

S21:

The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine

A Film by
Rithy Panh

2003, 35mm, 101 Minutes, Color
Khmer with English subtitles



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Synopsis

In Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, S21 was the main “Security Bureau,” or detention center. Located in the heart of Phnom Penh, some 17,000 prisoners were tortured, interrogated and then executed there from 1975 to 1979. Only three of them are still alive.

S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine is an attempt to understand how the Communist Party of Democratic Kampuchea (the *Angkar*, or Organization) organised and implemented its policy of systematic elimination.

For some three years, Rithy Panh and his team undertook an investigation involving not only the survivors, but also their former torturers. They persuaded both groups to return to the actual site of what was formerly S21, now converted into a Genocide Museum, to face their past.

Words cannot suffice to describe what took place there. The implacable and meticulous operation of the machinery of carefully planned murder is beyond our understanding. It is as though the conscience cannot take it in, as if the story cannot be put into words. But the evidence remains – photographs, archives, and the place itself – which bring back images from the past. There is also the memory buried deeply inside the bodies of the former inhabitants of S21, that of gestures and routines, that can spring up out of the unconscious as in a nightmare.

The victims, who have been forced by the law of terror to abandon all points of reference of their former lives, have only bureaucratic traces or the pain of their own scars to remind them of what happened.

The former torturers, the ordinary and obscure journeymen of the genocide, those who aided and abetted (out of conviction, blindness or terror), who enabled the everyday operation of S21, have remained alone with their horrific secrets. Asking them to reconsider these murders, helping them to unlock their memories and agree to meet their former victims has been a long and slow process. But were they hoping that speaking could free them from their past?

The leaders, those who were truly responsible for what happened, are walled in by their denials of any responsibility. This process does not concern them.

The singularity of the film lies in the confrontation between those who escaped and want to understand, so that they can pass on what happened and protect future generations, and their jailers, who seem to be stupefied to relive the horror to which they contributed.

It is necessary for certain things to be said to return to the victims their destiny and their memory. They must also be said so that reflection about the past can help in the construction of the present.

The New York Times

ON THE WEB

Former Khmer Rouge Leader Admits Genocide

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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PHNOM PENH, Cambodia (AP) -- A former Khmer Rouge leader expected to face a U.N. tribunal acknowledged Tuesday there is "no more doubt left" that his regime committed genocide, the first admission of the communist group's collective guilt.

Khieu Samphan's surprising statement in an interview with The Associated Press is a major step in the long overdue effort to bring to justice those responsible for the deaths of 1.7 million Cambodians during the ultra-leftist group's 1975-79 rule.

Many of the victims were executed; the rest died of starvation, disease and overwork in the Khmer Rouge's attempt to create an agrarian utopia. Now, with an agreement on a tribunal earlier this month between U.N. and Cambodian officials, ex-Khmer Rouge leaders should soon face charges for the first time.

A former head of state and one of the few top Khmer Rouge leaders still alive, Khieu Samphan, 72, is certain to be indicted. Speaking by telephone from his home, he apparently hoped to begin giving his version of Cambodia's bloody history before his likely prosecution for genocide and crimes against humanity.

He insisted he never ordered any killings -- and claimed he only learned from a documentary two months ago about the extent of the Khmer Rouge's crimes.

"Everything has to go the trial's way now, and there's no other way," he said. "I have to prepare myself not to let the time pass away. But I also want the public to understand about me, too. I was not involved in any killings."

Until Tuesday, none of the Khmer Rouge's top leaders had publicly accepted that the government committed genocide.

But Khieu Samphan said he realized he could no longer ignore the Khmer Rouge's atrocities after he saw a documentary about the notorious S-21 prison, presented to him by a Cambodian-French filmmaker, Rithy Pan.

"When I saw the film, it was hard for me to deny (the killings). There's no more doubt left," said Khieu Samphan, who lives in Pailin, 175 miles northwest of the capital, Phnom Penh.

“I was surprised because I never thought it (the regime) went to that extent in its policies. S-21 was in the middle of Phnom Penh. It was clearly a state institution. It was part of the regime.”

Until he saw the film, he said he had reserved his judgment about the prison’s existence and atrocities.

As many as 16,000 people are believed to have passed through the gates of the infamous prison but only 14 are thought to have survived. The prison is now the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum.

None of the Khmer Rouge’s surviving leadership has faced justice. Many are infirm but - like Khieu Samphan -- live and move freely in the country. Pol Pot, the regime’s supremo, died in 1998.

After five years of negotiations, U.N. and Cambodian officials tentatively agreed this month on steps to set up the tribunal. But the court's creation has been delayed by a lack of funds and by political instability after Cambodia's inconclusive general elections left three parties jostling to create a coalition.

