

MONTAGE OR FAKE NEWS?

AKADEMIE DER KÜNSTE

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Irradiés – Irradiated

Rithy Panh



Rithy Panh (Regie), *Irradiés*, 2020, Film Still. © RPanh

One day, as I was talking to Marceline Loridan-Ivens (who was deported to Birkenau concentration camp at the age of 15), we started to discuss how we still felt about our respective experiences after all these years.¹ It was astonishing how much we had in common: the lack of sleep, the dead that keep coming back, the persistent insomnia.

I wanted to do something about these recollections – the particular kind of pain you share after experiencing a tragedy. Is it contagious? Is it passed on from one generation to the next? All sorts of questions emerge, which are not limited to genocidal crimes but are also relevant for someone who has experienced familial abuse, for instance, or lives in an environment of absolute moral authority. How do you cope with this kind of traumatization? I made this film with that in mind, but also with the notion that something isn't working with how we live and treat our history, with how we process our memories. What's faulty is our lack of education, our lack of reference points, how quick off the mark we are with an immediate gesture, quick to rattle off facts, without taking a step back, without analysing things first.

I started without any preconceived idea. I worked according to what I felt, in terms of how this feeling lingered, and how an image resonated, physically and morally. I did not try to com-

pile a catalogue of humanity's misfortunes; I simply captured those images that echoed with my own experience. My aim was to revisit the origins of the violence of all-out war, the objective of which is to eradicate everything in one fell swoop. Chemical weapons were used during the First World War, then the Italians tried out chemical bombs on the Ethiopians; then there were the gas chambers with Zyklon B, followed by atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. After the plutonium and hydrogen bombs came napalm, Agent Orange. We have now arrived at bacteriological warfare.

I know the pain and devastation of a bombardment, the searing pain of a napalm burn, the sound of bodies being thrown into a pit. I started with all of this, by trying to translate it into images, by trying to differentiate between what was traumatic on both a physical and a moral level. I traversed the entire scenario in my mind's eye, up to the characteristic culmination of total destruction: the atomic bomb.

The image is shocking. The question of whether to show it or not, keeps coming up. Yet the image never manages to match true violence. It's only a recollection, an echo, which calls to mind a violent situation. The magazine *Esprit* wrote about this issue, as discussed between Claude Lanzmann and Georges Didi-Huberman. Claude Lanzmann said that if he had come across this kind of an image of destruction, he would have destroyed it; Georges Didi-Huberman argued that it should be shown. *Cahiers du cinéma* stated that we should be free to use any image we choose. I understand both points of view. My approach is more about working with the echo, with the image as an archaeological reverberation. It is interpreted, subjective, imparts a reality, my reality, which I cannot articulate in words. The reality of pain, which I cannot vocalise. I needed a way to do so.

How should one contemplate a dead body? And how the irreverence with which it is treated? Mass destruction, mass burial ... I tried to transform the image of a burnt body so that people would look at it differently. I don't know if I succeeded: I suggest something, suggest a detail, silence, a sound in one's head which is curiously louder because of the silence of the image, than if accompanied by actual sound. Sometimes you hear more in the stillness of an image than if it is set to music or is accompanied by other sounds.

When everything was mass, I searched for a foothold, an idea, to see it in another light. I chose a triptych to acknowledge

a need conjugated by detail and repetition; this repetition is intentional, it is requisite. It gives me the impression of embodying the echo, both present yet distant. But perhaps it also incorporates the repetition of history.

At a time when societies are debating the demolition of statues, the censorship of films and books, I sense just how important pedagogy is, how essential it is that we are committed to learning about history rather than the politicisation of memories. I sense how crucial it is for the cinema to remain free, because to understand reality you need art. And also awareness. In the same way that paintings and drawings in the caves of Lascaux tell us something about a form of expression and thought, we too have the need to express ourselves in other ways than just with words. This is why there is butoh. Butoh is an expression of the body born of the atomic bomb. At that time, the Americans forbade people from talking about the atomic bomb, so dancers used their bodies as a means of expression. A thought cannot be silenced. As always in my films, I return to gesture. This is where cinema is interesting: to present the body, not as a corpse but as a human being, right up to the point of being buried; and to depict the infinitely smallest components (DNA) to the infinitely large (the sun).

With *Irradiés* I wanted to follow this course so that we might be able to see – to take a second look. So that it leads to analysis. Memory is always repetitive. Through repetition I hope that reminiscence leads to reflection. When you don't speak, memories return. We have to find a way to speak and to observe. We haven't used images to educate in this way. With *Irradiés* I'm offering another set of tools. I will understand if this approach is rejected, but I'll take the chance.

Is poetry impossible after Auschwitz? I plead for more poetry, more creativity, more freedom ...

¹ Editorial note: During the reign of the Khmer Rouge Rithy Panh spent several years of his youth in a camp.