Transcript: Deirdre Boyle

Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: A podcast to think with and about documentary films.

STL: In this episode, Alisa interviews Deirdre Boyle, Professor Emerita of Media Studies at the New School and a media historian, a critic, a curator, and a psychotherapist. She is the author of the recent book, *Ferryman of Memories: the Films of Rithy Panh* (2023).

Alisa, can you tell us a little bit about who Rithy Panh is?

AL: Rithy Panh is a famous Cambodian director, probably the most famous Cambodian director, and he makes documentaries and fiction films. But despite being nominated for an Academy Award in 2013 for his remarkable autobiographical documentary *The Missing Picture*.

STL: That's the one that uses figurines to portray his family's experiences during the killing fields of the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia.

AL: Yeah, that one, which did get a lot of acclaim. Nonetheless, he's still relatively unknown to the English speaking world.

STL: And Deirdre Boyle's book is an attempt to change that.

AL: Yeah, exactly. I think it's a great way into Rithy Panh's films. I learned so much reading it and I caught up with her soon after it came out.

STL: Great. Let's go to the interview.

AL: So we're doing this interview. It's only a few days after you've launched your new book*, Ferryman of Memories: The Films of Rithy Panh*. So in effect, I'd say your book in one sense is designed to introduce English language readers to the work of Rithy Panh, but Rithy Panh is a the most famous Cambodian director in the world and quite well known, at least in France, as a very established director, so why do you think his work hasn't yet caught on well?

DB: I think some of it has to do with the fact that he's a French speaker and we tend to be very sort of insular and not wanting to read subtitles. But I frankly think that there's another factor here because the ground for much of his work is the Cambodian genocide that was perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge and the Khmer Rouge wouldn't have assumed such tremendous power were it not for the war in Vietnam. And the fact that the United States declared an undeclared war against

Cambodia that drove people into the arms of the Khmer Rouge. So, I think for a lot of Americans, Cambodia is part of a war they don't want to think about. And if they do know anything, they feel uncomfortable.

But I think really, Panh's works don't fit a format. People think, "Oh, he's the guy who made the perpetrator films" and he did. He made the revolutionary perpetrator film *S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*. But that's not all that he's done. Of his documentary films, one is different from the next, and his fiction films, which are fabulous films, are hardly known here at all, and he's won many, many prizes in Europe. I think of him as a francophone filmmaker because the Swiss and the Belgians and you know any of the countries where there have been French influences, he's known and his work appreciated. He has his celebrity supporters in this country and Angelina Jolie is probably the most famous. Her oldest adopted child is Cambodian and she made a film that he produced, called *First They Killed My Father*, which is another story about a survivor of the Cambodian genocide.

So it's hard, when you found the work interesting, and as I have, plunged into it all, to really understand why people wouldn't like it, because I think his work is incredible. It's never the same. How can you ever get bored when you never know what someone's going to come up with next? I don't really understand on that deeper level why more people don't know his work. People who make a specialty of Holocaust-related films, they should know more. So that's why I wrote the book so that they would.

AL: In the book, early on, you reiterate something about there being no coincidences, and I'm actually wondering how that applies to your encountering Panh's work and choosing to devote so much time and effort into writing about his work. What drove you to this?

DB: Well, there's a story that I'm not going to tell you or anybody that has to do with the period of time during the Cambodian genocide in my life. But the story I will tell is that, in 1970, when I graduated from College, Kent State happened and the [U.S.] National Guard killed students and others on the campus because they were protesting against the Cambodian undeclared War and the bombing. I mean, we dropped more bombs in Cambodia than we did in Japan during World War II.

