

Post-Khmer Rouge Documentary and the New Paradigm in Genocide Studies

Vicente Sánchez-Biosca

REVIEW OF: Raya Morag, *Perpetrator Cinema: Confronting Genocide in Cambodian Documentary* (London/New York: Wallflower & Columbia University Press, 2020). 283 pp. ISBN 978-0-2311-8509-7.

P*erpetrator Cinema: Confronting Genocide in Cambodian Documentary* is the third installment in Raya Morag's trilogy on violent pasts and trauma as seen through the camera lens.¹ In it she argues that the Cambodian cinema of the last two decades sheds light upon some of the major paradigm shifts in genocide studies, particularly with regard to the figure of the perpetrator. What is more, in spite of its modest scope, this set of documentaries issued after the complete destruction of the film industry under the Khmer Rouge comes to epitomize what is unimaginable in any other film production dealing with mass murder.

In contrast to the 20th century pattern modelled on the Holocaust and revolving around survivor testimonies and victim trauma,² more recent approaches have reframed genocide studies in relation to other cases and concerns. These, although of course heterogeneous, have determined a shift in perspective on account of a series of historical developments: the establishment of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions in the wake of South Africa's TRC, which resignified the notions of justice, forgiveness, and reconciliation; the constitution of the International Criminal Court and its first trials (ICTY and ICTR); as well as the introduction – certainly controversial – of colonial crimes into the genocidal agenda, in particular the extermination of indigenous peoples and slavery. If these developments constitute a turning point,

- 1 The first part of this trilogy was *Defeated Masculinity: Post-Traumatic Cinema in the Aftermath of War* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2009), followed by the influential *Waltzing with Bashir: Perpetrator Trauma and Cinema* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013).
- 2 Perhaps nothing captured the spirit of that period better than the expression 'era of the witness'. See Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

Journal of Perpetrator Research 4.1 (2021), 250–256
DOI: 10.21039/jpr.4.1.103 © 2021 by the Author



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

it is because they broadened the temporal range of mass violence to be studied, from the distant past to contemporary and ongoing conflicts.³

The decision to question the adoption of the iconography and conceptual vocabulary of the Holocaust to tackle new corpora is at the basis of Raya Morag's argument to address the cinematic production dealing with the Khmer Rouge genocide. In that sense, the documentary films she focuses on introduce an unprecedented scene which is – she insists on that point repeatedly – unthinkable in the case of films about the Holocaust, namely, the direct confrontation of the perpetrator with the survivor. This encounter, which is also recognizable in the latest trends of perpetrator documentary around the world and often involves the reenactment of the past crimes by the perpetrators themselves, had never before acquired, in Morag's view, such a degree of systematicity as in post Khmer Rouge cinema.⁴ Consequently, beyond their significance as individual films, the body of documentaries analyzed by Morag contribute to rethinking the relationship between the actors in a genocidal context (perpetrators and victims), as well as to reexamining pivotal concepts such as trauma and testimony, at least with respect to their canonic use by scholars such as Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub or Annette Wieviorka, whose horizon of reflection was the Holocaust. Morag's argument is thus consistent, as it is in line with her discussion of the films produced in Israel in the context of the Second Intifada in *Waltzing with Bashir*, a corpus that was also different from the Holocaust paradigm. In this sense, Morag convincingly argues that Cambodian cinema puts forward methodological issues to reevaluate how we think about mass violence in the 'era of perpetrator'.

Structured in four chapters followed by an epilogue, Morag's book starts by defining perpetrator cinema

as a new phenomenon in world cinema that in many respects [...] sheds light on the 21st century emergence of the new psychological-social-political era of the perpetrator and [...] a new perpetrator-oriented discourse to be considered by genocide studies as well as cinema studies.⁵

3 The recent debates around Raoul Peck's HBO 5-episode series entitled *Exterminate all the Brutes* (2021) are perhaps a symptomatic crystallization of this new paradigm in visual culture.

4 Of course, this is the case of the much acclaimed *The Act of Killing* (2012) and *The Look of Silence* (2014), both directed by Joshua Oppenheimer. But the tendency can also be found in numerous films such as *The Gacaca Trilogy* (Gacaca Productions: 2002-2009) and *My Neighbour, my Killer* (Gacaca Productions: 2009) by Anne Aghion among many others.

5 Raya Morag, *Perpetrator Cinema: Confronting Genocide in Cambodian Documentary* (London/ New York: Wallflower & Columbia University Press, 2020), p. 42.

Chapters 2 and 3 develop the two strongest arguments that sustain Morag's thesis on how Cambodian cinema epitomizes the new era: the duel paradigm and the concept of moral resentment. She does so with the help of an in-depth analysis of selected films.⁶ Chapter 4 introduces an incipient but growing issue in film research as it deals with atrocities, i.e., the gendered genocide and its relationship with traumatic memory. Forced marriages as well as group rape are still among the least studied crimes committed by the Khmer Rouge.⁷ In the Epilogue, Morag concludes by addressing the question of ethics and revisits her basic arguments.

