

Refaced/Defaced: Using Photographic Portraits of Khmer Rouge Perpetrators in Justice, Education and Human Rights Activism in Cambodia

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Abstract: This article explores the use of photographic portraits of Khmer Rouge perpetrators in Cambodia's public sphere today. It is often said that the Democratic Kampuchea regime was faceless. Hidden behind the façade of the *Angkar* (the Organization), the Khmer Rouge leaders engaged in limited personality cult, thereby remaining invisible to the major part of the Cambodian population during their years in power. What happens then when 'evil' is given a face, or rather specific faces? How does the former 'invisibility' of senior Khmer Rouge shape the later reception of their public image? To what extent do the photographic portraits of mass murderers provide socially accepted forms of emotional release for victims in particular and for society in general? Is it possible to go beyond affect and use such photos as tools of information and education about genocide and accountability? How do media, especially social media, contribute to these processes? To answer these questions, I look at a selected set of examples: the exhibition 'Genocide: Who are the Senior Khmer Rouge Leaders to be Judged? The Importance of Case 002', organized by the Documentation Centre of Cambodia (DC-Cam) at the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum; the graffiti-covered photos of Khmer Rouge leaders and guards displayed at Tuol Sleng; and the Dartboard Game action performed in Phnom Penh's public space by the Association of Khmer Rouge Victims in Cambodia (AKRVC) in 2011 and 2012.

Keywords: Cambodia, Khmer Rouge, face, education, human rights

My presentation at the conference 'Double Exposures: Perpetrators and the Uses of Photography'¹ was based on a visual scroll (partially presented here) dramatizing the sources I used for discussing acts of 're-facing' and defacing Khmer Rouge perpetrators in today's Cambodia.

This paper contextualizes the material and narrative of the scroll. Moreover, beyond *ekphrasis*, it expands on the initial presentation and its central questions: To what extent do public images of Khmer Rouge perpetrators provide socially accepted forms of emotional release for the victims and Cambodian society in the context of justice and mem-

1 Organized by the Perpetrator Studies Network in Mechelen, Belgium, January 2018.



ory? Is it possible to go beyond the affective impact of these photos and use them as educational tools about genocide, accountability, social justice and human rights?

More broadly, the paper aims to address, through image connections, the vexed question of the relation between the Khmer Rouge regime, visual culture and processes of memorialization. Visual culture (as an academic discipline) does not play as yet an important role in analysing the representation of Khmer Rouge perpetrators – by themselves and by others – and the complex and changing meanings attached to these images as they move across political, institutional and cultural contexts. The paper, thus, seeks to open new lines of inquiry into this topic.

Re-Facing a Faceless Terror Regime?

‘There is no close-up of the face, the face is in itself close-up, the close-up is by itself face, and both are affect, affection-image’, philosopher Gilles Deleuze writes.² The scroll starts with such an affection-image. It is a close-up of Nuon Chea, ideologist and key figure of the Khmer Rouge regime, as he appeared in the past years to people attending his trial for crimes against humanity and genocide at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC). In the photo, Nuon Chea is offered to public scrutiny, utterly exposed. At the same time, concealed behind his sunglasses, he remains elusive and unreadable. The picture encapsulates the difficulty of ‘re-facing’ the Khmer Rouge regime, which has often been perceived as ‘invisible’. The masters of Democratic Kampuchea, as Cambodia was called then, were hidden behind the façade of the anonymous *Angkar* (Organization). The population hardly knew who they were. Yet, the Khmer Rouge regime was not as faceless as it is generally assumed. Its leaders did not produce as much propaganda as their counterparts in China and Vietnam, but they were not afraid of images. Indeed, one finds a number of photos and films of them made before, during and after the Democratic Kampuchea period (1975–1979). The Khmer Rouge visual production evolved over the years, reflecting changes in the movement’s ideology, its internal dynamics, its relations with other powers, especially China and Vietnam, and the geopolitical situation.

2 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 87.

During the civil war (1970–1975), the Khmer Rouge put its ‘official’ existence aside. For strategic reasons, the movement was subsumed under the National United Front of Kampuchea, or FUNK as its French acronym goes. On the paper, the FUNK was presented as the alliance of all progressive forces around Cambodia’s former head of state, prince Norodom Sihanouk. Throughout the 1960s, the latter had tried to crush the Khmer Rouge, the term he had coined for his communist opponents. The situation changed dramatically in March 1970, after the coup that led to the founding of the rightist and pro-United States Khmer Republic. Sihanouk was deposed. Once in exile in Beijing, he had little choice but to listen to his Chinese and North Vietnamese friends, who advised him to ally with the Khmer Rouge guerillas. Sihanouk also hoped that once he regained power, he would be able to get rid of these problematic allies – a gamble he lost. Visual propaganda played a major role in this new context. It helped stage the reconciliation and friendship of the former enemies, united now in the struggle against the ‘war of aggression’ carried out by the Khmer Republic and the Americans, for domestic and international audiences.

Early 1973, Sihanouk was allowed for a tour of the zones ‘liberated’ by the FUNK in Cambodia. The booklet depicting his ‘historical return’ gives a good insight into how the Khmer Rouge leadership conceived its self-representation. A group picture shows Sihanouk posing with his ‘friends’ in front of Angkor Wat, the most emblematic site of Cambodia.³ The men standing with him at the center of the photo are Hou Yuon, Hu Nim and Khieu Samphan. In the 1960s, they were public figures and respected leftwing politicians (the legal window of the communist underground). In 1967, however, they were forced to flee to the jungle to escape Sihanouk’s persecution. For years they were thought dead, executed by Sihanouk’s police. Their reappearance in 1972 in the FUNK’s publications as official representatives of the movement with ministerial functions earned them the nickname of the ‘three ghosts’.⁴ This orchestrated return demonstrates how masterly the Khmer Rouge played with popular beliefs and a magical conception of photography – as making ghosts visible – in parts of Cambodian society, while us-

3 Some observers said that the Angkor Wat temples featuring in the photos and film of Sihanouk’s journey in the ‘liberated’ zones belonged to a mock movie set created in a studio in Beijing. American intelligence services even doubted that Sihanouk had reached Cambodia at all. See William Shawcross, *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia* (London: André Deutsch, 1979), p. 282.

