategies are conspicuous. First, the film structures two parallel narratives: of the father, heard in the voice-over in Khmer, and of the daughter/filmmaker, heard in the voice-over in French. Their non-linear narratives intertwine throughout the film, combining inner monologues; her reflections on the landscape, on her and her father’s identities, and the actions in the village (meetings, a local wedding); his painful recollections; and their shared and distinct memories. The double narrativization is a major strategy for the filmmaker/daughter to honorably oppose her father’s reconciled behavior as well as strictly oppose the perpetrators’ refusal to be engaged with questions regarding their deeds. The confrontation, in other words, is taking place through the film’s cinematic language not less than through the father’s encounters with the perpetrators. Thus, for example, Neary Hay uses silence during the first meeting with the perpetrators so that we do not hear what they say to each other. Instead, we hear a soundtrack built on a shout mixed with a sound of elegy, symbolizing the horror and the dead (the father’s entire family, eleven people, were murdered, as well as the other millions).

In another scene, her narration intervenes and presents the option of un-forgiveness even more directly: In this scene, the spectator just hears the voice of a perpetrator who sits behind a curtain. The only person shown during the entire talk is the father:

THE PERPETRATOR. Ask your questions, I am not afraid. I am not scared of anything. There is no blood on my hands. My hands are clean. And I was only a spy for a year.
THE FATHER. You were told what to do and you did it? You had to report on what people were saying?
THE PERPETRATOR. I know there was a spy under the house.
THE FATHER. Ma Nol used to say, “especially at night, don’t talk.”
THE PERPETRATOR. It’s true, it was so hard back then … Sorry to interrupt, but even we Old People … Couldn’t the Old People speak? But if we said something bad … you were finished. I understand.
THE FATHER. A word too many …
THE PERPETRATOR. Better to say nothing! I couldn’t even eat my own chickens! Yes, I ate them in secret.
THE FATHER. Did you realize you had rice? Did you think about the New People when you were eating? As a spy, you were better off than we were, though.
THE PERPETRATOR. Seriously, no. I promise you, it was worse for us.
THE FATHER. Worse for spies than for the New People?
At this absurdist stage, in which the perpetrator totally denies the terrible starvation of the New People, the editing cuts without further presenting the perpetrator’s response. The next scene shows the father in a barber shop getting a shave. The closeup on the old, huge, razor at his neck, which opens this scene, symbolizes the hidden violence of the previous dialogue, as well as serves as a visual reminder of the throat-cutting prevalent in the past. The filmmaker’s voice-over is heard over the shaving scene, honorably subverting the last meeting: “There was still a fearful respect when you spoke of them. As if the victim you’d been had never entirely left you.” The double-narrative structure not only presents the daughter-father and second-first generation relationships, but, through the editing, also contrasts the perpetrators’ reactions of evasion, lying, indifference, and denial with a woman’s voice, and with her objection revealed through her film.

The second strategy that builds un-forgiveness is Hay’s insertion of very short (two-second) closeups of the faces of the perpetrators into various scenes. In this way she uses the editing to stress her perspective on her father’s camp-self, still haunted and partially obsessed by the perpetrators despite all his efforts to reconcile and be redeemed by avoiding feelings of vindictiveness. The exposure of the perpetrators’ faces engraved on the cinematic screen contrasts with their un-repentant anonymity and stresses her objection to reconciliation-based-on-the-intimacy-of-reunion. Through these insertions, Hay expresses her disagreement with her father’s declaration to the perpetrators that although he lived and suffered in the village, he is not interested in revenge, he believes in Dharma, and is happy to see the Old People again. Even when the father sadly reflects on what seems to be survivor’s guilt (“I’m a survivor among millions of dead”), with which his daughter identifies, the editing cuts to a two-second closeup of one of the perpetrator’s faces, emphasizing once again that the frightening closeups are a form of confrontation that constitutes for the spectator the obligation to remember and not to reconcile.