II

In the same vein as new explorations on perpetration, but pioneering cinema studies from that point of view, Morag emphasizes the insufficiency of the classic lexicon forged by thinkers such as Primo Levi, Hannah Arendt, Raul Hilberg or Christopher Browning to account for recent forms of genocide and other instances of mass violence. At the close of the 'era of the witness' (which Wieviorka dated back to the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem in 1961), perpetrator cinema emerges as a new phenomenon in world cinema. What is specific of the post Khmer Rouge documentary is the tragic *agon* between perpetrator and survivor, an encounter that takes place in the context of the preliminary debates, constitution, investigation, hearings, and successive sentences of the Khmer Rouge tribunal (the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, ECCC).

Morag's analysis of her corpus hinges theoretically on the above-mentioned duel paradigm, in which perpetrator and survivor confront

6 Film analysis is present all through the book, even in the theoretical passages and this is a true asset of the book, since the reader can immediately see Morag's theses 'in action' and verify how they are born out in visual and aural terms. Some crucial works closely analyzed in the book are: *About my Father*, dir. by Guillaume Suon (Bophana Production, 2010), *Angkar*, dir. by Neary Adeline Hay (The Cup of Tea, 2018), *Behind the Gate*, dir. by Jean Baronnet (Bophana Production, 2003), *Breaking the Silence: Sexual Violence Under the Khmer Rouge*, dir. by Lov Sophea (Handa Center, 2017), *Bitter Khmer Rouge*, dir. by Bruno Carette and Sien Meta (Bophana Production, 2007), *Looking for Vorn*, dir. by Thet Wambath (2009), *Red Wedding*, dir. by Lida Chan and Guillaume Suon (Bophana Production, 2012), *Three Weels*, dir. by Kavich Neang (Anti-Archive, 2015), although many other references show the rigor and breadth of Morag's work.

7 Teresa de Langis is perhaps the scholar who has pioneered this field of research in the framework of genocide. See De Langis, Teresa ed., *Like Ghost Changes Body: The Interviews on the Impact of Forced Marriage* (Phnom Penh: Transcultural Psychosocial Organization Cambodia, 2015).

each other, and on the moral resentment paradigm. The former is thought in terms of a unique scene of in cinema, composed by the copresence of these two figures, and paves the 'way into theorization and comprehension of the first generation's encounter with the perpetrator'.⁸ Focusing on the objectives of that dramatic and often traumatic clash, Morag states: 'Interweaving the Why and the How, the testimony is aimed at repudiation of the perpetrators' reactions of denial: the new form of duel testimony expresses the responsibility of double transmission through the ongoing encounter'.⁹ This thesis is substantiated by her detailed study of celebrated films such as *Enemies of the People* (directed by Thet Sambath and Rob Lemkin, 2009) or *Duch, the Master of the Forges of Death* (directed by Rithy Panh, 2011), but also by less known productions, in which all echelons of perpetrators are interviewed.

The thesis of the moral resentment paradigm opens up a complex theoretical argument to tackle sensitive issues such as forgiveness and reconciliation. To begin with, Morag rejects Friedrich Nietzsche's and Max Scheler's concept of resentment as a negative feeling and turns instead to Jean Améry, for whom resentment appears as a moral response to the unbridgeable gap between the pressure of the present, which imposes forgetting and forgiveness, and the 'moral time of the victim,' trapped in the past.¹⁰ In keeping the wound open as it represents the confrontation between perpetrator and survivor, Cambodian cinema would give a blunt response, in Morag's interpretation, to the idea of reconciliation. She concludes proposing what she terms as 'unvindictive moral resentment,' insofar as resentment is no longer considered as an unconscious and uncontrollable impulse, but as a sentiment that contributes to elevating the dignity of the victim.¹¹

III

Perpetrator Cinema is a milestone in the study of trauma as represented in cinematic terms and opens up a fruitful perspective to rethink genocide beyond (or outside) the Holocaust paradigm. In addition, this study has the virtue (from a cultural point of view) of focusing on films produced and released outside the mainstream film industry and made often

8 Morag, *Perpetrator Cinema*, p. 143.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 184.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 33.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 88.

outside its standard style. By the same token, Morag's book deepens and further develops her previous contributions to perpetrator studies and perpetrator trauma in particular, clarifying that perpetrator studies is by no means 'a counterdiscipline to victim studies but a reflection on the complex intertwining of the two disciplines in the twenty-first century'.¹²