4 *Images du Retour Historique de Samdech Norodom Sihanouk au Cambodge* ([n.p.]: Éditions du FUNK, 1973).

ing it as a practical tool of political communication with international supporters of the movement. In 1973, the presence of the 'three ghosts' along with Sihanouk at Angkor Wat not only brought emphasis on the reconciliation of the former enemies. The sight of these familiar faces also distracted viewers from what was happening on the side of the image, where the 'real' leaders of the movement were standing. Indeed, in several group pictures of that period, the men actually running the show (Pol Pot, Nuon Chea, Ieng Sary, Son Sen) stayed, literally speaking, in the margins, observing rather than being observed. Therefore, facelessness is an inadequate characterization of the Khmer Rouge regime. Pol Pot and his comrades (possibly with the help of the Chinese) demonstrated their capacity to organize the visibility of the movement and its leadership for the public eye.



FIGURE 1. Group picture showing Norodom Sihanouk with Khmer Rouge (then known as FUNK) leaders at Angkor Wat, early 1973. *Images du Retour Historique de Samdech Norodom Sihanouk au Cambodge* (Éditions du FUNK, 1973).

Once in power, the Khmer Rouge continued staging itself as a collegial force. Pictures show the leaders sitting together in a train coach or a classroom for political education. But in 1978, mounting accusations of human rights violations in Western media and escalating tensions with Vietnam forced the Khmer Rouge leadership to rethink its communication and engage in a limited personality cult, giving the regime

an identifiable human face. This cult mostly centered on the person of Pol Pot, or Brother Number One. His trip to China in September 1977 was the perfect occasion for 'outing' him as the Prime Minister of Democratic Kampuchea.⁵ An official biography was released along with photos of the (triumphant) visit. Paintings and sculptures representing him were produced. Painter Vann Nath survived the Khmer Rouge regime thanks to his artistic skills. Imprisoned at the torture-and-execution center S.21 in Phnom Penh, he was recruited to execute portraits of Pol Pot. He recounts this experience in his biography *A Cambodian Prison Portrait* (1998). Pol Pot was not the only public figure of the Khmer Rouge regime. Minister of Foreign Affairs Ieng Sary appears in numerous photos too, like those showing him at the United Nations with Secretary General Kurt Waldheim (c. 1978) or as Cambodia's representative after the fall of Democratic Kampuchea in 1979.

From the 1980s onward, there was an ongoing visual production from the side of the Khmer Rouge. They had their own team of photographers, whose work featured in the publication *National Army of Democratic Kampuchea*, a magazine that glorified the movement's military advance inside Cambodia and its 're-conquest' of roads and villages. These photographers also covered the everyday life of the Khmer Rouge. Their pictures, which came to be known in the late 1990s after the final dismantling of the movement, frequently depict the Khmer Rouge leaders in private settings, with families and doing ordinary things. The representation of Ieng Sary as *bon vivant* presiding over a small banquet offers an interesting perspective on that period. The image conjures up the report written by American journalist Henry Kamm after he visited a Khmer Rouge model jungle basis in the early 1980s. The place, showcasing the new version of the movement, was stocked with Johnnie Walker Black Label Scotch, cakes of Lux soap, American cigarettes, soft drinks and ice brought all the way from Bangkok.⁶ The message to be conveyed to the international community was clear: the revolutionary puritan ideals were gone, and Marxism-Leninism replaced with a new, pragmatic ideology. For observers, it was hard to assess the extent to which the movement had changed, and whether this was mere scenery again.⁷

5 It was on this occasion that Pol Pot gave a speech in which he officially announced that Cambodia was ruled by the CPK.

6 Henry Kamm, *Cambodia: Report from a Stricken Land* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1998), pp. 179–181.

7 Christophe Peschoux, *Les 'Nouveaux' Khmers Rouges: Enquête (1979–1990). Reconstruction du Mouvement et Reconquête des Villages. Essai de Débroussaillage* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1992).

Justice and the Re-Organization of the Khmer Rouge's Visibility



FIGURE 2. Ieng Sary at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (Case 002), Phnom Penh, Cambodia (CC, ECCC).



FIGURE 3. Ieng Thirith at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (Case 002), Phnom Penh, Cambodia (CC, ECCC).

The exhibition 'Genocide: Who Are the Senior Khmer Rouge Leaders to Be Judged? The Importance of Case 002' (hereafter 'Genocide') opened at the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum (TSGM) in Phnom Penh in June 2010.⁸ Founded in 1979 as a memorial in the premises of the prison S.21, Tuol Sleng has been playing an important pedagogical role in the judicial process. NGOs working in collaboration with the ECCC regularly organize joint visits at the museum and the courtroom for villagers and students.⁹ The Documentation Centre of Cambodia (DC-Cam) conceived the exhibition 'Genocide' as part of the Tribunal's outreach activities, in preparation for the first section of Case 002, the trial of Ieng Sary, his wife Ieng Thirith, Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan. 'Genocide' involved well-known experts of the Khmer Rouge regime and transitional justice, such as anthropologist Alexander Hinton and law scholars Jaya Ramji-Nogales and Anne Heindel. The project, and more specifically, the exhibition, was funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida). The Human Rights and Good Governance Department of the Royal Danish Embassy in Phnom Penh, for its part, provided funding for the publication of the book. The exhibition toured in Cambodia and was held in the United States and Europe as well, under the title 'The Resistance to the Khmer Rouge Genocide: Arms and Emotions'.

'Genocide', as it was presented at the TSGM, used images of the senior Khmer Rouge as effigies, the latter being defined as 'a contrivance that enables the processes regulating performance'.¹⁰ The exhibition sought to produce a new kind of performance – an educational performance promoting the work of the ECCC and the rule of law. Revolving around the four defendants, 'Genocide' was built as a three-dimensional display of the book materials in the physical space of Tuol Sleng. Big boards were arranged on easels and placed in the room in the order of the publication. Each of the defendants was introduced via a huge black-and-white close-up, which corresponded to a full page in the book. The size of the portraits made the visitor's encounter with the four Khmer Rouge leaders a powerful, emotional

8 *Genocide: Who Are the Senior Khmer Rouge Leaders to Be Judged? The Importance of Case 002*, Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum (TSGM), Phnom Penh.