Neary Hay’s building of a polemical narrative through counter-editing aims at refuting, contradicting, opposing, and disproving the perpetrators’ lies. She also uses editing to constantly enhance the eerie feeling of the “home-movie-with-the-perpetrators”: the camera shows from a distance a man washing himself in the yard outside a shack. He is filmed from the back, but when the next cut shows his thin wrinkled torso and white-haired half-bald head in closeup, it is revealed he is probably in his late 80s or early 90s. Sitting on a stool, he uses a bowl several times to take water from a bucket and pour it over his head, scratching his skull. Over his slow climbing of the stairs into the hut, the spectator hears Khonsaly Hay’s first question, confirming that the old man, whose name will be revealed only in the film’s coda, was a collaborator, a spy (schlop) for Angkar. The next scene, inside the house, shows the survivor and the perpetrator sitting very close to each other on the floor so that the schlop can whisper in Khonsaly Hay’s ear the names of some of the killers. After their tête-à-tête about the killings and cannibalism, the conversation is shifted by the survivor to more personal directions:

KHONSALY HAY. So were you at the execution?
THE PERPETRATOR. As I said just now it’s the only time I’ve been at an execution.
KHONSALY HAY. How was he killed?
THE PERPETRATOR. How was he slaughtered? I saw blood spurting …
KHONSALY HAY. What did they hit him with?
THE PERPETRATOR. I didn’t dare look.
KHONSALY HAY. You’re not sure what the weapon was?

THE PERPETRATOR. A pickaxe handle. They also hit him with bamboo sticks.

KHONSALY HAY. Ahmmm

THE PERPETRATOR. They executed him and threw him in the ditch.

Then the editing cuts to a few shots of Khonsaly Hay in another yard in the village, washing himself the same way the collaborator-perpetrator did. Though it is obvious that the conditions in the village do not permit running water and indoor baths, the similarity between the two scenes is appalling.

Later, her father refers to one of the old women in the village as Mother, caresses her cheek and hugs her. Back then she supported him and once risked herself by giving him food (though she finally turned him in to his torturers and almost certain death). The spectators hear Neary Hay’s voice-over saying: “When you spoke about passive resistance, the woman you called Mother, I couldn’t understand. For me there were only ever victims and their executioners.” Over hazed, almost abstract filming of the water and trees from the perspective of a drone, such that they look like dots, Neary Hay’s voice is heard again (Figure 2):

One and a half to three million dead, out of a population of seven million, in three years, eight months, and twenty days. Cambodians killed Cambodians. Like a man killing his brother, so that the shame of it made the whole family keep the crime a secret. This silence, which passes on no memories, is the shame within which I grew up. The silence of a people’s collective shame.

These scenes are emblematic of the complexity of the intimacy of horror, shown through the film’s staging of the survivor-(low-ranking)perpetrator encounter, but—reflecting in various ways on the autogenocide tragedy of sameness and difference—the scenes’ revelation of past methods of killings and the perpetrator’s confession undoubtedly emphasize the confictual views that this complex form of transmission engenders. This begins with the uneasy visual resemblance of the bathing scenes and ends with contrasting meaning-making through the voice-overs. Regardless of the

![Figure 2. Khonsaly Hay and his perpetrator-mother in Angkar. Courtesy of Christophe Audeguis (The Cup of Tea Productions).](image)
intergenerational tensions, cinema’s empowerment of both the survivor and second-generation subjectivities is remarkable. Further, in contrast to other violent contexts, most notably the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, in which the categories of perpetrators and victims were reorganized and mixed, the challenge that the ethics of un-forgiveness poses, as Neary’s voice-over emphasizes, is the sheer differentiation between the survivors and the perpetrators. In this regard, it is the drone’s perspective that is both a hopeful symbolic reminder of Cambodia’s beauty in the midst of the violent cruelty depicted and a symbol of the impossibility of the gaze to mediate intelligibility. In other words, the ambiguity of transmission is reflected through the (apparently) “no one’s point-of-view” shots. Pointing through cinema’s meta-language to the intergenerational tensions enables the second-generation daughter/filmmaker’s un-forgiveness and non-reconciliation to become a form of vicarious mourning.

Finally, in one of the last scenes of the film, over a landscape of the village at night, a series of cuts presents the faces of the perpetrators and collaborators on the cinematic screen. Their roles are printed with big red letters over their faces while her father’s voice announces their names and roles: “Chief of District, Ta So; Pat Bourreau, executioner; Égorgeur Moeung San, Throat Cutter; Ta San, Collabo, collaborator.” The spectators, who were not familiar with their names or with their specific roles until this scene, and who got to know them partially through the filmed meetings, are now confronted not only with the naming, but with their total exposure. The faces that were part of semi-friendly talks or appear for a few seconds, flickering as a brief nightmare, are bestowed through this noticeable infographic truth with the responsibility they mostly refused to accept; the intertwining of the father’s narration and the daughter’s cinematic language gives extra weight to her “tagging” of the perpetrators as such.