So, I, like most of my classmates, wore a white arm band on my academic gown in protest in solidarity with those who died, and I did nothing else. And I think as I have, you know, grown and changed and learned more about the world, the notion of bystander guilt began to sort of take root in me. It's like, why didn't I do more? Because that was before the Khmer Rouge took over. And when the Khmer Rouge were driving people out of their homes into forced labour camps, starving them,

torturing them at times, I was teaching, I was going on vacation. I wasn't so well aware of what was going on. So, I think as I sat in the movie theatre at the New York Film Festival and saw S*21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* 20 years ago. It all kind of came back to me and I had just recently finished getting a degree in social work with an emphasis on trauma, grief and loss, and that coupled with my interest in Holocaust film. And in the connection of the personal and the political, I saw it all coming together in a way that just knocked me out. And work that I had done when I was studying to become a therapist really resonated for me when I watched *S21* and saw this guard step out of the present into his past, and it wasn't a re-enactment in a sense of like, a director telling you what to do. It was someone who was in traumatic memory which requires recall and re-enactment, and I thought, my god, this is what I was reading about, and now I'm seeing it, and nothing I had ever seen in a film had done that before.

So I was mesmerised and I wanted to see the next film and the next film. And one day I woke up and said, you know, it's not enough to write about these films one by one. I need to see the whole gamut of the work, because I felt at that time that I had seen, I think, only one of his fiction films, and I thought there's a whole other dimension here. That comes across because he can say and do things in the fiction films that he doesn't do in the documentaries because he has a different sense of sort of ethical propriety. And in the fiction films I began to recognise over time how much of them were autobiographical and it was like being a detective. The more films that I saw, the more I began to understand the complexity of the mind and the heart. And the creativity of this survivor of genocide.

You know the great figures that we think of when we're talking about the Holocaust, of writers, Primo Levi, Charlotte Delbo, [Jean] Améry. And then there are the filmmakers like Claude Lanzmann. But Lanzmann was not interested in the visual. It was the word that counts and Panh did not have that limitation. He came from another culture. And so little was done to document what was happening at the time that for Panh it was essential to come up with the [visual] equivalents for it. So as a filmmaker, his creativity was in some ways for me, far surpassing that of much of what we associate with the early stages of film. So there's just such richness there to explore. You know, I think I could probably, I won't, but I could spend the rest of my life figuring all of the elements that went together in order to make the kind of films that Panh could make.

AL: Well, you have spent a significant part of your life doing this work.

DB: Twenty, well, no, it really wasn't twenty years ago that I started. That was the first film that I saw. But I made-up my mind I was going to write a book in 2015 when I went to Cambodia.

A: Oh yeah.

DB: Because I wanted to interview Panh, I wanted to see the films that weren't available. Here I wanted to go to the genocide sites that I had seen in his films, and I wanted to go to Angkor Wat because Angkor Wat is one of the seminal forces influencing Pol Pot and his ideas about this agrarian wonderland that proved to be anything but. So when I went to Cambodia in 2015, I thought it would be maybe two or three years before I'd write the book. Well, what I didn't foresee was how complex it would be to do the research, and I certainly didn't foresee the pandemic and other changes in my own life that just made things [take] longer. But at the same time, I think having had that time to contemplate the work and to continue to see him producing more films, so being able to write through to *Graves Without a Name* [2018] allowed me to complete what I think of as his personal cycle. Because *The Missing Picture* [2013], *Exile* [2016], and *Graves Without a Name,* are a trilogy, and Panh likes trilogies, he uses them visually and he uses them conceptually. So I was happy to finish with *Graves Without a Name*. I didn't imagine that when I got started, but I definitely knew I wanted to fill in the background at the beginning.

AL: Well, maybe we can talk a little bit about your writing. I love the style in which this book is written. There's a very personal angle to it. There's a certain kind of anecdotal aspect, but also there's a breadth of knowledge of theoretical ideas, philosophical ideas, historical ideas, and a political history that is quite distant from your own, that you really had to kind of get a handle on because it's a big responsibility to represent this kind of material.

DB: Well. It evolved. I did not intend to have a personal storyline through it, but when I began to interject it, it made me very happy and I began to see the value in it. I think one of the ideas I had early on was to understand how this genocide happened. Some people won't call it a genocide because it doesn't fit the, you know, some of the legal terms, but Panh does and I don't have any problem with that. I realised it was incredibly complicated. Who did what to whom, when, you know, how much of this had to do with French colonialism, how much of it had to do with Maoism? You know, where does Marx enter into the picture? It was very confusing and I felt that if I wanted the reader who may know nothing about Cambodia, nothing about Panh, nothing about this history, that I had to give them a little bit of background. And I knew that I wanted to give attention to all of the feature length films that he had done, so the structure of the book sort of evolved because I wanted some background on his history. But his incredible book, *The Elimination* [2011], which is

part memoir and part analysis of the horror he experienced, interviewing Duch, the man who was responsible for some of the worst abuses at S21, I knew that I had to accommodate all of that in some fashion.

