

H-France Review Vol. 24 (June 2024), No. 49

Deirdre Boyle, *Ferryman of Memories: The Films of Rithy Panh*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2023. xiii + 251 pp. Notes, illustrations, and index. \$37.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781978814646; \$37.95 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9781978814660.

Review by Jennifer Cazenave, Boston University.

Deirdre Boyle's latest book, *Ferryman of Memories: The Films of Rithy Panh*, finds its origin in 1970. This was the year Boyle graduated from college, wearing a white arm band on her gown in support of the students killed at Kent State while protesting the invasion of Cambodia under Nixon. In the midst of the Vietnam War, the US dropped 540,000 tons of bombs on Cambodia (p. 47); this campaign weakened the country and contributed to the rise of the Khmer Rouge regime led by Pol Pot between 1975 and 1979, during which nearly two million people died from starvation, execution, disease, and forced labor (p. 42). "One of the reasons I felt compelled to embark on this project had to do with feeling myself a guilty bystander who had done nothing--beyond wearing a white arm band," Boyle writes in the preface. "I could not shake a sense of responsibility for what my country had contributed to the deaths of so many" (p. xii).

This preface sets the tone for the rest of the book, which blends memoir, history, biography, and film criticism. Boyle's title refers to Charon, the hooded boatman from Greek mythology tasked with ferrying the souls of the dead--following a proper burial--across the River Styx to the underworld. It is also inspired by Rithy Panh's self-designation as "a ferryman of memory." Panh is a Franco-Cambodian filmmaker and genocide survivor who lost most of his family under the Khmer Rouge. In 1979, he fled to Thailand and lived for a time at the Mairut refugee camp. He then settled in France, attending the Institut des Hautes Études Cinématographiques in Paris in the late eighties. Since then, he has spent nearly four decades creating cinematic memories of Pol Pot's regime and its aftermath. His films bear witness to this traumatic history and provide a home for the ghosts of those who died during the genocide and were denied a proper burial, their bodies thrown into mass graves known as killing fields.

Comprised of over twenty fiction and documentary features, as well as five books, Panh's oeuvre invokes "an anxiety of historical transmission," a term used by Thomas Trezise to describe the accelerated production of Holocaust testimonies since the late 1970s, notably through the creation of video archives, the publication of memoirs, and the release of films such as Claude Lanzmann's iconic *Shoah* (1985).[1] As Boyle notes, Panh's visual representations of the Khmer Rouge regime have prompted comparisons to "Holocaust film innovators like Alain Resnais, Marcel Ophüls, and Claude Lanzmann" (p. 86). Similarly, his writings, including his 2011 memoir *The Elimination*, call to mind the testimonies of Primo Levi and Charlotte Delbo. Like

these two Auschwitz survivors, “Panh feels he died during the genocide, but no one sees it” (p. 168).

Whereas Trezise attributes the urgency to collect Holocaust testimony to the imminent passing of survivors, the anxiety of transmission underpinning Panh’s oeuvre reflects the status of the Cambodian genocide as a missing picture--both during and after the Khmer Rouge regime. Under Pol Pot, cinema was reduced to propaganda films while movie theaters were shut down and artists murdered or exiled. The Vietnamese invasion in 1979 ended the genocide but led to a decade-long war that displaced large numbers of Cambodians to refugee camps and delayed recognition of the atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge. The Paris Peace Accords signed in 1991 excluded the term *genocide*; in turn, the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) was only established in 2001, with the first trial commencing in 2009. Beginning with the release of his documentary *Site 2* two decades prior, Panh “decided to demonstrate through his films that genocide had happened” (p. 64). Since then, he has also worked tirelessly to train a new generation of Cambodian filmmakers and technicians, notably through the creation of the Bophana Center in Phnom Penh.