9 Maria Elander, 'Education and Photography at Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum', in *The Arts of Transitional Justice*, ed. by Peter Rush and Olivera Simić (New York: Springer, 2014), pp. 43–62; Peter Manning, 'Governing Memory: Justice, Reconciliation, and Outreach at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia', *Memory Studies*, 5.2 (2012), 165–181.

10 Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 36.



FIGURE 4. Nuon Chea at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (Case 002), Phnom Penh, Cambodia (CC, ECCC).

moment. Yet, the exhibition did not only rely on this affective component. Rather, it tried to emphasize the cognitive dimension of the encounter. Each portrait was paired with a panel providing biographical information, the list of crimes for which the Khmer Rouge leader portrayed was charged, the names of his or her defense counsels and a link to the corresponding ECCC Information Sheet. Moreover, each defendant was connected to a constellation of documents that helped contextualize his or her role in Democratic Kampuchea and thus move beyond the strictly personal aspect of the presentation toward a historical understanding of the Khmer Rouge regime. Further resources were made available in the shape of a detailed bibliography, a list of educational projects and a series of links.

'Genocide' is best understood as an attempt to transform not only Cambodians' relation to the past, but also their perception of leadership and governance. In that sense, the educational performance organized in and through the exhibition did not only publicize the work of the Tribunal. It also demonstrated how justice enables the demystification of political power. The act of re-facing dispelled the 'mystique' of the former Khmer Rouge leaders. It showed them as they are today, old and diminutive, their faces operating as a synecdoche for the whole body. This mode of representation was consistent with



FIGURE 5. Khieu Samphan at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (Case 002), Phnom Penh, Cambodia (CC, ECCC).

the visual communication strategy of the ECCC. The Tribunal's media section offers a substantial amount of photos and close-ups of Khieu Samphan, and the late Nuon Chea, Ieng Sary and Ieng Thirith. Such an exposure of the perpetrators' aged body and face cannot but evoke, in some twisted way, Kantorowicz's theory of the king's two bodies.¹¹ The display of the diminished 'body natural' of the senior Khmer Rouge might be construed as the Tribunal's attempt to demonstrate that the Khmer Rouge 'body politic' has been equally rendered powerless through accountability. For the ECCC, this becomes a means of connecting the process of justice to broader political reforms, in line with the holistic approach of transitional justice institutions, often tying legal processes and 'good governance'. One may even go further and suggest that 'Genocide' gestures in the direction of a wider demystification of political power – beyond the Khmer Rouge leadership and possibly addressing the present-day government. In many ways, the Khmer Rouge 'body politic' keeps haunting Cambodia through structural violence and mostly through the political system, since a number of former Khmer Rouge members occupy top positions in the state apparatus. By portraying Nuon Chea and Khieu Samphan as fragile

11 Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997 [1957]).

old men, the ECCC sends Cambodians the message that any political power, however potent, decays and vanishes one day. However, it is difficult to answer the question whether this strategy has real effects in society, or at least on museum visitors. Drawing on the work of anthropologist Joseph Roach on effigies and performance, one may ask what kind of post-genocide community the act of exposing senior Khmer Rouge in such a way sustains, and whether it provides this community with 'the comforting fiction that real borders exist and [troubles] it with the spectacle of their immolation'.¹²

The Performance of Defacement

The big-size faces of Nuon Chea, Khieu Samphan, Ieng Sary and Ieng Thirith shown in the exhibition 'Genocide' are not the only faces of Khmer Rouge perpetrators to be seen at the TSGM. Many other faces of Khmer Rouge are displayed in the museum. Some are the faces of infamous figures like S.21 chief Duch and Minister of National Defense Son Sen. Others are not so well known. These are former S.21 staff members, photographed in their daily surroundings by Heng Sinith in 2002.¹³ Their portraits are displayed side by side with their identification pictures of the Democratic Kampuchea period. Many of these images are covered with graffiti and obscenities. Does this indicate an ongoing anger, an excess of affect that cannot be expressed or harnessed via legal and educational channels? Anthropologist Alexander Hinton has discussed the question of anger in post-genocide Cambodia on several occasions. Drawing on survivor Haing Ngor, he relates it to the notion of *kum*.¹⁴ In his memoir *A Cambodian Odyssey*, Ngor defines *kum* as a Cambodian mentality of revenge, 'a long-standing grudge leading to revenge much more damaging than the original injury'.¹⁵ Is *kum* the reason behind this performance of defacement at Tuol Sleng, a belated retaliation on effigies? In the photos, the eyes of the Khmer Rouge dis-

¹² Roach, p. 41.

¹³ Heng Sinith was a child when the Khmer Rouge came to power. He became a professional photographer in the early 1990s, in the wake of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC mission). See Sinith Heng, 'The Photographer Sinith Heng: My Heart and Soul', *Documentation Center of Cambodia: Searching for the Truth* (2003), <http://d.dccam.org/Archives/Photographs/Former_Khmer_Rouge/Sinith.htm> [accessed 20 January 2019].

¹⁴ Alexander Laban Hinton, *Why Did They Kill? Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p. 45; pp. 64–65; p. 85.

¹⁵ Haing Ngor and Roger Warner, *A Cambodian Odyssey* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), p. 9.

appear under layers of white or black ink, in some possible reversal of the 'blindness' of the Cambodian population, kept in the dark during the whole Democratic Kampuchea period. The former masters are now those who no longer see. This kind of revenge performed on visual representations points to the idea of 'mimetic magic'.¹⁶ The blinding also conjures up the slogan 'Angkar has the eyes of the pineapple' (Angkar sees everything) and therefore the destruction of the Khmer Rouge panoptic view through this act of defacement.

