

## Perpetrator Images, Perpetrator Artifacts: The Nomad Archives of Tuol Sleng (S-21)

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### *Abstract*

This essay examines the production and circulation of the *mug shots* of the detainees generated by the Khmer Rouge machinery at the centre of torture S-21 (Phnom Penh). When they were taken, these images played a key role in the process of identifying, repressing and killing those considered enemies during the regime of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979). Yet, since the collapse of the Khmer Rouge, these photographs have been used to denounce their creators as if the pictures had kept no trace of their original intention and were reversible. With this purpose they have migrated from museums and art galleries to the stage, from illustrated books to the cinema and from the Internet to the criminal court devoted to judge the former KR leaders. I argue that the stories of the phenomena must be told in close relationship: firstly, the deciphering of the archive of *mug shots*, that is, the discovery of the negatives, the extraction of new prints, and their availability; secondly, the circulation through different public spaces and media; thirdly, the changes in the geopolitical context in such a controversial region for the international equilibrium. Although these three levels do not evolve into a mechanical dependence, they are intricately interrelated and prove the advantages of articulating technological, semiotic, and political uses of an archive that concentrates within it human pain experienced at the very core of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### *Victims under the eye of the enemy*

Visiting former prisons, commemorative museums and memorial centres has familiarized human catastrophe tourists with galleries, exhibition spaces and walls populated by faces from bust photographs or close-ups of victims, some face-on, others in profile. Such mosaics suggest a special synthesis of the singular and the collective: if the accumulation of faces underlines the statistically monstrous dimensions of the crime which such places recall, then each image asks us to take each man or woman as individuals. As we pass through lobbies, corridors and halls decorated with photos we waver between embracing the horrific body of images (where each victim is reduced to the almost imperceptible) and

submitting ourselves to the shock of wide-open human eyes observing us from a fateful moment suspended in time.

However, this balance does not last long in these exhibitions and the individual gives way to the collective as none of the faces has the physical proportions to hold our attention on its own. As a result, the museums' double strategy ends up favouring the immense nature of the crime in detriment to personal tragedy, maybe fearing a tendency towards the anecdotic; emphasizing the numbers involved highlights the murderous condition of the executioners. In any case, we are dealing with unknown victims, and even if their condition does not depend on sheer numbers, this increases our consciousness of the suffering of each individual... while letting them as distinct natures to fade into the absolute.

The Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Phnom Penh (Cambodia) was conceived in this way from the outset, the government of the Vietnamese occupation in 1979 striving to denounce the crimes of the Khmer Rouge (1975-1979). A former school converted into a secret detention and torture centre under the direct control of the security police (Santebal), its cells were intended for the 'traitors' of the regime. While the country closed itself off completely from the outside world due to economic failures of the regime and new international threats, conspiracy paranoia took over the leaders and Tuol Sleng (known as S-21) became one of the vital centers of the repression.

This said, the gaze with which all these human beings contemplate us comes not from their victimhood; on the contrary, their condition is pervaded by their status as traitors. It is this which was being registered by the camera. In effect, when they lifted their eyes to the camera and this framed them, they were guilty. We are then surprised by the ease with which, without changing the contents in the frame, our perception of these people is transformed into its opposite. How is it possible to ignore the steady bureaucratic eye which created these photos? The scene itself is, however, well documented historically: the prisoner, transported by truck, thrown by the captors into a place where the blindfold covering the face was pulled off in order to take the snapshot. Our hypothesis is that this brief moment of the photographic shot must have left a trace on the photo itself. No matter how insufficient this may be, we must reflect on the original impulse which brought the archive into being, the eye which engendered it.

In other words, these photographs belong to a particular genre of images that Marianne Hirsch has termed 'perpetrator images,'<sup>1</sup> such as those scenes shot by Joseph Goebbels' teams in the Warsaw Ghetto in May 1942 and the photos of Abu Ghraib which so shook American and international public opinion in 2004, or the most recent videos of the beheading of hostages issued by ISIS militants. So with this in mind, what characterizes a perpetrator image? What differentiates aspects of the *mug shots* exhibited in Tuol Sleng?

