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Authors	Iordanova, Dina
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Perpetrator Cinema: Confronting Genocide in Cambodian Documentary, by Raya Morag. Wallflower Press/Columbia University Press, 2020, 312 pp.

Dina Iordanova

The book under review is not brand new. In fact, it was published during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, 2020, as a follow up to the author's 2013 study, *Waltzing with Bashir: Perpetrator Trauma and Cinema*. Having started this series of investigations with 2009's *Defeated Masculinity: Post-Traumatic Cinema in the Aftermath of War*, Morag has worked on the matter of "paradigms of perpetratorhood", scrutinising representations of the figure of the perpetrator and the bystander as they confront the victim face-to-face in documentary film from places of conflict from around the globe for quite a few years. She continues to do so now.[1]

For me, the interest in her work came in the context of my own writing and research into documentaries that chronicled perpetrators and trauma victims in the films that featured the wars of Yugoslav succession. In 2001, I published *Cinema of Flames: Balkan Film, Culture and the Media* about the films made internationally in response to the Bosnian war. My active research on the way villains and victims were treated in film only went as far as 2000, when the manuscript was submitted. I had to draw the line at a time when there were already quite a few films featuring perpetrators (such as Arkan, Radovan Karadzic, Ratko Mladic and others). Yet films dealing with perpetrators and genocidal practices continued to appear, revealing, for example, camp experiences, sexual exploitation, the Srebrenica genocide and the Hague trials. They continue to appear today. Just in the past year two major documentaries (*Bigger than Trauma* (*Veće od Traume*, Vedrana Pribacic, North Macedonia, 2023) and *Silence of Reason* (*Šutnja razuma*, Kumjana Novakva, Croatia, 2023)) that directly deal with these matters have been released. New important writing has been published, too, most notably by Aida Vidan and Dijana Jelača.

Yet in all the healing and the discourse on trauma that has been taking place in the post-Yugoslav realm, there have been little face-to-face confrontations between perpetrators and victims. Of course, many such confrontations took place in the context of the Hague trials—and they have been extensively explored on film. Encounters similar to The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa or The Truth Process in Cambodia have yet to materialise. Many across these lands glorify the perpetrators. It is not easy.

This is why I believe it is so important—when we reflect on the aftermath of genocidal violence—to widen the horizons and not dwell on one specific regional scenario of conflict. The patterns we have seen in the wars of Yugoslavia's succession have kept repeating again

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and again, and they have been captured in films like Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog* (*Nuit et brouillard*, France, 1955) through Lordan Zafranovic's *Jasenovac: The Cruelest Death Camp of All Times* (*Krv i pepeo Jasenovca*, Yugoslavia, 1983) and Helke Sander's *Liberators Take Liberties* (*BeFreier und BeFreite*, Germany, 1992), to name just a few. There are, however, many more films that address different angles of what Morag calls "perpetrator trauma" featuring confrontations from Indonesia to Israel, as well as some most recent films about the Ukrainian war, like the remarkable "intercepted footage" short *Occupant: War and Peace in a Russian Soldier's Phone* (*Окупант. Війна і мир у телефоні російського солдата*, Mikhailo Tkac, Ukraine, 2022).[2] All these films go beyond collecting testimonies in that they suggest a next logical step: post-traumatic confrontation with the perpetrators.

I see quite a few scholars today writing on documentary representations of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, yet I realise many among them are not familiar with the work of Morag. When I recommend it, some react reticently, as if wondering in what way could a work on Cambodia in the 1970s and its aftermath be of relevance to the conflict in Ukraine today. Such reactions remind me of my own response to a colleague who recommended a piece on the adverse workings of media in Kashmir at a time when I was working on the breakup of Yugoslavia. I could not immediately see the relevance. Until I realised that even if the two places were geographically remote, the way propaganda worked in spreading the conflict was pretty much the same. It was a breakthrough. Today I believe that we must approach the study of conflict in these wider transnational frameworks.

It is precisely the supranational approach to trauma and perpetratorhood adopted by Morag that makes her work so compelling. In this current book, her focus is mostly (but not exclusively) on films from Cambodia, where survivors confront their perpetrators face to face, some from the Khmer Rouge tribunal in 2006, others from different occasions. New truths are born in the interstices of these encounters, and a way forward appears, painfully and painstakingly.

Perpetrator Cinema is as much a contribution to the philosophical discipline of ethics as it is to film studies and to the studies of the Cambodian genocide, in the context of which some 1.7 million lives were lost. Raya Morag's name is among those who have done stellar work on highlighting the contribution of Rithy Panh, who is deservedly regarded as the most important documentarian of the genocide. But Morag discusses other films as well, many made in Cambodia, and many in places like Australia, France and the US. A key feature of her approach is that she surveys films made in many countries and contexts, some by local Cambodians, some by those in the diaspora and some by directors of other nationalities. In her choices, she reveals the importance of accounting for narration's shifting positions.

It is all part and parcel of the perennial question "who can speak?" A native of Jerusalem, Morag teaches at the university there, and spent most of her life in Israel. Some of her writing is informed by conflict and trauma she has observed locally—but a lot is based on researching other cultures, such as distant Cambodia. And in this respect her work is pathbreaking. Her research into films from a country to which she herself does not belong, in a language she doesn't speak and relating to a conflict that has had no direct bearing on her personal life is meticulous and extensive. Her right to speak is granted by her persistent and profound engagement with the systematic uncovering of perpetrator tropes.

The book is structured in four parts and an epilogue. The first chapter is dedicated to defining the phenomenon, and here Morag's theoretical contributions are gathered (in addition

to some important observations in the epilogue). “Interrogating the perpetrator figure in world documentary cinema”, she writes, “posits a research perspective aimed at advancing the study of the perpetrator as an inevitably synchronal and thus interconnected, complimentary field of research, a central part of current cultural memory” (21). She then proceeds to explore, attentively and in detail, various paradigms, showing how moral resentment manifests and settles in the context of reconciliation efforts. The chapter on Gendered Genocide resonated with me quite deeply. I have not seen the films discussed, and yet the protagonists and their ordeal came to life, triggering intense reflection and bringing new insights.

In her work, Morag continues (and supersedes) work on documentary film and ethics carried out by people like Bill Nichols, Elizabeth Cowie, Brian Winston and Patricia Zimmermann. Her discussion in the book on Cambodia ranges widely, from the Shoah and Nazi Germany, through PTSD and disillusionment in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, to Kosovo and Iraq. So many other conflicts. So much to think about.

Notes

[1] Since the publication of *Perpetrator Cinema: Confronting Genocide in Cambodian Documentary*, I have heard Raya Morag speaking twice on the subject: first in June 2021 as part of the online panel-launch of the edited collection *The Cinema of Rithy Panh: Everything Has a Soul*, to which she contributed an essay entitled “Rithy Panh, Jean Améry, and the Paradigm of Moral Resentment”, and then once again at the Visible Evidence conference in Gdańsk in summer 2022.

[2] This shocking film is available on YouTube with English subtitles. At the time of writing in September 2023, it has been viewed more than four million times.

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Silence of Reason [*Šutnja razuma*]. Directed by Kumjana Novakva, Metar 60, 2023.

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Dina Iordanova has written on the Bosnian war and other ethnic conflict in the Balkans. With this background, she finds Raya Morag's propositions related to "perpetrator cinema" of great interest. Iordanova is an Emeritus Professor of global cinema at the University of St Andrews in Scotland.