The political and public sphere-oriented dimension of anger cannot but raise the question of the outlet Cambodians were given after 1979. Indeed, the policies of the newly established People's Republic of Kampuchea vis-à-vis the Khmer Rouge created an explosive situation. Mid- and low-level Khmer Rouge were imprisoned, but only for a short time. After their 're-education', they were released and assumed to be accepted back into society. This leniency was born out of practical reasons. The new socialist republic was in dire need of reliable staff, especially in the provincial administration. Recruiting former civil servants of the Sihanouk and Lon Nol regimes was out of the question. They were deemed too anti-communist. Consequently, only Khmer Rouge cadres were left: they were ideologically compatible, and they had the needed networks. Moreover, by promising amnesty, the Cambodian government found a good way to attract more defectors and deplete the Khmer Rouge forces, engaged in guerrilla warfare against the People's Republic of Kampuchea.¹⁷

Unsurprisingly, these policies were not popular with Cambodians. Indeed, there are numerous stories of revenge killings, beatings, mutilations and decapitations of former Khmer Rouge in the post-1979 period.¹⁸ At some point, the government even had to declare that anyone seeking vengeance against the Khmer Rouge would be arrested.¹⁹ Instead, the new authorities tried to channel popular anger toward the 'Pol Pot–Ieng Sary clique' through a set of measures. These included the

16 Michael Taussig, *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 4.

17 See Evan Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge: Inside the Politics of Nation-Building* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

18 Peter J. Hammer, 'Killing the Khmer Rouge', *The Journal of the International Institute*, 7.2 (2000), <<http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.4750978.0007.201>> [accessed 18 October 2019]; Alexander Laban Hinton, 'Oppression and Vengeance in the Cambodian Genocide', in *Genocide by the Oppressed: Subaltern Genocide in Theory and Practice*, ed. by Nicholas A. Robins and Adam Jones (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009), p. 98.

19 Hinton, 'A Head for an Eye: Revenge in the Cambodian Genocide', in *Violence: A Reader*, ed. by Catherine Besteman (New York: New York University Press, 2001), pp. 136–168 (p. 159).

People's Revolutionary Tribunal held in Phnom Penh in August 1979, which sentenced Pol Pot and Ieng Sary to death, and, from 1984 onward, the annual Day of Anger (*Tivea Chang Kamheng*). The 'Pol Pot–Ieng Sary clique' provided a convenient scapegoat, which helped form national unity anew. The Day of Anger ceremonies fostered political mobilization in a period of international tension and civil war. There were speeches by survivors and officials. Effigies were burned. Villagers used to carry knives, axes, and clubs.²⁰ Anthropologist Judy Ledgerwood, who was working in Cambodia in the early 1990s, recalls seeing schoolchildren taking turns to strike an effigy of Pol Pot with a large stick before setting it aflame.²¹ Researcher Dy Khamboly remembers:

A straw effigy of Pol Pot with black clothes for the kids to hit and kick to express hatred, anger and revenge toward the Khmer Rouge. I also joined the other kids in my village in hitting and kicking the Pol Pot effigy for fun, although I absolutely had no idea who Pol Pot was.²²

Yet, the effectiveness of scapegoating was limited. The government's policy of quasi-blanket amnesty generated a complex situation, since it forced victims to live side by side with perpetrators. There was, obviously, a rationale behind this policy. In the disastrous aftermath of the Pol Pot regime, as the country had to be rebuilt from scratch, widespread violence might have been conducive to an even worse state of affairs. Still, the new authorities certainly cast the net too wide. In contrast, they did not give victims a sufficient space of expression. This had long-term consequences. The inability to directly express anger, except on the occasion of a commemoration day, translated for some people into somatic symptoms. Through Buddhism, karma and moral tales, religious authorities offered alternative ways out of these negative and disruptive emotions. But was it enough in the face of the extensive impunity of Khmer Rouge perpetrators, in Cambodia and on the international scene alike? The situation grew worse after the departure of the Vietnamese in 1989 and during the negotiations for the Paris Agreements, through which the Khmer Rouge leaders were progressively reintegrated into the Cambo-

20 Hinton, 'Begrudgment, Reconciliation, and the Khmer Rouge', *Documentation Center of Cambodia: Searching for the Truth*, 20, August 2000, <http://www.dccam.org/Tribunal/Analysis/Begrudgment_Reconciliation.htm> [accessed 20 January 2019].

21 Judy Ledgerwood, 'The Cambodian Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crimes: National Narrative', in *Genocide, Collective Violence, and Popular Memory*, ed. by David E. Lorey and William H. Beezley (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resource Books, 2002), p. 112.

22 Dy Khamboly, 'Genocide Education: Local Initiatives, Global Connections' (unpublished PhD dissertation, Rutgers University, 2015), p. 2.

dian political system. In 1991, Khieu Samphan, who had come to Phnom Penh for United Nations-monitored peace talks, was almost lynched by a mob. Understandably, popular anger was far from appeased. Yet, in 1998, Prime Minister Hun Sen held his infamous 'dig a hole and bury the past' speech, in line with his strategy of negotiating with his former enemies and encouraging their defection by promising them a safe haven. The image of Ieng Sary and Hun Sen greeting each other must have been a hard blow for many Cambodians. In the late 1990s, discussions about a possible trial of Khmer Rouge leaders were at a standstill, and it took a few more years (until 2003) before the Cambodian government and the international community came to an agreement on the establishment of a tribunal, thereby putting a stop to impunity.

