

Summary

Young Cambodians, those born after 1979, have a hard time dealing with the Khmer Rouge experiences and memories of their parents, as they are not being well taught about the regime and are facing questionable portrayals of that time. A complex internal struggle for truth and reconciliation occurs in various ways in Cambodia. I believe that the current representation of the Tuol Sleng photographic archive functions as a remarkable metaphor for the spider's web of complex issues related to the Khmer Rouge years. Tuol Sleng, built as a high school, functioned as a prison and interrogation center under Khmer Rouge rule. Now operating as the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, the walls display black and white photographs of anonymous people. Yet the photos originally were taken by the Khmer Rouge to create an identification database of their enemies.

The main objective of this research focuses on the role of photography in the archive practices, historiography and memory of the Democratic Kampuchea era, 1975 – 1979. The Tuol Sleng photographs have three important purposes nowadays; they function as an archive, as evidence and as a monument. The chapters of this research are formulated according to those three pillars in order to investigate the main research question; what roles does photography play in the archive practices, historiography and memory of Democratic Kampuchea (1975 – 1979)? Chapter 1 explains the different roles that the archive as a corpus can fulfill throughout time. The first half of this chapter covers the role of the archive in Cambodia's historiography to shifting functions of archives through time. The second part of chapter 1 looks at the role of the archive in the art discourse and the materiality of the archive. In chapter 2 I take the single image as a basis in terms of representation and evidential purposes. The first part of the second chapter investigates the level of transparency in the photographs for evidential purposes from the perspective of the photographer as an eyewitness. Several concepts of time with an emphasis on the spectator's role are applied to the photographs in the next part of chapter 2. Finally, 'presence' and 'absence' issues in photography and the photograph as interface are elucidated in the last part of the second chapter. The third chapter of my research takes a more psychological point of view as this photographic archive is being linked to concepts of memory. After an introduction on photography as participation in another person's mortality and vulnerability and the 'memento mori' concept, I investigate to what extent a facial identification photograph, or mug shot, can be an object of contemplation and how it functions in a memorial site. I close chapter 3 with an account on universal laws of entropy in the digital age, a view on fading memories and fading photographs.

In general, I can conclude that the Tuol Sleng archive fails in functioning in the historical and educational discourse. The disconnection between Cambodia's written historiography and visual historiography – in other words the portrayed people (subjects of the mug shots) who do not literally represent the Cambodians who wrote memoirs (part of the historiography) – in combination with the inaccurate interpretation of the Khmer Rouge system that was established through the art discourse in the nineteen-nineties become interesting conclusions when linked to the reliability and evidence qualities of the photographs in terms of the current Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) tribunal. The question whether the prisoner portraits can function as pieces of evidence appears problematic. But based on the relation between photography and memory; the mug shots undoubtedly are the most significant aspect of the Tuol Sleng memorial. On the other hand, when defining a monument as a peaceful place for commemoration and preservation I argue that the Cambodian prisoner portraits fail to meet the needs of many visitors. Both the discussions on photographic evidence and photography and memory derive from the medium that is used.

As lines between perpetrators, victims and bystanders become blurred in a more nuanced historiography – even the Khmer Rouge's criminal-identification system could not distinguish between prisoners and KR employees – research should be done at the very basic level: the original archive. Organizing and researching the physical material will contribute to knowledge, and factual contextualization will transcend the violence focus and anxiety that

covers Tuol Sleng nowadays. Despite the fact that the archive seems digitally accessible; no digital representation is accurately contextualized. Cambodian youth, among others, remain disconnected from the archive, although they do have access to the Internet and wish to reconcile national history. I conclude that an archive (and its representation) that is barely open for research and spreads unnecessary obscurity is unable to function as a place for commemoration, but I do see a direct link between the two aspects. Unknown or unclear facts contribute to noise in the perception and understanding of people. As 'symbols' without context, these photographs now lay the unstable foundation for people's memory and a nation's reconciliation.

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