Conclusion

My analysis of two prominent films made by women filmmakers reveals that, in a way similar to the other films of this new wave, Cambodian women’s cinema, which is mainly a second-generation cinema, is dedicated to exposing the autogenocidal memory of the first generation, silenced for forty years. The renaissance of women’s filmmaking after nearly all the directors, actors, actresses, novelists, and technicians were murdered during the KR regime and the cinema industry was demolished is based on the acknowledgment that the ECCC cannot function as an imaginary replacement for the vast number of low-ranking perpetrators who will never be tried. Thus, the films that deal with low-ranking perpetrators become a major contribution to Cambodian society. Using meta-cinema (the reconstruction of the film-within-the-film in The Last Reel and the subversion of the “home-movie” in Angkor) as a major tool for confronting low-ranking perpetrators, both films propose post-genocide ethics embodied on a spectrum of forgiveness: on one end of the spectrum, negotiated by the second-generation woman/filmmaker, aporetic reconciliation is depicted as the only solution that might keep the family intact despite the threats that the secrets of perpetratorhood present beneath the surface of the apparently rehabilitated family life (as in The Last Reel); on the other end, promoted by the second-generation woman/filmmaker, un-forgiveness subverts both the first generation’s reconciled attitude towards the perpetrators, and, most importantly, the perpetrators’ evasion, denial, and lack of accountability and atonement. In both cases, the identity of the
daughter (woman/filmmaker) as a Cambodian who became familiar with her past is built through the conflicts that the horrific intimacy with the perpetrators imposes.

Finally, striving to construct Cambodia’s national consciousness, both fiction and non-fiction films advance the possibility of cinematic creation of ethical communities, moving Cambodia towards a culture of accountability.

Notes

1. Some films depict the consequences and ramifications of the genocide on modernization, such as Kalyanee Mam’s A River Changes Course (2013). Women are also involved in various other projects: For example, Ung Loung co-wrote with director Angelina Jolie the script for First They Killed My Father (2017), based on her autobiographical novel; Kauv Sotheary is the scriptwriter and leading actress in Chhay Bora’s Lost Loves (2010); eight short-short films made by women are part of the One Dollar Project: http://onedollar.bophana.org/en/.
2. Susan Rubin Suleiman (2002, 283) terms the child-survivor the “1.5” generation.
3. In 2010, Kaing Guek Eav (nicknamed Duch), the head of the government’s internal security branch (Santebal) was found guilty of crimes against humanity, torture, and murder. In 2012, his sentence was extended to life imprisonment (Case 001). On 2014, Nuon Chea, the chief ideologist of the KR and the Prime Minister of Democratic Kampuchea (“Brother no. 2”, second-in-command to KR leader Pol Pot, who was the general secretary of the party during the Cambodian genocide and “Brother no. 1”), and Khieu Samphan (Cambodia’s head of state, “Brother no. 4”), were found guilty of crimes against humanity and grave breaches of the 1949 Geneva Conventions and sentenced to life imprisonment (Case 002). In 2018, the court found both of them guilty of genocide against the Vietnamese people and the Chams. See https://www.eccc.gov.kh/en/keyevents.
4. Following the demand to try lower-ranking perpetrators (Cases 003 and 004 against regional leaders Meas Muth, Yim Tith, and Ao An), in 2010 Prime Minister Hun Sen expressed his notorious disapproval of the notion that the court’s remit extended beyond Case 002, and threatened an inevitable civil war if this should happen. See https://www.cambodiadaily.com/news/hun-sen-warns-of-civil-war-if-eccc-goes-beyond-limit-78757/.
5. I chose to use the term “autogenocide,” following Ervin Staub (1992, 7, 191), from among other terms, such as “politicide” or “ideocide” (Arjun Appadurai [2006, esp. 1–13]) because it seems to me to be the most appropriate term when considering the extraordinary Cambodian context. My use of autogenocide henceforth in this article is not evaluative, and using the concept means addressing the Condition Inhumane of the extermination of the other who pre-revolution was myself.
6. In Panh’s film Duch, Master of the Forges of Hell (Duch, le maître des forges de l’enfer, 2011), Duch says: “The KR word kamtech has its own meaning. It doesn’t only mean kill, it means kill and leave no trace, to reduce to ashes, so that nothing left remains.”
7. In Angkar, for example, after the film’s title appears, we hear a woman’s voice-over saying in French: “I was three months old when we left Cambodia. I grew up in France, in your silence.”
8. On the relation between the concept of Karma, the Cambodian king’s power to pardon, the 1996 pardon of Khmer Rouge leader Ieng Sary, and the tribunal see Ashley Thompson (2004). Thompson’s analysis of the formation of the Khmer geobody has particular resonance in the discussion of perpetratorhood suggested by these films. For a thorough analysis of linga-yoni and male-female binarism see Ashley Thompson (2016).
9. Being aware of the enormous difficulty faced by survivors who attempt after the event to narrate their experience as victims, Primo Levi (1959) distinguishes between his “camp-self” and his “survivor-self.”
10. Sotho Kulikar is the first Cambodian woman to direct a fiction film since Ung Kanthouk (10,000 Regrets [Mouy Mern Alai, 1970s]).
11. The film won The Spirit of Asia Award at the 2014 Tokyo Film Festival and was submitted to the 88th Academy Awards.