For some observers, the frustration due to 'the lack of closure and the long-awaited trials' certainly explains why Cambodians had 'their say on the surface of the portraits of the Khmer Rouge leadership' at Tuol Sleng.²³ A study by psychologists Jeffrey Sonis, James L. Gibson and Joop T.V.M. de Jong reveals that in 2006–2007 (i.e. after the establishment of the ECCC but before the opening of Case 001), a high percentage of people still felt a desire for revenge.²⁴ Alex Hinton commented:

Even now, while most Cambodians generally appear to favor the trial of a handful of former Khmer Rouge leaders, some continue to talk of revenge, or even to view the tribunal itself as a form of vengeance against these former enemies. It remains to be seen whether these perceptions will shift as the trials proceed, the past is reworked again, and ordinary people seek to make sense of it all.²⁵

A lingering desire for revenge is not exclusive to Cambodian society, as show studies conducted in Northern Ireland, Rwanda and South Africa, for example. Moreover, a number of factors intervene in the process of 'letting go' or not. These range from personal ones (the extent of trauma exposure, the economic situation of the individual, the social support the person is given) to collective ones (what society offers to suffering people

23 Timothy Dylan Wood and Rita Leistner, 'Hanging the Past: Timothy Dylan Wood and Rita Leistner Explore the Relationship between Photography and State Narratives at Cambodia's Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crimes', *Idea&s*, 4.1 (2007), 28.

24 Jeffrey Sonis and others, 'Probable Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Disability in Cambodia: Associations with Perceived Justice, Desire for Revenge, and Attitudes Towards the Khmer Rouge Trials', *JAMA*, 302.5 (2009), 530. This is confirmed by two further surveys, carried out in 2008 and 2010 respectively, which show only a very slight decrease in desire for revenge. See Phuong Pham and others, 'Dealing with the Khmer Rouge Heritage', *Peace Review*, 23.4 (2011), 457.

25 Hinton, 'Oppression and Vengeance', p. 99.

not only in terms of mental health assistance but also as cultural frameworks for making sense of the events). These factors make the interaction between desire for revenge and forgiveness an extremely complicated dynamic.²⁶ The transformation of post-genocide discourses in Cambodian society, whether initiated by the government, international bodies or civil society actors, obviously plays an important part in this process. When the Day of Hatred resumed in 2001, after a break of several years, it was under a new name – the National Day of Remembrance. Yet, the ceremony (held at Choeung Ek) kept including a performance in which a group of actors reenact Khmer Rouge atrocities, thus showing how porous the boundaries between ‘revenge’, ‘catharsis’ and ‘healing’ remain.

This context may help explain why the defacement of images of Khmer Rouge perpetrators at Tuol Sleng continued even after the trials began. Possibly, since the museum has long been a site of exposure, some people may consider that the tagging of photos on the walls is a socially and culturally approved way of re-directing their anger. But are desire for revenge and pent-up frustration the only motivation here? In other words, does the act of de-facing Khmer Rouge perpetrators address only the past? Could it be that this anger has also something to do with the present situation? Looking at the effigy as ‘surrogation’²⁷ and at the defacement as a ‘mode of revelation’²⁸ suggests such an explanation. Instead of operating as a form of release of ‘negative energy’²⁹ vis-à-vis the past, the defacement becomes a means of proactively expressing a stance vis-à-vis the current political situation. The issue at stake here relates to the continuity of power. The body natural of the Khmer Rouge is dead (or ageing), but the body politic is still alive, since the regime of Prime Minister Hun Sen can be seen, to some extent, as a continuation of it (taking its source in the same ideology and traditions of authoritarianism). In that sense, the photos are not effigies of the Khmer Rouge leaders as persons. Rather, the photos of the Khmer Rouge leaders become effigies of Hun Sen and his fellow politicians of the Cambodian People’s Party (CPP). These photos can be safely defaced, unlike the images of the CPP leaders featuring on the Party’s posters and banners hanging in the streets.

26 See Laura McGrew, ‘Pathways to Reconciliation in Cambodia’, *Peace Review*, 23.4 (2011), 514–521; Pham and others, ‘Dealing with the Khmer Rouge Heritage’.

27 Roach, p. 36.

28 Taussig, p. 3.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

Theary Seng and the Poetic Justice Project (War Criminal Dart Game)

The post-UNTAC³⁰ period has seen the growth and development of civil society in Cambodia, with the implementation of international NGOs and the founding of local NGOs.³¹ Civil society actors have had ‘catalytic roles in rebuilding and reshaping Cambodian society, polity and economy’ – their impact, however, remains a contentious issue.³² The civil society landscape offers a great diversity in terms of objectives, missions, sectors of action and tactics. Therefore, in the specific context of justice, it might be interesting to contrast the ways in which an organization such as the DC-Cam uses photographic portraits of Khmer Rouge perpetrators with a project carried out by a different organization. The comparison shows distinct understandings of ‘image operations’ – to draw on the terminology of art historians Jens Eder and Charlotte Klonk – in the Cambodian public sphere.³³ The distinction made by Eder between ‘cold’ and ‘hot’ images operations proves especially useful.³⁴ The DC-Cam’s exhibition ‘Genocide’ is an illustration of a ‘cold’ operation. While it appeals to emotions (the confrontation with the faces of the perpetrators), it mostly functions independently of affective response and emphasizes the cognitive dimension – which fits with the educational objective of the exhibition. In contrast, the project to be discussed in this section, Theary Seng’s ‘Poetic Justice Project’, is a good example of ‘hot’ image operations, depending on the affective power of images and aiming to trigger intense emotional responses. While both projects revolve around the work of the ECCC, the ways in which they address the question of justice reflect differences: not

30 The United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (March 1992–September 1993) ensured the implementation of the Paris Agreements signed in October 1991 by the four Cambodian political factions (Hun Sen’s CPP, Sihanouk’s FUNCINPEC, the Khmer Rouge and Son Sann’s KPNLF) and nineteen countries. It organized and conducted free and fair general elections as well as the repatriation of Cambodian refugees and maintained civil administration and the rule of law while Cambodia transitioned into a multi-party constitutional monarchy.

31 See Grant Curtis, *Cambodia Reborn: The Transition to Democracy and Development* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institute, 1998); Caroline Hughes, *Dependent Communities: Aid and Politics in Cambodia and East Timor* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2009).

32 Kaustuv Kanti Bandyopadhyay and Thida C. Khus, ‘Changing Civil Society in Cambodia: In Search of Reliance’, *Development in Practice*, 23.5–6 (2013), 667.

33 By ‘operation’, Eder and Klonk mean that images become ‘instrumental in a whole series of further events (...) that often go beyond the original intentions of their producers and sometimes against them’. Jens Eder and Charlotte Klonk (eds.), ‘Introduction’, *Image Operations: Visual Media and Political Conflict* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), p. 4.