<sup>1</sup> See Marianne Hirsch's last version of this concept in *Nazi Photographs in Post-Holocaust Art*, in Id., *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*, Columbia University Press, New York 2008, pp. 127-152.

The perpetrator images, according to Marianne Hirsch's standard definition, are photographic, cinematographic images or those in any other format, taken by those who commit criminal acts against humans. In this sense, such images may be considered part of the mechanism of destruction, embodying the point of view of the perpetrators of the crime or their accomplices during or after carrying out the violent act against their victims. Intended for the consumption within the group participating in the crime, this circle might be extended to those who share the same ideology or even to the authorities which ordered the act. In any case, the act of dissemination generally confirms the pride of the authors (of the photographs, or the acts, or both) concerning the actions carried out, in such a way that these images have something of the traditional *photo-trophy*. However, on their public dissemination, be this by infiltration, from the *hubris* of the persecutors or an aggressive propagandist approach, as in the case of the ISIS militants, the images find themselves under a different light from the point of view of the historian and for a possible reclamation of collective memory. Thus they are subjected to rigorous analysis, remembering that the taking of the snapshots is an action separate from the act of violence itself, even if, of course, being closely related to it. Correspondingly, these disturbing perpetrator images take on a variety of different forms according to their production, sphere of circulation and the recovery strategies used for other purposes taking place at a distance from the original act.

In this way, the challenges and risks that the consumption of these images suppose come from the physical identification of the executioner and their accomplices they bring about. However, occupying the same physical space of someone does not mean sharing the same feelings or ideology. From this we can infer the importance of some questions: did the perpetrators of the criminal act themselves take the images? Were they intended for propaganda? Which photos or shots were taken following orders and which were arbitrarily taken by the operators? These distinctions, even when apparently about detail, take on a great relevance and may only be answered taking into account precise historical knowledge (if this exists), following photographic study traditions that insist on, although with different terminology and aims, from Walter Benjamin or Roland Barthes, to Philippe Dubois or Susan Sontag, the *indexical* aspect of the photo, that is to say, the registering of an indelible record of an instant or, if we prefer, of the adherence to this. Even having gone over these images with a scalpel with the skill of a surgeon these perpetrator images still retain an inextricable darkness, even maybe as dark as the feelings they inspire.

What is sure is that the circulation of these images in the media, their absorption by memorial museums and webpages, tend to produce a wide range of reactions which go from perverse voyeurism to empathy and analysis. Their use for recuperation of memory thus requires from those who use them an awareness of the mechanisms of rewriting, from the spatial changes (installations, museums, theatre stage) to the incorporation of historical settings equivalent to what philologists would call *critical apparatus* (spatial-temporal coordinates, descriptions, identification of character), taking into account the distancing introduced in the texture of the

photos or films themselves (editing, zoom, colouring, overprinting outlines within the photo or running time, freeze frames, slow motion...) that draw attention to aspects which may have otherwise gone unseen. Each one of these appropriations supposes a different gesture of expression, which leads to not only a modification in the conditions of existence of the original archive, but also a dialogue with previous uses, given that these images widely circulate in the media universe and they have often become icons of human suffering in the collective imagination.

*Enemies: the founding eye*

When they were taken, these perpetrator photos were identifying a fearsome enemy, presumed (later confessed, under torture) spies for the KGB or the CIA (or both at the same time), saboteurs of the revolution or infiltrators in the party. The Khmer Rouge imagination turned S-21 into a prison for high-level communist cadres fallen into disgrace.<sup>2</sup> Along with these a large number of detainees were also executed there (including old people, children and women) whose own destinies had fallen into the web of the conspiracy. One could say that S-21 is the most authentic expression of the Khmer Rouge world view and most probably the only efficient one: their zeal in uncovering, documenting, repressing and exterminating their opponents. To understand this requires penetrating the logic and functioning of such archiving zeal from the point of view of the authors. Which leads us to formulate certain questions: how did the taking of the photos function? In which order were the events recorded? What was the motive behind the documenting of the image of the detainee, bearing in mind that they were to be executed? Why were the records stored? Which other documents make up the criminal archive? On not finding any answers to these questions we are at a loss as to any alternative use for these images.