So one day I was thinking, I don't want to forget my experience there and some years had passed and I thought, I think I should write everything that happened from before I left to go to Cambodia to now, to the end of the book, which was, you know, some years later. And I began to see that, if Panh is a ferryman, you know, using the image of Charon, who brought the dead across to the afterlife, that I was essentially a ferryman for potential viewers of his films, who know nothing about him, but now may be curious, and I was going to create a path, you know, get them in the boat with me and take them along. And I did not want to overstep his history, his own writing about his experience as a child growing up in a happy family. And then his experience during the four years of horror. Then his attempt to make sense of all of that and find a new path for his life. People should read that, they should read him on that, but I needed to give the reader enough of a sense of who he was so that they'd want to go further.

AL: I think you'd do an incredible job with it, really. We know his work is difficult. We know the subject is very painful and I can't imagine a more inviting text than the one that you have provided us with.

DB: Well, you know, I have to say that, if all you know are the perpetrator films, then you would agree. I mean, then you would say what you've just said. But the films that he made that are really more for the Cambodian people are not so prohibitive, and he's made quite a few films for the Cambodians in the diaspora who've had to sort of find another way of living in a culture that they're no longer part of, but also to the people who continued living, reclaiming their lands, reclaiming their history. Panh's father was a teacher. In fact, he was sort of the Under Secretary of Education. And there's a moment in *The Missing Picture* when we see the two figurines of his parents and his mother says "You always wanted him to be a teacher" and Panh is a teacher. He is teaching us in all of the films, including the films where we learn something about Cambodian literature, Cambodian dance, Cambodian theatre. There's so much richness there. It's not always grim, you know, and even where there is a darkness, there is a sense of the beauty in the culture that the Khmer Rouge were not able to erase and he is one of the most prominent artisans of keeping that memory, that history, alive.

AL: You talk about having to throw out your best laid plans when working with Panh and learning to listen, and learning to listen differently, learning to perceive differently in working with Panh, maybe you can describe the process.

DB: Well, when I look back on it now, I think it was kind of hubris on my part thinking I could just take off and go to Cambodia and get this filmmaker who was making a film and many other things at the same time, which I wasn't even aware of, and expect him to sit down and answer all of my questions. And so sometimes being a little stupid is your best ally. But there was another voice inside of me that said, you know, maybe it isn't going to be so smooth after all, and when he didn't answer my emails and I thought, well, I thought you were going to be there and I'm now being told you're not going to be available, I had to sort of like pull myself together and say it doesn't matter. I will do what I can. I will do all the research that I can do and if he's available, great. And if he's not, I still have work to do. So that was sort of my beginning.

And I think Panh didn't know what to expect of me. I've often wondered, you know, being an American, you know, he's an international figure, and he's well-travelled. But you know there's a reluctance to be very trusting of Americans. So I don't know how much of that was the case. I'll never know. Nor do I feel I need to know. But I think Panh began to see that I was determined. And I kept coming back and I don't think I'll ever really know what he was thinking or why he continued to talk to me and not always would he talk to me. And I just learned that I needed to be very patient. And he gave me lots of clues that I had to follow.

AL: Sounds to me like in some sense you passed a test, he made himself available and he decided that you're good people to do this work. But he also never fully let down his guard. And why should he?

DB: Absolutely. Yeah, couldn't agree more.

AL: One of the threads in your book, which sort of jumped out at me because I have actually seen not only his genocide films, I've seen some of his other documentaries and have a feel [for his other work]. I think the year that I was a jury member at IDFA [International Documentary Film Festival of Amsterdam] Rithy Panh was the featured filmmaker, so I got to see several of his documentaries. But it took reading your book to pull out a very interesting theme that I want you to talk about, which is his attention to women subjects, women's gestures, women's lives, and you describe the figure of Bophana, who is a woman who became some kind of muse for Panh's work. What is this figure of the woman in Rithy Panh's work?