12. This is the local term for a gang member who is not considered a gangster. (Thanks to Kulikar Sotho for this information).

13. Dy Saveth starred in over one hundred Cambodian films throughout the 1960s and 1970s until the communist takeover in 1975, and later from 1993 to the present.

14. She is seen lying in bed, incessantly repeating KR slogans like “Do not speak, do not listen, do not know, do not ask . . . We are the youth, we are liberated, and on a bright road, the road of Revolutionary Communism!”

15. Helen Jarvis (2002) notes that since Buddhism was restored as the official religion of Cambodia, stupas have been built in various wats around the country (97–98). In Trapeang Sva, Tonle Bati, a new stupa was built in 1999.

16. The script was written by Ian Masters.

17. During my conversation with Kulikar Sotho (on November 26 2017), the director told me that she was a very young child during the KR regime, and that her mother refused to talk about the past until the film’s premiere. In many respects, her mother’s thirty-five-year silence became the reason for making the film.

18. During the KR dictatorship, and especially after 1978, more than five hundred thousand young women were forced into marriages, often with KR cadres. The circumstances of these forced marriages have been suppressed and covered up for four decades. See, e.g., Trudy Jacobsen’s (2008, 223) analysis of the rituals of marriage. Jacobsen indicates that the correct way for husbands and wives to call each other was mit p’doi (comrade husband) and mit prapuan (comrade wife). See also Peg LeVine (2010). Based on her anthropological research, the author relates to arranged marriage’s conventions and other cultural rituals, but hardly emphasizes the horror of the phenomenon of forced marriage and rape.

19. “To keep you is no gain to destroy you is no loss” (Dith Pran 1999, 13).

20. Old People is the KR term for the class of peasants from rural areas who were considered the privileged class of Base/Ancient People, pure and unstained by what the KR regarded as the corruption of capitalistic city life. This stands in contrast to the New People, the KR term defining the new class of Cambodian civilians, like Khonsaly Hay, which, broadly speaking, included anyone who was from an urban area and thus impure, perverted by Western ideas: the middle class, intellectuals, and artists (as well as ethnic minorities). Deported from the cities to the countryside on April 17 1975, they were made a new people.

21. Her father stayed in the village and met his former acquaintances. From time to time she joined them with a small video camera. It was just the two of them, with no extra film crew. (Personal conversation with the director via Skype on August 17 2018).

22. Who removed human livers and regularly drank the bile from the gallbladders of their victims.

23. The director told me that the atmosphere was similar to that felt in Lars Von Trier’s Dogville (Netherlands/Denmark/UK/France/Finland/Sweden/Germany/Italy/Norway, 2003). Moreover, a young man showed up and told her he would disclose all the truth and tell her “who did what,” but when she came to the meeting they set, he disappeared (Personal conversation via Skype on August 17 2018).

24. The bystander-perpetrator-victim triangle, mainly constituted by Raul Hilberg (1993), is the most common model referred to in the huge literature on genocide and its aftermath. On the entanglement and differentiation of these social categories/subject positions see, for instance, Dominick LaCapra’s reflection on the Goldhagen debate (2001, 114–140), Zygmunt Bauman’s ([1989] 2011) analysis of the situation in which some individuals occupied all three roles, and Tristan Anne Borer’s taxonomy of victims and perpetrators following the TRC trials (2003, 1088–1116).
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