U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan plans to launch an appeal in early February for contributions toward the tribunal’s \$40 million operating budget. Sok An, the Cambodian government's chief negotiator for setting up the court, has said its formalization will be “addressed immediately” once a new legislature is formed.

The other senior leader expected to face trial is Nuon Chea, the former Khmer Rouge’s ideologue, who also lives in Pailin. He and Khieu Samphan surrendered to the government in December 1998, just a few months before the capture of Ta Mok, the former Khmer Rouge army chief, which capped the final collapse of the movement.

Ta Mok and Kaing Guek Iev, the S-21 prison's chief, are now in prison.

Interview with Rithy Panh

Why did you make the film?

I made *S21, the Khmer Rouge killing machine* out of conviction, but also because I think it is necessary. Filming means being with other people, body and soul. I owe my life to those who died, I have debts to repay to them. Committing myself to those who are alive is also a duty. My way of carrying out my share of the work of remembrance is by talking and by providing a platform for the witnesses of the genocide, both victims and torturers. I would like to think that each testimony is one small stone that helps to build up a rampart against a threat that is always possible, both here and elsewhere: the return of barbarism.

How did you convince the former executioners to talk?

I explained to them that I was not the public prosecutor, and that my film was not a courtroom. That if they came to the shoot in peace, they would also leave in peace. That talking could help them to be more at ease with themselves. But that this would not mean, with respect to the victims and their families, that my work would enable them to wash their hands of the crimes they have committed. This film is a space for dialogue in which each individual accepts his responsibilities in relation to history.

Do you have a working method?

All my documentary work is based on listening. I do not fabricate events. I create a situation – in this case by returning to S21, which has today become the Tuol Sleng genocide museum – so that the former Khmers Rouges can reflect on their actions and so that the victims can say what they lived through. I try to frame the history in the most human terms possible, on a daily basis, at the level experienced by each individual. With Houy and his former S21 comrades, I tried to find out what there was inside them that remained human when they carried out their actions: What were they thinking of when they raised their hands to kill? What had become of their feelings and their education? What kind of conditioning enables hatred to triumph and holds back all compassion? I reject the idea that in every human being there is a murderer lying dormant. Admittedly good and evil are inside us, but we do not all become murderers.

Did Houy and the others find it easy to talk?

Houy, the deputy head of security, Khân the torturer, and Thi who kept the registers at the S21 centre are capable of explaining how the eradication machine functioned. On the other hand, as soon as I asked them to specify their own role in the mechanism, they were unable to find the words. One does not forget oneself by chance; it is very hard to talk about murders one has committed. I was discussing with them the topics I wanted to raise, and then I confronted them with the evidence: the photograph of a prisoner who had committed suicide, the infirmary register or the execution register, the testimony of their former comrades, or the words of those who escaped ... But each time it was a battle. I had to alternate surprise effects and periods of reflection, and avoid routine so that they could not reconstitute their defence system. When one of them did not acknowledge his actions or tried to limit their scope, he knew that he was taking the risk of being confronted with his own contradictions.

You also filmed scenes in which men repeat the gestures they carried out 25 years ago...

At the start of the shoot, one day when we were at Pœuv's home, in the village, he showed me how he closed the door of the room at S21 that he guarded. Looking at the rushes, I saw that his gesture was prolonging his words, and I discovered that another memory existed: the memory of the body, sharper, more precise, unable to lie. Under the Khmer Rouge regime, words had become weapons, they had lost their ordinary meaning. There was no communication, just ideology. When there is no longer any language, violence gains the upper hand.

Pœuv was 12 or 13 years old when he became a guard at S21. He was indoctrinated, "educated" to hit the prisoners. When we did the shoot at Tuol Sleng, something clicked into place inside him: like a forgotten automatic mechanism that was suddenly switched on again, he began to repeat the gestures of the past. Pœuv is like a child who has been beaten, and when he re-enacts these gestures, all the pain that has been contained inside him for years submerges him. It is not theatricalisation. This is particularly true in that everything takes place in a very specific order: he calls the prisoner by his number, blindfolds him and puts the handcuffs on him before freeing his feet. If he had done this in another way, "the enemy of the people" might have struggled, or thrown himself out of the window. The mechanics of the gestures were meticulously established and taught. Pœuv had learnt them. He had become a cog in the machine.

Why are you so interested in details?