DB: It's great that you are drawing attention to this because if people have only seen the *S21* related films, you wouldn't know about this. Panh had discovered the Bophana story when he went to S21's archive. Panh's uncle died in S21. And he didn't know that for sure until he actually had the resources, the inner resources, to be able to go and look in the archive, and he found this to be the case. But the

biggest file in the entire archive from that time period was the Bophana file. And he was for many, many reasons, I think, captivated by her history and her incredible determination to be faithful to her husband and her association with art, with the Reamkur, which is the Cambodian version of the Ramayana.

AL: There's a film that comes before S21 that's called *Bophana: A Cambodian Tragedy* [2016]?

Yes. *Bophana: A Cambodian Tragedy* is her story, and she was horribly treated during the Khmer Rouge era and her husband was arrested because of his association with someone in the army and she was seen as the more grievous offender because she worked for the Americans, for an American non-profit. And so she was the focus of some of the worst interrogations and tortures during the time. And she remained absolutely faithful to her husband. It's only in the end, when she had been completely broken down and would allow them to dictate, you know, the lies that were expected, even then she continued to sign her name, Sita, and Sita is the is the figure in the Reamkur who is faithful to her husband after terrible, terrible tests of loyalty.

So, I think for Panh, he saw a woman who was, she was beautiful, she was horribly treated, and she also was educated and she represented, I think, for him, the woman driven mad by the horrors of genocide, who nonetheless maintained her integrity to the very end. And she became a figure that appears in almost every one of his films, whether it's a photograph, whether it's mention of her name, whether it's a name that he's given to a character in a fiction film. Bophana is an essential figure for him.

The very first film that he won a prize at Cannes, *Rice People* [1994], that film is the first film in which you see the mad woman in his work, and I think when Panh began to think about how people dealt with the history they had lived through, women were the most horribly treated and suffered the most, and many of them lost their minds, and it's one of the things that, even to this day and looking at the diaspora, women have often been the ones who have suffered the most. So, I believe Panh in his own experiences, saw women tested beyond their ability, and yet triumphant in a way, and he's celebrated them throughout the films. And Bophana is the epitome of that.

Two of his sisters died. His mother died. He was close to women who suffered that tragedy. And I think his sense of responsibility to women and women's roles is very much an essence in the films. There's a film that was made for television in France, about a woman who has come from Cambodia, who falls in love with a Vietnamese boat person. And what binds them together is gambling (which is a personal, I think, motif from Panh's own life). But the notion that a woman has as much of a struggle to

survive in the aftermath of this is a subject that matters a great deal to Panh, and I think he's probably known many survivors from his own experience that he draws upon.

AL: I still find it remarkable, given that this is generally true of war, but that most male fiilm makers have chosen to ignore that fact, that truth. Do you consider Panh a feminist filmmaker?

DB: In his films, for sure, absolutely, no question about it. Whether or not he would, you know, fit the bill in other categories, I couldn't say, but certainly in his films and women matter, you know, women's lives.

AL: Well, you've talked about. Bophana, the muse, we've' talked about Bophana the character in his first feature film, and then the character who returns in pretty much all of his films. But now I'd like to talk about Bophana, the audio-visual research center that Rithy Panh has established in Phnom Penh. Can you tell us about that?

DB: Yes, Panh, the teacher, really wanted to do everything that he could to retrieve and preserve the history of Cambodia that the Khmer Rouge tried to destroy. Particularly audio-visual records, whether it was films, music, also literature, but very much so, the audio visual record. And with a collaborator, he started an audio visual resource centre that would archive these images, and it was not an easy task without air conditioning and other kinds of archival elements, but he was determined to do that. He was also determined to make films with Cambodians, having been trained and educated as a filmmaker in France, he was fortunate initially to be able to bring colleagues from France to help him with his first films, but he wanted to train Cambodians not just to facilitate his own filmmaking, but he wanted to help establish the industry that had once flourished in Cambodia, that had been virtually destroyed.