What we do know is that the prisoners of S-21 had already been condemned to death on their arrival. The *photographic act*, to borrow Philippe Dubois' expression,<sup>3</sup> formed a part of a sequence of actions in a fixed order of inextricable causality: detention, transportation, blindfolded at night with hands tied behind the back, to this enclosure in a deserted city; checking-in through the inscription of the name, measurement and the assignation of a number which was generally placed on the detainee's chest; the snapshot during which the blindfold would be briefly exposed to blinding light; then came transport, shackled with bars, to a communal cell which would be only left for periodical interrogations. The length of these varied according to the importance of the prisoner and his or her resistance, but were meticulously supervised by the director of the prison, Kaing Guek Eav (alias Duch), who scrupulously noted down instructions which

<sup>2</sup> David Chandler, *Voices from S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot's Secret Prison*, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Philippe Dubois, *L'Acte photographique*, Labor, Bruxelles 1983.

would lead to a *satisfactory* confession; this once achieved, his tiny handwriting would decide the moment of 'elimination' which normally took place in the Killing Fields of Choeung Ek.<sup>4</sup>

In conclusion, the *photographic act* was inserted into a calculated chain of events which could not be broken without threatening the power of the Khmer Rouge, as the logic of the leaders and bureaucracy insisted they were dealing with agents of sedition. Seen in this way, the photographs obtained were not documenting suspects or accused, but the guilty. Soon after, these same photographic prints were cropped and cut into a small format to be stapled onto the file made up of the criminal biography of the subject in question. Archiving and storing the files of the traitors was a way of writing the history of the revolution in Democratic Kampuchea.

*Second look: pathos and trauma*

In January 1979 Vietnamese Seventh Division forces entered Phnom Penh finding an apocalyptic scene in their path, recorded by both the photographic and cinematographic cameras of the war reporter Ho Van Thay and his team. The situation had become more complicated since 1977-1978; the Vietnamese-Cambodian war had been set off by the splitting up of the communist block (Vietnam was allied to the USSR while the Khmer Rouge counted on Chinese support). Once the Vietnamese victory had been assured, the occupying forces poured all their zeal into proving that the crimes committed by the Democratic Kampuchea had been the work of sadistic Cambodian leaders, who they compared to Nazism and not Communism. This is why, on 25 January 1979, communist journalists from different countries were invited to Tuol Sleng by the recently formed Popular Republic of Kampuchea; the celebrated East German documentary makers Walter Heynowski and Gerhard Scheumann even received support to film *Kampuchea – Sterben und Auferstehen (Kampuchea, Death and Rebirth)*, 1980) and *Die Angkar* (1981), which included some of Tho Van Thay's images. The Vietnamese strategy consisted of displaying an improvised archive of objects, fetishes and representations (kinds of *objets trouvés* of the barbarism) with which they hoped to present the Khmer Rouge as a gang of criminals who had committed genocide on their own people. For this, the new government went for a strategy of offending the eye and scandalizing the spirit. Their most repellent result was the Museum of Genocidal Crimes, which opened in 1980.<sup>5</sup>

The task of setting up the museum was entrusted to Mai Lam, the director of

<sup>4</sup> Elimination (*kamtech* o *komtech* in khmer, according to transcriptions) means not only to destroy but also to make disappear any trace of the existence of the being (Christopher Bataille, Rithy Panh, *L'Elimination*, Grasset, Paris 2011, p. 135).

<sup>5</sup> Until July 1979, the Cambodian population was not admitted to Tuol Sleng, so that at the beginning of the occupation the Vietnamese strategy was to point to the international socialist press (Cuba, East Germany...).

the Museum of American War Crimes in Ho Chi Minh City (1975), although the Cambodian survivor Ung Pech was formally appointed director. Even after having visited Auschwitz in search of inspiration, Lam's formula was much more visceral, that is: a chamber of horrors. The museum went for putting the accent on the collective, using the details to reinforce the macabre aspects (the exhibition of torture instruments, the metal beds on which they had found prisoners soaked in their own blood, some enlarged photos of victims...). Rather than promoting understanding, the museum had been designed to elicit feelings. Because of this design we find, even today, a near absence of informative materials. The spectator was required to relive the experience in a sort of re-enactment of the trauma, where the horror was staged and cognitive functions ignored.<sup>6</sup> However, other strategies were also put into practice. In 1980 the painter and survivor Vann Nath was contracted with the task of "documenting" scenes enacted in the place graphically.<sup>7</sup> His works describing the horrors of S-21, conceived surprisingly in a naive style, were incorporated into the museum; the following year the same was carried out with the sculptor Bou Meng.