34 Jens Eder, ‘Affective Image Operations’, in *Image Operations*, ed. by Eder and Klonk, p. 63.

only in motivations and strategies, but also in the conception of the link between the treatment of the past on the one hand, and matters of political and civil rights and citizenship on the other.

Lawyer Theory Seng is a major figure of human rights activism in Cambodia. As a child, she survived the Khmer Rouge regime, an experience she recounts in her book *Daughter of the Killings Field* (2005).³⁵ She migrated with her siblings to the United States in 1980. In 2004, she moved back to Cambodia permanently, after volunteering with labor and human rights groups in the country for ten years, among them the Center for Social Development. Seng is the president of the Association of Khmer Rouge Victims in Cambodia (AKRVC), the first Cambodia-based victims association to be registered with the Ministry of Interior in 2009. She was the first person to file a civil party application in Case 002 in September 2007, just after the arrest of Nuon Chea. She is also the representative of the Civil Parties of Orphans Class, a special grouping pre-dating the AKRVC, introduced officially in the Pre-Trial Chamber hearing of Nuon Chea in February 2008 and officially recognized by the ECCC Victims Support Section. Seng's relation with the ECCC broke off in November 2011. A few days before the start of the first section of Case 002, the Tribunal announced that defendant Ieng Thirith was ruled unfit for trial due to dementia. This was bad timing, especially in a context of mounting allegations of political interference, judicial misconduct and violations of victims' rights.³⁶ In the press conference she held on 15 November 2011, Seng declared that she was withdrawing her civil party status and denounced the trial as an 'irredeemable political farce that is negating justice, soiling memory and embedding cynicism'.³⁷ This was a radical move for someone who had strongly believed in the positive effect of civil parties' participation in Cambodians' exercise of their legal, political and civil rights.³⁸ 'I do not have faith in the court as a whole and in the lead (civil parties) co-lawyers', she said.³⁹ Furthermore, she pointed out the failure of the

35 Theory C. Seng, *Daughter of the Killings Field: Asrei's Story* (London: Fusion Press, 2005).

36 Sebastian Strangio, 'From Tragedy to Sham in Cambodia', *Asia Times*, 19 November 2011.

37 'Theory Seng Withdraws Her Civil Party Status, Denounces ECCC as "Irredeemable Political Farce": Press Release', *KI-Media*, 15 November 2011, <<http://ki-media.blogspot.com/2011/11/theory-seng-withdraws-her-civil-party.html>> [accessed 20 January 2019].

38 Hinton, *The Justice Façade: Trials of Transition in Cambodia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 106–107.

39 Bridget DiCerto, 'KRT Critic Offers Poetic Justice', *The Phnom Penh Post*, 16 November 2011.

United Nations in monitoring the work of the Tribunal.⁴⁰ Finally, she presented her Poetic Justice Project (War Criminal Dart Game) as a way to 'reverse the negative impact' of the ECCC.



FIGURE 6. Theary Seng installing the Dart Game, Sisowath Quay, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 18 November 2012, Screenshot, video AP Archive.⁴¹

The first Dart Game was performed on 21 November 2011 in Phnom Penh at a very busy and well-known place, the corner of Sisowath Quay and Street 178, across the Foreign Correspondents' Club. The Poetic Justice Project consisted of huge photo-based portraits. Besides Pol Pot, Nuon Chea, Ieng Sary, Ieng Thirith and Khieu Samphan, there were Khmer Rouge commanders Meas Muth, Im Chaem and Ta An as well as the international leaders Mao Zedong, Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger. The posters were mounted on structures and red target circles were superimposed on the faces for dart practice. Each player received five darts. Bull's eye gave seven points. Victims, media and politicians such as Son Soubert and Long Botta, former Minister of Education in the Khmer Republic (1970–1975) joined Seng for the game. A second Dart Game was organized at the same spot on 5 December 2011. The police showed up on the two occasions. The first time, they intervened forty-five minutes into the game:

40 Robert Carmichael, 'Prominent Victims' Advocate Quits Khmer Rouge Tribunal', *VOA News*, 14 November 2011.

41 'Leaders Urge China to Start Talks over Islands, Police Scuffle with Protesters', online video recording, AP Archive, 31 July 2015, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xXYzHoNQiH8>> [accessed 20 September 2019].

Police: Do you have a permit to be here?

Theary Seng: Why do I need a permit? Do the people playing badminton have a permit?

P: They are playing games.

TS: So are we.

P: They don't disturb the peace.

TS: You're disturbing my peace.

P: They don't block pedestrian traffic.

TS: You haven't been paying attention. They block my traffic all the time when I am strolling.

P: Do you have a permit?

TS: I don't need a permit the way badminton players don't need a permit. I think you need to throw a few darts to release the tension.

P: They are exercising.

TS: I am exercising.⁴²

The second time, the police intervened twice, first to disperse the crowd under the pretext of making traffic announcements, then to intimidate Seng by asking her name. Far from being scared, she volunteered her name, mobile phone number, email and website addresses. As the policemen decided to write up a report, she also volunteered her age and marital status, and her opinions on a set of subjects, among them the role of women in society. The information blog *KI-Media*, affiliated with the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP)⁴³ and supportive of Seng's action, reported about the Dart Game. Readers' comments, however, were in part negative. Seng was blamed for not including portraits of Sihanouk and Ho Chi Minh among the targets. This was a fair point. Yet, *KI-Media* argued, Seng would hardly have found a print shop in Cambodia accepting to print King Sihanouk's portrait for a dart game. Other comments attacked Seng *ad hominem*, both for her emancipated lifestyle and her supposed affiliation to Hun Sen's CPP (a preposterous claim, given Seng's vocal position vis-à-vis

42 The exchange was reported by the blog *KI-Media*, see 'Photos from the Poetic Justice War Criminals Dart Game on the Riverfront in front of the FCC', *KI-Media*, 21 November 2011, <<https://kimedia.blogspot.com/search?q=Photos+from+the+Poetic+Justice+War+Criminals+Dart+Game+on+the+Riverfront>> [accessed 22 January 2019].