Because it is through the details that one can perceive the everyday reality of S21 and grasp the meticulousness of the organisation. According to the ideological line of the Khmers Rouges, any "suspect" was potentially a "counter-revolutionary enemy", and it was essential to make him confess this to justify his elimination. Violence and psychological pressure were officially recommended to achieve this aim. The obvious incoherence of the alleged "conspiracies", the absurdity of the confessions forced out of victims under torture were not a problem. What was needed was confessions, so that the files could be filled in. The juxtaposition of the savagery of the interrogations and the maniacal attention to clerical detail in the constitution, classification and conservation of archives (photographs, biographies, confessions) is terrifying.

From the emotional viewpoint, other details left a mark on me. They bear witness, at the very heart of the genocide machine, to the resistance of a form of dignity that is profoundly human. It is these little things, these unsubstantial details, so slight and fragile, which make us what we are. You can never entirely "destroy" a human being. A trace always remains, even years later... Revolt, resistance, a refusal to accept humiliation can sometimes be conveyed by a look of defiance, a chin slightly raised, a refusal to capitulate under the blows... The photographs of certain prisoners and the confessions conserved at Tuol Sleng are there to remind us of it.

And what about Nath, one of the S21 survivors. What did he feel about the filming?

For Nath, the effort required was painful and violent, physically and psychologically, before each meeting, and even afterwards... I admire this man's dignity, I can find no words that can adequately describe his courage. His presence, facing his torturers, made it possible to specify who was the victim, who was responsible, who executed the orders...

There is nothing worse than a former torturer who continues to believe that he acted in accordance with the law, a former torturer who does not recognise the barbarism of his actions. The former jailers could not lie in front of Nath. Even when silent, he acted as a "developer", revealing the secrets of their souls.

Nath, who I began filming in 1991, has never stopped calling for a trial for the Khmers Rouges, even at the time when some were talking about drawing a veil over the past in the interest of reconciliation. But reconciliation cannot be achieved in a vacuum.

Nath has never known for which crime he was arrested, nor why he survived rather than someone else. He is haunted by these questions. But how can he tell his children that he is innocent? That he is not the forgotten remnant of a massacre?

He has written a book about his detention in S21, "*A Cambodian Prison Portrait: One year in the Khmer Rouge's S21*". This film was in his view the logical next step in expressing his commitment to the victims.

One day, the trial of the Khmer Rouge leaders will finally take place. What are your thoughts on this matter?

Passing judgement on the Khmers Rouges is essential. It means asserting the will of a state of law. No-one can commit a genocide and get away with it. But justice is only one stage in the process. The trial must be accompanied by an effort of memory to protect future generations.

What have you learned from these three years of work?

"*Understanding everything is almost the same as forgiving*", said Primo Lévi, who has been my guide over the whole period. But you cannot understand everything. Trying to do so has enabled me to start the process of mourning.

A film remains something subjective, and I did not experience *S21, the Khmer Rouge killing machine* as a "mission". But we must come to terms with our collective history. I do not want to leave this burden to our children. A time will come when they will be able to turn the page and be confident about the world around them. The ghosts will then stop haunting the living.

Cambodia, chronology

1953: Independence of Cambodia

1969: Beginning of U.S. bombardments of Viet Cong positions set up in Cambodia.

1970: A coup led by Lon Nol overthrows Prince Norodom Sihanouk, triggering a civil war.

1975 – 1978:

Phnom Penh is taken by the Khmers Rouges (17 April 1975).

Evacuation of the towns, abolition of the currency, closure of the borders, collectivisation of the land, elimination of people linked to the former regime, a series of internal purges of the Party. The successive displacements of the population and the lack of organisation in the countryside result in gigantic famines. Over the four year period that the Democratic Kampuchea regime lasted, almost two million people died.

War with Vietnam following Khmer Rouge incursions into Vietnamese territory.

1979: Phnom Penh is taken by the Vietnamese on 7 January.

The fall of the Khmers Rouges and the beginning of the Vietnamese occupation.

1980: The former prison S21 became the genocide museum.

1991: Paris peace agreements.

1993: Elections boycotted by the Khmers rouges.

1996: Some Khmer Rouge forces rally to the new regime.

Royal amnesty granted to the former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Democratic Kampuchea, Ieng Sary, when he agrees to support the government.

1998: Death of Pol Pot on the Thai border (April).

Surrender of the last remaining Khmer Rouge leaders (December).

2001: Passing of the law to set up special courts to judge the Khmers Rouges.