At that time the international horizon was full of highly complex overlapping between diplomatic, humanitarian efforts and associations. The defeated Khmer Rouge, scattered in the jungle, were still recognised by the United Nations and the US as the legitimate government of the country, while Vietnam was still considered as illegal occupation forces. The situation did not get any clearer in the years after the Vietnamese withdrawal in 1989 either: the Paris agreements of 1991 opted for a rhetoric of national reconciliation which recommended prudence with respect to the crimes of the Democratic Kampuchea, while the term genocide remained banned from diplomatic forums. However, other lines of actions were being initiated: in 1982 pro human rights activists David Hawk and Gregory Stanton searched for evidence with the aim of prosecuting the leaders of the Khmer Rouge, founding the Cambodian Genocide Project, while Hawk did the same with the Cambodian Documentation Commission. These activities went on to generate a new way of contemplating the beings photographed by the Khmer Rouge machinery. The ominous archive would take up attention once more.

### *Images, biographies, narratives*

Deep within international diplomacy, with the hope of bringing the leaders of the Khmer Rouge to trial, activists, university projects and private initiatives

<sup>6</sup> Patrizia Violi, *Il visitatore come testimone. Il Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide Crimes a Phnom Penh*, in Maria Pia Pozzato (ed.), *Testi e memoria. Semiotica e costruzione politica dei fatti*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2010, p. 38.

<sup>7</sup> Vann Nath, *A Cambodian Prison Portrait: One Year in the Khmer Rouge's S-21*, White Lotus, Bangkok 1998, p. 100.

started to go about a conscientious gathering together of documents. In 1988 the Cornell University's Microfilming Project, with Judy Ledgerwood and the librarian John Badgley, proposed the setting up of an inventory of the huge amount of existing evidence in S-21, found then to be in an abandoned state. In September 1989 they were authorised to microfilm the abundant available documentation in Tuol Sleng.<sup>8</sup> In 1994 Yale University, under the initiative of Ben Kiernan, established the Cambodia Genocide Program. This opened a local operations centre in Phnom Penh in 1995: the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam). These initiatives found themselves swimming against the tide: threats to stifle the running of Tuol Sleng grew, while the documents not only deteriorated but even went missing; the 1991 Paris agreements and resulting creation of the United Nations Transitional Authorities in Cambodia (UNTAC, 1992-1993) inclined towards putting off any analysis of the genocide until the last of the Khmer Rouge abandoned arms; this would not happen until 1998.

It was in this uncertain atmosphere that the photographers Chris Riley and Douglas Niven proposed cleaning, cataloguing and obtaining new prints of the negatives found in the Tuol Sleng storeroom. For this they founded the Photo Archive Group in 1993. After three years of work, new possibilities of establishing the identity of the victims came into view. These could be individually developed through a series of narrative, museum, literary and cinematic resources on an international scale, freeing representation from the scene of the crime and trauma themselves. As this new horizon opened up, one point – the symbolically charged Tuol Sleng archive – slowly became the focus of attention. To explore each photo, to peel the life-cut-short away from each face and evaluate differences with respect to the others: these were the new tasks. Among the broad range of strategies, one particularly began to gain in definition: to invert the collectivisation of the suffering which had been imposed by the echoing walls of S-21. This gave the victims a fleeting breath of life: calling to us from the half-light of the exhibition space, from the page or from the shadows flickering in a film. The first attempt – bursting into museums and art galleries – posed a moral dilemma: where are the limits of art dealing with human suffering?<sup>9</sup> The second – cinematic narration – aspired to reconstruct the fabric of life which the Khmer Rouge had ripped apart. Two points of view (museum or cinematic), but with a common denominator: to name, represent, and then re-evaluate a period which at that time found itself excluded from the textbooks, out of reach of the courts and even a public expression of mourning.