43 The Cambodia National Rescue Party was founded in 2012, merging the Sam Rainsy Party and the Human Rights Party. It became the main opposition party to the CPP. The Supreme Court in Cambodia dissolved it in November 2017 in the wake of its leader Kem Sokha's arrest on treason charge. Since then, the party's main figures have been in exile in Europe and the United States.

the ruling party).⁴⁴ In spite of this, the performance Seng organized around the effigies of Khmer Rouge and American perpetrators succeeded in producing a temporary critical public sphere.



FIGURE 7. Theary Seng making a statement after the Dart Game was disrupted by the police, 18 November 2012, Screenshot, video Michael Miller.⁴⁵

More than the Khmer Rouge perpetrators, it was the Tribunal itself that was the target. Seng made herself clear on the subject of the ECCC in a number of interventions. Case 002 is like ‘fast-food drive-through’, she said, referring to the speedy procedure. She compared the trial to a ‘Big Mac... but minus the meat, minus the lettuce, minus the tomatoes, and minus the pickles’. She explained that Cambodians perceived the top-down decisions of the ECCC as intrusive and patronizing. She called the Tribunal ‘junk justice for poor Cambodians’. She continued: ‘[Cambodians] have the feeling that the UN tells them: “you are insignificant, faceless, cheap – be thankful for the scraps of justice this ECCC is offering you; at least, it’s something”’.⁴⁶ International justice not only insulted the survivors, it also treated the dead as second-rate:

44 Photos from the Poetic Justice War Criminals Dart Game on the Riverfront in front of the FCC, *KI-Media*, 21 November 2011, <<https://kimedia.blogspot.com/search?q=Photos+from+the+Poetic+Justice+War+Criminals+Dart+Game+on+the+Riverfront>> [accessed 22 January 2019].

45 Michael Miller, ‘Theary Seng’s Darts Went Dark by Police Violence’, online video recording, YouTube, 18 November 2012, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uMXnQ68b6kY>> [accessed 20 September 2019].

46 Theary C. Seng, ‘Junk Justice’, *Theary C. Seng*, 13 December 2011, <<https://www.thearyseng.com/columnist/32-theary-sengs-blog/327-voa-mentally-unfit-ieng-thirith-surya-subedi->

My parents and other loved ones who passed away deserve more than crumbs and scraps from this ECCC that has the appearance of a court but is really a political farce that is mocking us, the living and loved ones, those who died.⁴⁷

Seng declared on several occasions that she saw the hearings as 'theatre performances' at best or even 'circus acts'.⁴⁸ In her view, the only possible response was to create something 'absurd' that would underline even more the farcical dimension of international justice in Cambodia. Interestingly, her assessment of the ECCC echoes the 'Response to the Opening Statement by the Prosecutor', given by Nuon Chea's defense counsel Michiel Pestman in the courtroom on 23 November 2011. The lawyer suggested that the ECCC needed a jester and he proposed to play the role. This was the conclusion of his strong indictment of the Tribunal's work, which he described as partial, biased, ridden with political interference and lacking any willingness (from the international side) to regain control over the legal procedures. Pestman even mentioned Seng's withdrawal as civil party and commented: 'When Civil Parties and Defense find common ground, there is a serious reason for concern'.⁴⁹

Obviously, it was not the idea of justice itself that Seng questioned, but the system through which justice is embodied and the double standards of the United Nations and other international (Western) institutions. According to her, this flawed version of the long-awaited trials deprived Cambodians from agency in the judicial process. In the courtroom, the civil parties had no power, contrarily to what the ECCC claimed. But this could be different in the street. There, law could be infused with bodily action. In this sense, the Dart Game may be construed as a performance of law, in which the perpetrators' effigies become the surrogates that allow postcolonial criticism of the failure of the ECCC and international justice in Cambodia. Moreover, the Dart Game constitutes a means of producing alternatives through which Cambodians may regain agency – or, as Roach writes, 'displaced ver-

junk-justice-poetic-justice-products-yuthethor-aid-chai-nuon-cheas-defense-chucks-email-theary-seng-withdraws-her-civil-party-status-denounces-eccc-as-qirredeemable-political-farceq> [accessed 20 January 2019].

47 'Seng Theary, ECCC spokesman Neth Pheaktra and RFA Leng Maly', *Call-in Show*, Radio Free Asia, 25 November 2011, 19:30.

48 Seng, 'Junk Justice'.

49 Michiel Pestman, 'Response to the Opening Statement by the Prosecutor', Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (23 November 2011), Document E146.1.

sions of the proscribed behaviors when performers test the limits of the law, incorporating innovations that would not have existed otherwise'.⁵⁰

The notion of agency, as involved in the Dart Game performance, does not only relate to the exercise of justice. It is (perhaps most of all) a matter of emotions, since the project encourages specific forms of externalizing anger. For years, Seng has been referring to the idea of the 'court of opinion' – in contradistinction to the 'court of law' – as a dimension where 'impressions, sentiments, history can be expressed', 'allowing people to rant, to talk about things that don't need to be verified but that is a catharsis of releasing emotions'.⁵¹ The Dart Game is a manifestation of the 'court of opinion', and what is stake in it is the potential of emotion to reorganize the public space. Seng seeks to devise new cultural forms of public expression that may serve as outlet for the victims of the Khmer Rouge regime in particular and for Cambodians in general. She conceives of anger as a socially accepted behavior, disconnected from negative connotations.⁵² Seng elaborates further on these aspects in the booklet accompanying the Poetic Justice Project. She explains that the 'poor man's therapy', her main goal, can be achieved either through amusement and relief or anger, grief, reconciliation and forgiveness. She links therapy to empowerment, the latter being associated with 'voice, creativity, ownership of our emotions, pain, healing'. In a 'therapeutic, dark comedic way', the Dart Game helps people 'creatively, poetically "get back" at those perpetrators'. It offers an emotional release 'for those of us who still want to get physical against the perpetrators'. While this release is only a phase in the process, it is nevertheless a phase that cannot be skipped. Without it, education (or 'edification' as the booklet puts it) cannot be fully effective.⁵³ In her 'Notes on Forgiveness', Seng writes more on these ideas. Referring to other post-genocide processes worldwide such as Fambul Tok in Sierra Leone, she tries to establish the difference between hate and anger. Hate is destructive for the individual and society and leads only to revenge. On the other hand, anger is defined as a positive force directed at acts rather than persons and sustaining the drive to justice.⁵⁴

50 Roach, pp. 55–56.

51 Interview conducted by Hinton on 29 June 2009. See Hinton, *The Justice Façade*, p. 99.

52 Alexander Hinton insists, correctly so, on the influence of Seng's Christian education (received in the United States) on her understanding of trauma, healing and social transformation. See Hinton, *The Justice Façade*, pp. 100–101.