So, The Bophana Centre also became a training ground. And it has produced some very successful documentary film makers and influenced the work of fiction film makers also coming out of Cambodia. Panh wanted Cambodia to be a place where anyone wanting to make films in Southeast Asia, would want to come and work. There would be trained people, there would be people who knew locations who could do everything from constructing housing to designing wardrobes, to acting.

And over the years, Panh has trained quite a number of people, so you know, with Panh, it's sort of seeding generations of film makers and technicians, camera, sound, lighting, all of the people that it takes in order to produce quality work. Panh started the Bophana Archive and was the director of it for many years, and he was managing all of this at the same time he was making his films, writing his books, he was teaching classes around the world to make some money. And he was also training people to take over. And he's no longer the director, although he continues to

be a very present figure there. And you know, they've created now a Cambodian International Film Festival. There are many things that have emerged out of this extraordinary enterprise really designed to cultivate a cinematic culture again in Cambodia.

AL: Considering when he's talked about himself as in some sense, "I was dead inside". I mean, the amount of life force actually that he has and that he has given over to the new endeavours is just, for me, it's just exemplary and remarkable.

That is a legacy.

You mentioned in the book early on that he went to the French. School in Paris and that in some sense he was disappointed because he wanted to study documentary and they only have like one semester out of three years of training in documentary. And he's made his fiction films. But he is one of the very few, trained in fiction filmmakers who seems to use his fiction films as sketches for his documentaries as opposed to the traditional other way around.

What is this commitment to documentary?

DB: I think documentary is where he feels the truth lies. And in making his fiction films, there is a truth, but there's also more latitude and there's also room for opinions. He used to say this. I don't know if he would say this today. I think both the fiction and the non-fiction works meet the same standards, frankly. And once he began to find a way to tell his own story, because he couldn't do that for a long time. He couldn't do it because he couldn't ask anybody to take on the gestures that he had seen, that were so brutal. But when he made *The Missing Picture*, he found a method, but it's only because Panh is always building from one form to the next.

He directed *Bangsokol: A Requiem for Cambodia* [an opera, written by Him Sophy, directed by Panh] and it was the first time he did something that involved three screens. And then he made *Irradiated* (2020). *Irradiated* is another multi-image work. So you see how there is this evolution. He doesn't do things twice. But he builds from one to the next and sometimes goes back several films in order to retrieve something that has now evolved to another level. It's why his films are so interesting to somebody who spends a lot of time looking at films because you're never repeating yourself. But you can see the threads as they connect.

AL: Absolutely. I mean it, he's a filmmaker who is always challenging himself but not just for the sake of the challenge. There's such an integrity I find to his work. Maybe that's a good segue into thinking about the perpetrator films, which he's best known for, certainly in the English language. There's a little bit of a cottage industry, it seems, both writing about and making perpetrator films, though I dare say *S21* is

one of the first and I guess we can name a few that followed. Let's say Ari Folman's *Waltz with Bashir* or Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing*. And actually, it was Joshua Oppenheimer and the Vision Machine people who introduced me to *S21* well before *The Act of Killing* came out. And I met Rithy Panh in 2012, so that was after *The Act of Killing* came out and we were both jurors in Lisbon at the DocLisboa festival. He was on the main jury. I was on a minor jury.

And, I mean, he was joking, for example, “like nobody's going to believe it. I'm making an animation”. He was talking about *The Missing Picture*. And of course, I don't think I would call it an animation, exactly, but, you know, he's quite light-hearted when he’s talking about his work.

DB: And deliberately misdirecting, you know, he said he was going to make a musical. The musical was *Bangsokol: A Requiem for Cambodia*. Not exactly anybody else's idea of a musical, you know.

AL: And I said, “have you seen *The Act of Killing*?”, because I knew they knew one another. And he said "Yes, I have". And I said, "What did you think?" And he said "I called Joshua up, and I said, how did you make that amazing, terrible film?"

That's all he said. This amazing, terrible film. And he left it at that. And I kind of felt like he meant "Why did you make this amazing, terrible film?" I felt that without saying it, there was something, a distinction he needed to make, and I feel it very strongly that his films, the perpetrator films, the trilogy about the S21 camp in particular, have a distinction from these other so-called perpetrator films. How would you characterise that?