One of these ways of looking (the third on our list) finds its origins in the

<sup>8</sup> An excellent account of this work from an archivist perspective can be found in the recent book by Michelle Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable: Silence, Memory, and the Photographic Record in Cambodia*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison 2014. See as well Michelle Q. Hamers, *Do Nothing, Sit Still, and Wait for My Orders: The Role of Photography in the Archive Practices, Historiography, and Memory of Democratic Kampuchea 1975-1979*, MA thesis, Universiteit Leiden, March 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Thierry De Duve, "Art in the Face of Radical Evil," in *October*, no. 125, 2008, pp. 3-23.

above mentioned Photo Archive Group. The return of the negatives allowed for the reappearance of what had once gone unnoticed: the differences between the original shot and the clipped document photo on the detainee's file, which eliminated the *background noise* of the setting.<sup>10</sup> A photograph removed from the archive, exhibited in an art gallery, sheds new light: some of the prison exteriors give the lie to the idea that all the photos were taken in the laboratory-room, a background detail, such as a baby's arm invading the lower edge of the photo, reveal that the women were photographed with their offspring, a second detainee bound to the one being photographed documents how the prisoners where tied up... all these details of the *staging*, that go beyond the face being portrayed, enrich our knowledge of the *hic et nunc* in which the identification was carried out. To observe single details means inspecting them as a historical source and the photos serve as a window into the darkness of the structure of death ruling in Tuol Sleng. The human faces then became phantoms projected in the half-light of Gallery Three of the MoMA or in the centre of the Rencontres Photographiques d'Arles.<sup>11</sup> Here each unit, in amplified form and isolated setting, could be scrutinized in not only an irreducible state, but also enveloped in an aesthetic aura. The dissonance was excruciating and some have condemned the curator's lack of sensitivity in showing victims not only from their executioners' point of view but also as anonymous beings.

A very special book came out in 1996, whose<sup>12</sup> title was taken from the Roland Joffé film: *The Killing Fields* (1984). The authors were Riley and Niven themselves.<sup>13</sup> Using the excellent prints obtained, the book invited us to lose ourselves in contemplation of the faces of the victims which filled the pages. The book opened and closed with blocks of plain black, which suggested entering a dark tunnel. This effect aimed at prolonging the hypnotic contemplation of the prints, but in the intimacy of the text. Sitting before these countenances the meditations of Susan Sontag acquired their full potential: "These Cambodian women and men of all ages, including many children, photographed from a few feet away, usually in half figure, are – as in Titian's *The Flaying of Marsyas*, where Apollo's

<sup>10</sup> Despite the fact that original prints were on display on the walls of Tuol Sleng, the quality of the new prints obtained by Niven and Riley allowed for the examination of data which had not been given attention before.

<sup>11</sup> The MoMa exhibition, titled *Photographs of S-21*, took place between 15 May and 30 September 1997 and was consisted of 22 enlarged *mugshots* taken from the 6x6 negatives. Although at that time the photographer Nhem Ein was well known in European circles, the captions indicated 'photographer unknown.' In June of the same year, the Rencontres Photographiques d'Arles presented *S-21: 100 Portraits* curated by Christian Caujolle. A symptom of the effect produced by the MoMa exhibition is the piece by the French-American playwright Filloux, *Photographs of S-21* (1998), in which two of the photos in the exhibition are brought to life one night, <http://playscripts.com/play.php3?payid=220>, last visit 1 December 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Christopher Riley, David Niven, *The Killing Fields*, The Twin Palms, Santa Fe 1996.