An anxiety of transmission also informs *Ferryman of Memories*, which provides a detailed overview of Panh’s cinema against the backdrop of Cambodia’s traumatic past. As Boyle notes, his films remain little-known and little-distributed outside of Cambodia and France. Similarly, his oeuvre engages in dialogue with complex histories that may be unfamiliar to many. As a result, Boyle proceeds chronologically, detailing each film one by one: she begins with *Site 2* and ends with Panh’s autobiographical trilogy comprised of the Oscar-nominated documentary *The Missing Picture* (2013), the experimental narrative *Exile* (2016), and the concluding *Graves Without a Name* (2018).[2] *Ferryman of Memories*’ seven chapters are enriched by Boyle’s meticulous research into Cambodian history and the making of each film. Throughout the book, she draws on Panh’s writings, untranslated interviews and articles published in France, and her own interviews with the filmmaker over the years (two of which are included as appendices). She also devotes one chapter to the history of the Khmer Rouge regime and includes a prologue, an interlude, and an epilogue detailing her travels to Cambodia.

The prologue opens with Boyle’s first encounter with Panh at the Bophana Center in 2015, the year she began working on *Ferryman of Memories*. She describes the filmmaker as an “unpredictable and deliberately impenetrable individual” who initially failed to respond to her emails; later on, he “simply changed the subject” anytime she posed a question that left him uninspired (pp. 3-4). Rather than separate the auteur from his work, the book opens with biography criticism to illuminate a “cinema of witness” haunted by Panh’s lived experience under the Khmer Rouge (p. 6). The book’s first chapter, “Uncle Rithy and the Cambodian Tragedy,” tells the filmmaker’s story, beginning with his childhood in Phnom Penh in the sixties and ending with the present day, where he divides his time between France and Cambodia. Chapter two, “The Return: Discovering the Gaze,” encompasses Panh’s first films from the late eighties to the mid-nineties. Boyle begins with *Site 2*, framing her discussion of the eponymous refugee camp on the Thai-Cambodian border through the lens of Hannah Arendt, herself a refugee whose writings on statelessness and genocide inform the book’s film criticism on several occasions. Boyle ends with Panh’s first fiction feature, *Rice People* (1994), which marked the beginning of his efforts to develop a new generation of Cambodian filmmakers and technicians:

over the course of shooting the film, the French professionals he had hired simultaneously trained a local crew.

Chapter three, “The Khmer Rouge: Three Years, Eight Months, Twenty-One Days,” provides a short history of Cambodia, moving from French colonial rule to the Khmer Rouge regime to the Vietnamese occupation. Boyle concludes her account of the genocide by focusing on S-21, a secret prison in Phnom Penh where roughly 17,000 individuals were interrogated and tortured during the genocide (only 23 are believed to have survived). Chapter four, “Perpetrators and Survivors: The S-21 Trilogy,” delves into the documentaries Panh devoted to this site of memory: *Bophana, a Cambodian Tragedy* (1996), which is centered on the story of a single female victim--Hout Bophana--after whom he named his audiovisual center in Phnom Penh; *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (2002), a film that brought Panh international recognition and in which former prison staff bear witness to the atrocities they committed; and, finally, *Duch, Master of the Forges of Hell* (2012), Panh’s interview with Kaing Guek Eav, known as Duch, the first perpetrator to be charged with crimes against humanity in Cambodia in 2007. Boyle concludes this section of the book with an interlude titled “Dark Tourism,” in which she recounts her visits to three important sites of memory: the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum (the name given to S-21), the Choeung Ek killing fields outside of Phnom Penh, and a session of the ECCC during the trial of Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan, two members of the Khmer Rouge Central Committee.

Chapter five, “After the Wars: Fiction and Nonfiction,” examines the post-Khmer Rouge era. Boyle begins with two fiction features: *One Evening After the War* (1997), a love story between a genocide survivor and a former soldier, and *Let the Boat Break, Let the Junk Crack Open* (2001), which bears witness to the experiences of Southeast Asian refugees in Paris. The chapter then shifts to four documentary portraits of “invisible” Cambodians in the present day. These include *The Land of the Wandering Souls* (1999), the first film Panh made with an all-Cambodian crew, and *The Burnt Theater* (2005), which centers on a small community of artists who survived the Khmer Rouge regime. In Chapter six, “Colonialism: France and Cambodia,” Boyle examines Panh’s engagement with imperial memory in the twenty-first century. In 2015, he released *France is Our Mother Country* (2015), a silent film with intertitles that draws on a vast archive of moving images captured by colonial-era propagandists, ethnographers, and amateur filmmakers. This documentary came after his 2008 adaptation of Marguerite Duras’ anti-imperialist novel, *The Sea Wall*, which received poor reviews in France and was never released in American theaters.[3] As Boyle observes, *The Sea Wall* “had nothing to do with the nostalgia for the colonial era that was all the rage in France in the nineties, when films like Régis Wargnier’s *Indochine*...enjoyed box office successes” (p. 154).