53 *Association of Khmer Rouge Victims in Cambodia, Poetic Justice War Criminals Dart Game* (Phnom Penh: [n. pub.], 2011), pp. 1–2.

54 Ibid, p. 49.

As will be seen, in Seng's conception of human rights activism, justice goes far beyond the question of the ECCC and the prosecution of the Khmer Rouge. It has to be understood as social justice, in response to issues of structural violence and inequality in Cambodia.

On 18 November 2012, the Dart Game returned to the corner of Sisowath Quay and Street 178. This time, Kissinger's poster occupied center stage. The performance was organized at the occasion of American President Barack Obama's visit to Cambodia for the summit meeting of the ASEAN.⁵⁵ For the AKRVC, the presence of Obama in Phnom Penh was a 'great occasion [for the United States] to offer a much glaringly, painfully delayed apology to Khmer victims for the destruction of Cambodia – the illegal US bombings which enabled the diabolical rise of the Khmer Rouge'.⁵⁶ The association also asked for the extradition of 'war criminal Kissinger' to the ECCC. The Dart Game was again a performance of the law, since it expanded the Tribunal's temporal jurisdiction and therefore the range of perpetrators to be prosecuted.⁵⁷ Moreover, the AKRVC requested that the contentious Cases 003 and 004 (at the time, Meas Muth, Im Chaem and Ta An) be processed.⁵⁸ Once more, the highly political content of the Dart Game provoked reactions from the authorities. Seng and three members of her staff were playing, surrounded by a crowd and some 300 tourists, when twenty police officers and ten senior district officials in plain clothes intervened. They confiscated and destroyed some targets and yelled at the crowd: 'You are obstructing public order! We are security! We can do anything!' Seng was pushed and shoved. 'It's an authoritarian regime that wants a picture-perfect image for the summit and this does not accord with reality', she declared.⁵⁹

This was indeed a major issue for the Cambodian government, which quickly repressed the slew of protests Obama's presence had prompted. For example, the eight residents facing eviction near Phnom Penh air-

55 Luke Hunt, 'Kissinger in Cambodia', *Latitude: Views from around the World*, *New York Times*, 20 November 2012, <<https://latitude.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/20/protests-greet-obamas-visit-to-cambodia/>> [accessed 22 January 2019].

56 Seng quoted by *KI-Media*, 'Public Announcement of Poetic Justice War Criminals Dart Game, Prominently Featuring War Criminal Henry Kissinger, in Honor of US President Barack Obama's Visit', *KI-Media*, 18 November 2012, <<http://ki-media.blogspot.com/2012/11/public-announcement-poetic-justice-dart.html>> [accessed 20 January 2019].

57 The temporal jurisdiction of the ECCC covers only the period going from 17 April 1975 to 6 January 1979. This leaves the American carpet-bombing of Cambodia (1969–1973) out of the scope.

58 Cases 003 and 004 have been for years a matter of conflict between the international and the Cambodian judges (the latter trying regularly to dismiss them) and the subject of political interference from the higher echelons.

59 See Hunt, 'Kissinger in Cambodia'.

port who had painted the word 'SOS' on the rooftop of their house were briefly detained. On 21 November 2012, the Dart Game was on again, this time at a different location, the emblematic Boeung Kak Lake. The latter has been described in *The Phnom Penh Post* as the 'poster child of the Kingdom's land rights disputes'.⁶⁰ Early 2007, without any public consultation, Phnom Penh City Hall had granted the development firm Shukaku Inc. with a ninety-nine-years lease on the lake. Thousands of people living there were evicted and forced under police intimidation to accept the deal, which included either some monetary compensation or relocation twenty kilometers away from Phnom Penh (none of these meeting the obligations of international laws on eviction). Moreover, the planned transformation of the area into a mix-used development zone damaged the eco-system and deprived many people from both a popular site of entertainment and a means of subsistence. According to Amnesty International, the expulsions at Boeung Kak were the largest forced evictions since the Khmer rouge emptied Phnom Penh in April 1975. Citizens fought back and this gave birth to a strong group of activists. It was with them that Seng demonstrated on that day of November 2012. This pointed to the emergence of a potential new function of the perpetrator effigy as a socially transversal means of struggle for human rights, democracy and social justice.

Conclusion

The paper and scroll introduced different kinds of performance organized around the faces or effigies of Khmer Rouge perpetrators. In the different cases reviewed, these performances (of education and law) did not relate only to the past, operating as a safety valve for issues of grief and revenge. Instead, they articulated reactions to the past with forms of protest and social criticism in the present. In that respect, the faces of the senior Khmer Rouge can be understood as surrogate sites or surfaces onto which Cambodians express their reactions to structural violence, especially in relation to political power and governance. Moreover, they suggest a redefinition of the role of affect – in this case anger – in the formation of the public sphere and civil society in Cambodia. Anger is no longer an emotion that is controlled and released at will by the state, as it was the case with the Day of Anger for example,

60 Ananth Baliga and Khouth Sphak Chakrya, 'Boeung Kak: A Disastrous Decade', *The Phnom Penh Post*, 3 February 2017.

or framed by traditions. Instead, it becomes a means of expression that can be channeled toward issues of social justice and human rights.

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