<sup>13</sup> In these years the military presence of the Khmer Rouge disappeared preceded by the farcical trial of Pol Pot by Ta Mok 'the butcher' (July 1997); the ill dictator was interviewed by the journalist Nate Thayer and Pol Pot died and was cremated the following year.



knife is eternally about to descend – forever looking at death, forever about to be murdered, forever wronged. And the viewer is in the same position as the lackey behind the camera; the experience is sickening.”<sup>14</sup>

However, this confrontation also has its counterpart: the abstraction, the separation from the source, the removal of the image from its accompanying documentation which also sealed the fate of the observed subject (confessions, notes, biography, sometimes other photos...). What was lacking in this new purely visual even aesthetic setting of the archive was the documented context, which the projects of Cornell, Yale and CD-Cam had been trying to articulate over these years. In the experience proposed by this catalogue-like book as in the exhibitions, the photo is alone: our gaze suspends the person as the *photographic act* suspended it in former times, separating it not only from the sequence of its destruction but also tearing it away from the theatre of its torture. The result is painful, but also transcendent.

### *Bophana as a human counterfigure*

In 1996 the filmmaker Rithy Panh released *Bophana: A Cambodian Tragedy*. This was the first production shot in Cambodia to cover the 1975-1979 period. Panh, a survivor emigrated to France whose family had perished in the labour camps, analysed the Khmer Rouge universe in relation to the civil war it followed (1970-1975) and its memory projection. For this he chose as a heroine a figure he had found in the US writer Elizabeth Becker's account.<sup>15</sup> When sifting through the S-21 documents, she came across a criminal confession... made up of love letters. In her letters the central figure – Bophana – takes on the imaginary identity of a character from the khmer version of Ramayana, Seda, describing the revolutionary society in the allegorical form of the catastrophes evoked in the epic poem.

Bophana was born and raised in the bosom of a family of highly educated academics. At the outbreak of the civil war in 1970, living isolated, she is raped by the soldiers of the forces of Lol Nol, has a child and works for the NGO Catholic Relief Services. She later marries a cousin, at that time a Buddhist monk, who her father had previously come to the aid of. On the fall of Phnom Penh to the Khmer Rouge on 17 April 1975, Bophana flees the capital, while her husband Ly Sitha joins the party under the name of Seth. The two continue as lovers with fleeting unhappy meetings as the party does not permit living together. A falsified travel pass found by the Angkar leadership among Ly Sitha's papers becomes indisputable evidence when Sitha's protector – the minister for trade Koy Thuon – falls into disgrace during an internal purge. On the 19 September 1976, Seth is held in S-21, tortured and officially 'destroyed' on the 18 March 1977; Bophana is ar-

<sup>14</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York 2003, p. 61.

<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth Becker, *Bophana*, Cambodia Daily Press, Phnom Penh 2010.

rested on 12 October 1976 and eliminated on the same day as her lover; each one cannot be aware of the presence of the other in the torture centre.

The film starts with Panh filming Bophana's uncle in the corridors of S-21 as he is seeking to identify from the mosaic of faces his niece's plain and dignified image, before which he relives the memory of her farewell in a Phnom Penh in the grips of panic. From here, the film goes in flashback to this face in a country scene in which the beautiful silhouette of a young girl cycles along a river. The reading of love letters, the chronicle of her loneliness, the persecution and intrigue make this highly educated and fragile being into the emblem of old-fashioned values of the Cambodian spirit which the Khmer Rouge are to wipe out.

Panh captures Bophana's subtle features with his camera as traced by the painter Vann Nath in contrast to the criminal record file which relates the details of her arrest and death. Bophana is for the filmmaker the distillation of Cambodia's sensitive and learned spirit; the very hateful class which the new leaders denominate as 'new people' and whom they must destroy.<sup>16</sup> In short, the image of Bophana is redeemed by the filmmaker; her story having been transposed to a tragic register (Ramayana's), her voice incarnates the Democratic Kampuchea's most hated word, relationship or custom: love – a bourgeois emotion which must be eradicated all cost.