Boyle concludes her study of Panh’s films through an analysis of his autobiographical trilogy. She thus ends *Ferryman of Memory* in the same way she had begun--by connecting the life and work of the auteur. It is perhaps Panh’s unique perspective as a survivor and filmmaker that prompted Boyle to weave into her book her own memories of research and writing. This stylistic choice, which at times can feel out of place, follows a recent memoiristic turn in the humanities that sees academics draw on personal stories to frame research questions.[4] Accordingly, in her epilogue, Boyle returns one last time to her visit to Phnom Penh in 2015. She recalls strolling on a narrow street when she was suddenly “flung into the air, violently propelled by invisible

forces...landing hard on [her] right arm and shoulder.” Six years later, as she was finishing *Ferryman of Memories*, she still experienced phantom pains in her right arm (pp. 189-190).

Evocative of Alison Landsberg’s notion of “prosthetic memory,” Boyle’s personal recollections throughout the book are haunted by the ghosts and traumas of Cambodian history.[5]

Anticipating the end of *Ferryman of Memories*, the prologue describes the phantom pains Panh himself experienced for a long time following an injury in the Khmer Rouge rice fields. “Panh also had to maneuver with hands and arms, unable to walk for a year, after accidentally wounding himself with a pickax that he drove into his foot while working” (p. 2). This memory immediately follows Boyle’s account of her first encounter with Panh in 2015 at the Bophana Center: she arrived just as a group of disabled children were making their way inside the building to watch a movie. Although it is not the focus of *Ferryman of Memories*, the experience of people with disabilities during and after Pol Pot’s regime recurs in the book, a reminder of the mass violence perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge. As Boyle notes in the opening lines of the chapter devoted to Panh’s S-21 trilogy, “the first victims were the mentally ill and the physically impaired” (p. 61).

The present day carries with it the many wounds and invisible traumas that have informed the making of each of Panh’s films. Of the many poignant anecdotes included in *Ferryman of Memories*, one, in particular, stands out: “Panh tells the story of how birds would invariably arrive when he was shooting [*S-21*] and assemble on a wire strung outside a window. When a perpetrator lied, they cried out...When the shooting of the film ended, the birds flew away. Panh felt they were the souls of the dead come to observe what was happening” (p. 100). This vignette encapsulates the immense work of memory and care undertaken by Rithy Panh over several decades in the face of missing pictures and contemporary landscapes haunted by the wandering souls of those who never received a proper burial.

NOTES

[1] Thomas Trezise, *Witnessing Witnessing: On the Reception of Holocaust Survivor Testimony* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), p. 5.

[2] Panh has since made two documentaries, *Irradiés* (2020) and *Everything Will Be Ok* (2022), which Boyle lists in her filmography (p. 240). His latest feature film, *Meeting with Pol Pot*, premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in May 2024.

[3] Marguerite Duras, *The Sea Wall* [1950] translated by Herman Briffault (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1985 (3rd edition)).

[4] The memoiristic turn began in Black studies and queer studies. See, for example, Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), pp. 1-10 in Boyle’s book. For a recent example in French studies, see Robin Mitchell’s prologue in *Vénus noire. Black Women and Colonial Fantasies in Nineteenth-Century France* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2020), pp. xiii-xv in Boyle’s book.

[5] Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of Mass Culture in the Age of Mass Media* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

Jennifer Cazenave
Boston University
jcazenav@bu.edu

Copyright © 2024 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172