Two questions – linked respectively to a minor and a greater issue – merit further debate. The first is Morag's acceptance of the term 'autogenocide' (borrowed from French journalist and specialist in Southeast Asia Jean Lacouture) to refer to the crimes committed by the Khmer Rouge. The expression is, in rhetorical terms, obfuscating in and of itself, since it conflates subject and object of the murders and reveals the difficulty (even the *malaise*) of tackling the concept of genocide in political terms, that is, outside the 1948 Genocide Convention, which limits itself to racial, ethnic, and religious grounds. This is not – or shouldn't be – the case any longer in a period in which ideology has been systematically integrated into definitions of mass violence, as Leo Kuper pointed out a long time ago.¹³ Of little importance in itself, the category of genocide (as well as crimes against humanity) has recently been applied to broader cases, including colonial violence, revolutionary processes and class hatred, which could eventually call into question the status of the Gulag and the Chinese Cultural Revolution, to name just two examples. The issue is delicate, but the proposal by the sociologist Daniel Feierstein to argue that the Argentinian dictatorship called by the perpetrators a 'national reorganization process' (*proceso de reorganización nacional*) should be put under the umbrella of genocide is telling. Feierstein's reasoning stresses the idea that the Argentinian process aimed at systematically destroying a substantial part of a society as such. Certainly, the argument is debatable, but reasonable in sociological terms if not acceptable currently in criminal terms. This is the reason why Feierstein speaks of genocide as a *social practice*.¹⁴ The use of the term 'autogenocide' is perhaps illustrative of these heated debates.

The second issue is a major one. In calling attention to post-Khmer Rouge genocide cinema, Morag challenges the predominance of Western references to account for all kinds of mass violence. In her own terms,

¹² Morag, *Perpetrator Cinema*, p. 187. In my opinion, calling perpetrator studies a discipline sounds a bit excessive. It seems to me more reasonable to consider it as a field or, better, an angle to the crime scene that has to be integrated in the analysis to get the whole picture of mass murder.

¹³ Leo Kuper, *Genocide: Its Political Use in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981).

¹⁴ Daniel Feierstein, *El genocidio como práctica social: Entre el nazismo y la experiencia argentina* (Buenos Aires: F.C.E., 2011).

Cambodian cinema proposes a new set of non-Western post-genocide perpetrator-oriented conventions.¹⁵ It is because this statement is so compelling that we would have expected a more developed conceptual apparatus featuring non-Western perspectives in Morag's discussion, accompanying the voices of Jacques Derrida (and his deconstruction of the notion of forgiveness), Jean Améry, Giorgio Agamben, and Jacques Rancière among others. Let me give an example: In his seminal book *Why Did They Kill?*,¹⁶ anthropologist Alex Hinton sought to explain how the Khmer Rouge ideology permeated Cambodian society so as to take advantage of local traditions (in a sort of Lévi-Straussian 'bricolage' procedure). This is significant, since mechanisms such as 'disproportionate revenge,' translated by the Khmer Rouge in terms of class hatred (the urbanite and cultivated professionals and civil servants rechristened by the Khmer Rouge as 'new people'), as well as their perverted, but efficient, reinterpretation of the family tradition (to reconvert it into a superior family-class commune) or the Buddhist conception of death as something non-definitive would have been worth developing. These efforts of reappropriation are particularly meaningful for understanding how the Khmer Rouge succeeded in destroying the basic principles of Cambodian life (family, rural community and Buddhist religion) not only by inspiring terror and fear, but also by providing an appearance of continuity with traditional values. This syncretism could help to understand how immemorial institutions were transformed into their opposite with the support of a part of the rural population.

IV

In sum, *Perpetrator Cinema* is a major contribution to the consolidation of a new critical paradigm both in perpetrator studies and in documentary cinema. As such, the book merits to be read and discussed in forums beyond the discipline of cinema studies, where its influence is already felt. And yet, despite its ambitiousness, this paradigm still lacks a nuanced lexicon to talk about new forms of genocide, as Michael Rothberg puts it in his latest book *The Implicated Subject*.¹⁷ Developing

15 Morag, *Perpetrator Cinema*, p. 22.

16 Alexander L. Hinton, *Why Did They Kill? Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

17 Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).

and nuancing this vocabulary can only be done by paying special attention to the insufficiency or even inaccuracy of certain words and concepts developed to explain the Holocaust. Forgiveness, reconciliation, truth, and justice threaten to become buzzwords and irrefutable principles at the same time. Further elaboration and recontextualization is needed in order for them to become helpful resources to untangle new forms of catastrophic events and to reconsider past ones. It goes without saying that this is the case for the key word in this debate: perpetrator. Gone are the days where concepts like 'the gray zone', collaborators, accomplices, or bystanders among others were deemed satisfactory to account for genocides. *Perpetrator Cinema* makes a decisive step forward in pointing out that the missing picture, if any, is the one of the encounter between perpetrator and survivor.

Vicente Sánchez-Biosca is Senior Professor of Visual Culture at the University of Valencia (Spain) and leads a research group (REPERCRI) on crime scenes turned into sites of memory. His latest book is *La muerte en los ojos: Qué perpetrán las imágenes de perpetradores* (Alianza, 2021).