### *The eye of the law*

The final move of the Tuol Sleng archive of faces is that of the staging of the legal process. With the setting up of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) hopes become reality: to put the Khmer Rouge leaders on trial. This was the result of a long process littered with obstacles, whose success was due to the persistent investigation carried out by the DC-Cam. The first case started in 2009 against Duch, the director of S-21, arrested ten years previously, after being identified by the photographer Nic Dunlop. The trial represented an unheard-of event in Cambodian life from the dark period and consisted of a public act of recognition of the victims and an effort to translate juridical action into an instrument of reflection and, in the long term, of national reconciliation.<sup>17</sup>

Without abandoning the old structures nor letting go of the archive strategies discussed above, the victims of S-21 became the basis for a prosecution, with the voices of the survivors and witnesses in support. What is more, the road taken ending in the courts, permeates other spaces which would serve as a sounding box for the accusing voices. While the *mugshots* were passed between the hands of

<sup>16</sup> In contrast to the *old people* (the illiterate country people), the *new people* were the irretrievable remains of capitalism to be wiped out implacably by the revolutionary base. This "social class" was made up of teachers, doctors, nurses, engineers and educated people in general.

<sup>17</sup> The following cases are yet to be settled, however the hopes of an effective sentence is limited. Ta Mok died in prison in June 2006, before the court was set up; Ieng Thirith was declared insane in September 2012; Ieng Sary died while actually on trial on 14 March 2013. Only Kieu Samphan and Nuon Chea, who plead innocent, are the last important leading figures awaiting trial.

families, of those involved in the process and around press offices, they were disseminated on a large scale in the media. One image synthesises this last mutation of the *mugshots*: the one in which some of these photos pass through the hands of the then director of the prison while he interprets them in silence. Caught deliberately by the camera, this meeting of eyes becomes in itself a radical metamorphosis in the functional gaze; Duch, who had once contemplated the files in order to determine the sequence of the interrogations and executions, finds himself before them nearly three decades later. What has dissolved in this time is the fact that they are no longer regarded as enemies, but as victims, his victims. That Duch has pronounced the *mea culpa* in public, asking forgiveness from the victims (whether or not this be sincere) carries with it a change in the social structures clustered around the courts. One could say that with this final mutation all the gazes, eyes, looks that had taken place rekindle a palimpsest of memories, revealing itself for an instant and then immediately fading away: gazes within gazes.

The trial of Duch became a sewer into which illustrious minds drawn: the French anthropologist François Bizot, who had been a detainee in 1973 then only to be incomprehensibly liberated;<sup>18</sup> the filmmaker Rithy Panh, whose film *S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (2003) revolved around all-present, but physically absent, demigod figure of Duch;<sup>19</sup> François Roux, the lawyer who accepted the challenge of defending this tyrant under the condition that he should plead guilty.<sup>20</sup> It was assumed that Duch, as had Adolf Eichmann half a century before, would question us from the shifting frontier that separates, and unites, humanity by its absence. Under Duch's steady bureaucratic eye of yesterday and in the eyes of the accusation today, the archive of faces exercises its power and closes the circle before the same central figure.

### *Artefacts, representations, icons*

The *mugshots* of Tuol Sleng are among the very few objects surviving the time of destruction.<sup>21</sup> These meaning-charged objects make up a nomad archive, one in continuous migration, decomposition and re-composition. Each unit represents a semiotic object whose figuration code we may analyze (scale, angle, proportion, shutter speed...). In the way they have been gathered, the archive offers

<sup>18</sup> François Bizot, *Le Silence du bourreau*, Flammarion, Paris 2011.

<sup>19</sup> Christopher Bataille, Rithy Panh, *L'Élimination*, cit.

<sup>20</sup> See the film *Le Khmer rouge et le non-violent* (Bernard Mangiante, France 2011).

<sup>21</sup> Rachel Hughes, "The abject artefacts of memory: photographs from Cambodia's genocide," in *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2003, pp. 23-44. In reality, memorial museums allow us to combine analysis of photos, a characteristic of art museums, with their consideration as objects, which brings into play the traditions of history and anthropology museums. Also this museum operation doesn't always come with the analysis. See: Paul Williams, *Photographic Memory: Images from Calamitous Histories* in Id., *Memorial Museums: The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities*, Berg, New York 2007, chapter 3.

us an insight into how the Khmer Rouge conceived (that is, looked on) their enemies. But this representation is not enough; a second level takes shape within them: the unrepeatable meeting of gazes, where the object of the photograph shows in a gesture his or her reaction to the gaze of the one who is doing the archiving. In this sense the act of photographing has something of a *performative act* about it; more than describe an enemy, it brings this about; more than opening a file on the detainee, it is “trial by camera” (in photographer Nic Dunlop’s words).<sup>22</sup> The photo takes us back to the moment, but draws everything that happened afterwards into its orbit. Rarely has Roland Barthes’ idea that all photos intone the sentence “he’s going to die” imposed itself with so much force.