This film could not have been made without the participation of:

Vann Nath, *painter*
Chum Mey, *public works department mechanic*
survivors of S21

Him Houy, *deputy head of Santébal*
Prâk Khân, *member of the interrogation group*
Sours Thi, *head of registers*
Nhiem Ein, *photographer*
Khieu Ches ("Pœuv") *guard*
Tcheam Sêur, *guard*
Nhieb Ho, *guard*
Som Meth, *guard*
Top Pheap, *interrogator - typist*
Peng Kry, *driver*
Mâk Thim, *doctor*
Former Khmer Rouge personnel at S21

and

Ta Him & Yeay Cheu
Parents of Huoy

and with the support of:

Mr Youk Chhang
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and
the Tuol Sleng-S21 Genocide Museum

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Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Ministry of Culture
Phnom Penh City Hall

Rithy Panh

Born in 1964 at Phnom Penh.

From 1975 onwards, like all his compatriots, he was forced to work in the Khmer Rouge labour camps. In 1979 he managed to escape and reach the Mairut refugee camp in Thailand. One year later he moved to France and in 1985 he was admitted to IDHEC (Institut des Hautes Etudes Cinématographiques).

Filmography

- **Site II** (documentary), 1989
"Grand Prix de la SCAM" for the Best Creative Documentary of 1989.
"Grand Prix du Documentaire", Amiens International Festival of 1989.
- **Souleymane Cissé** (documentary), 1990.
Portrait of the Malian film-maker for the series "Cinéma de notre temps".
- **Cambodge, entre guerre et paix** / "Cambodia, between war and peace" (documentary), 1992
- **"NEAK SRE" Les Gens de la Rizière** / "NEAK SRE" The people of the rice field (fictional feature film), 1993-94.
Cannes International Film Festival 1994, official selection, in competition.
Silver Screen Award, Best performance by an actress, (Singapore).
Special Jury Prize (Hawaii).
- **The Tan's Family** (documentary), 1995
- **Bophana, une tragédie cambodgienne** / "Bophana, a Cambodian tragedy (documentary), 1996
Audience Prize, "Vu sur le Doc" (Marseilles).
"URTI" Silver Medal, Best Creative Documentary, 37th International Television Festival (Monte Carlo).
Special Jury Prize, International Television Festival, Sendai (Japan)
- **Un soir après la guerre** / "One evening after the war" (Fictional feature film), 1996 - 1997
Cannes International Film Festival 1998, Official selection, "Un certain Regard".
- **10 films contre 110 000 000 de Mines** / "10 films against 110 million mines" (short films on Cambodia, documentary), 1997
- **Van Chan, une danseuse cambodgienne** / "Van Chan, a Cambodian dancer" (documentary), 1998
- **La terre des âmes errantes** / "The land of the wandering souls", 1999
"Réal 2000" Grand Prix, Festival du Réel (France)
Prix Louis Marcorelles, French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Festival du Réel Documentary Prize, Vision du réel (Nyon, Switzerland)
Documentary Prize (Festival des films francophones, Namur, Belgium)
Documentary Prize (Festival dei Popoli, Florence, Italy)
Documentary Grand Prix (Traces de vies, Clermont-Ferrand)
Laurier du Sénat, Découverte et Prospective category (France)
Golden Gate Award (San Francisco, U.S.A.)
Golden Matchstick, Amnesty International (Amsterdam, Netherlands)
Global Television Grand Prix (Banff, Canada)
Sony International Critics' Prize (Banff, Canada)
Grand Prix - Frances & Robert Flaherty Prize (Yamagata, Japan)
Special Award to the International Jury
(International Three Continents Festival of Documentaries, Argentina)
- **Que la barque se brise, Que la jonque s'entrouvre** / "Let the boat break its back, Let the junk break open" (fictional film made for TV), 2000
- **S21, the Khmer Rouge killing machine** (documentary), 2002
- **Le peuple d'Angkor** / "The people of Angkor" (documentary, in process)

Credits

<i>A film by</i>	<i>Rithy Panh</i>
<i>Cameramen</i>	<i>Prum Mésar, Rithy Panh</i>
<i>Sound engineer</i>	<i>Sear Vissal</i>
<i>Editing</i>	<i>Marie-Christine Rougerie, Isabelle Roudy</i>
<i>Assistant directors</i>	<i>Then Nan Dæun, Ræun Narith</i>
<i>Control room</i>	<i>Ros Sareth</i>
<i>Original music</i>	<i>Marc Marder</i>
<i>Sound editing and mixing</i>	<i>Myriam René</i>
<i>Executive producers</i>	<i>Liane Willemont, Aline Sasson</i>

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Ina

ARTE France

<i>Documentary Programmes Unit</i>	<i>Thierry Garrel</i>
<i>Programme Executive</i>	<i>Pierre Merle</i>
<i>Executive Production – Ina</i>	<i>Dana Hastier</i>
<i>Producer</i>	<i>Cati Couteau</i>