But however, these photos-as-archive are also objects. They deteriorate in a cupboard for years, the negatives are rescued to generate new beautiful prints, more eloquent in detail; then they are enlarged to the desired scale and framed, they make the rounds of museums and galleries, letting themselves be stoked like relics and, in a disturbing infection, they pass from hand to hand between the executioners themselves. They are the remains of ‘bare life,’<sup>23</sup> that, although they may become ghostly when they are projected in a funeral cortege,<sup>24</sup> they often take shape, fill the spaces, behave like traces of the past, call to us as a society to recognize them as a material archive.

In a passage from *Shoah* (Claude Lanzmann, 1985), the historian Raul Hilberg takes in his hands a simple yellowing sheet of paper: it is a route plan (*Fabrplanordnung*) of a death train. In this there are the precise times, station names, number of wagons. The historian calculates the distances carefully, projecting them in his mind’s eye on to the imaginary deportation map, to read the hidden codes that hide the crime, as with this railway which, after leaving its load, returns empty. Hilberg not only interprets the document, but also fill the omissions and makes its silences speak. What fascinated him about this sheet of paper was its condition of being original, of which there must be as many copies as there were bureaucrats implicated in the order. As the genuine object that it was, it had been in the hands of a responsible officer who, due to the sheet, was able to carry out his task. Rather than a mere piece of paper, this sheet was a *performative document*: it does not relate the extermination; it produces it. To hold it in your hands is to put yourself in the place of the perpetrators, follow their mental processes, take from them, even if too late, this weapon of destruction. That is to turn it into an archive, but a burning and shape-shifting archive.

<sup>22</sup> Nic Dunlop, *The Lost Executioner: A Journey to the Heart of the Killing Fields*, Walker & Company, New York 2006, p. 148.

<sup>23</sup> In the original way in which Giorgio Agamben takes up to Greek traditon (*haplós*), as one of the bases of Western metaphysics, the essence of being. See Giorgio Agamben, *Quel che resta di Auschwitz. L’archivio e il testimone. Homo Sacer III*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 1998 (Eng. ed. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1998, p. 182).

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, the slideshow used in the project by Yale University: [http://cgp.research.yale.edu/cgp/cts/cts\\_slideshow.jsp](http://cgp.research.yale.edu/cgp/cts/cts_slideshow.jsp), last visit 15 March 2014. A different strategy can be found in a selection of photos from an unknown origin on the Tuol Sleng webpage: <http://www.tuolsleng.com/photographs.php>, last visit 20 April 2014.

## Perpetrator Images, Perpetrator Artifacts: The Nomad Archives of Tuol Sleng (S-21)

The photos of Tuol Sleng make up a precarious archive that has been deconstructed and put back together, that has migrated through various different media and circulated around many social spaces. They are the material vestiges pulled from the dark world of the Khmer Rouge, objects manufactured by these: clipped, contemplated, commented, inventoried, handled. In this still-to-be domesticated and anesthetized archive, we find traces of the fear and the fury of those who produced and those who suffered them. An archive, when all is said and done, that will never go to sleep.



Fig. 1 – Torture cell at building A of Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum. Iron bed as found by the Vietnamese forces when they entered Phnom Penh, 7 January 1979. Photo by the author, October 2014.



Fig. 2 – Front gate of S-21 extermination center, now condemned. Photo by the author, October 2014.



Fig. 3 – Chum Mey, one of the two survivors of S-21 that are still alive. Chum Mey sells his memoirs by the front gate of Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum. Photo by the author, October 2014.



Fig. 4 – Exhibition room at Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum with panels of faces as taken by the Khmer Rouge photographic unit. Photo by the author, October 2014.