DB: Well, um, I was reminded I had seen *S21* before I met Joshua Oppenheimer, who was trying to raise money to make *The Act of Killing*. I was invited to one of those events. And it was the week before he was going off to Boston to talk to Errol Morris about raising money. And what I saw was something that seemed on the surface to be affiliated with the idea of an exploration of political exploitation, but it didn't quite come together. He knew about me because I had written about *S21*, so he was making a connection to *S21*. I wasn't. And I wasn't surprised when he said he was going to see Errol Morris. So that's my personal association.

When I was interviewing Panh, he began to talk about *The Act of Killing*, and I don't know why I did this, but I said I don't want to talk about that film. I said your ethics and Josh's are so different, I don't want to take the time away from you talking about your films. And so he let it go. Now, this is why I say I could have listened better. You see, I know my limits. I just don't always recognise them in the moment. But I thought to myself, I really think that they're worlds apart and there is a lack of honesty in *The Act of Killing*, and I've always felt after seeing it the very first time, that the final scene

is one which [Anwar] was essentially saying [to Joshua], "Did I get it right? Did I do what you wanted me to do? "

Panh's approach is totally different. But there's a similarity there, which is why one might be confused and begin to think they're the same. And I write about in the book that in *S21*, he does get the perpetrators to admit their guilt exsanguinating torture victims, beating women, raping women. He explains, not in the film, but in the interviews that I found, that what he did was he convinced the, I think it's eleven men who agreed to participate, that it would be to their advantage, that it would give them peace, because all of these men had their trauma memories, that it would give them peace if they participated. And he explained to them what they were getting into and that he was not going to let them off the hook as criminals. But he was not a prosecutor, and it was not a courtroom, so they agreed, these eleven men. But then they started telling lies. And denying what they had done. And what Panh did was incredible research and produced for them the evidence that what they were saying was false and he would shoot over and over and over again until they finally fessed up and told the truth. And people said, well, this isn't re-enactment, this is direction. And that was not Panh's response. He said, each take is unique and until I got the truth, that was what was necessary.

So I think Panh's whole approach toward what you do in a re-enactment scene is at complete odds with what Oppenheimer did, which was fantasy. It was sensationalism. It was designed to entice audiences. And that's not at all what Panh was doing or does. If anything, he's more likely to hold people at a distance with his extreme rigour in searching for the truth. And I think that's why, you know, people, if they want to take him seriously, do.

AL: Right. He doesn't necessarily make it easy, and actually there's a phrase that you use in terms of his cinematic ethics or literally the ethics of the camera, which is that he keeps people at arm's length, which is normally a way to say at a distance, but in this case it's literally close enough to touch, but not too close, not manipulative.

DB: Well, I think that's his rule for everything. That as the director, working with the cinematographer, he's always at arm's length. There is that sense that if something needs to stop it can be stopped and this is as close as you get to the person you're talking to without invading their space or letting them get lost in too much space. So at arm's length is an advantage. It's not a disadvantage. It's a method, a method of honesty, I think, on Panh's part, or control, actually.

AL: I mean, I hate to quote Errol Morris, but you know, the truth is never guaranteed by any method, right? And that is, I think, a principle here. There's some way that we trust Panh's integrity, that it feels to me, can't be taught. Can't you know, is somehow

kind of, you know, part of his relationship to the world that makes him this extraordinary filmmaker. But you can't reduce it to a method, you know. It's something much deeper than this, no?

DB: Well, you know, as you were speaking, I was thinking about *Duch: Master of the Forges of Hell* (2011), the director of S21 and, that was, I think, the most difficult film for Panh to make, maybe until the most recent ones. And there he did the same thing using the same technique. He had all of the photographs of the people who were tortured. He had the records in Duch's own handwriting, indicating whether or not somebody was ready to be killed, and [Panh] had the videos that he had made with the men under [Duch's] command, telling what was done, that Duch was denying.

However, the perpetrators were not directors. They were not educated men. They were not sophisticated and they were not master interrogators, and Duch was. Panh had more than met his match dealing with Duch. And one of the reasons why it is such an amazing film and subtle, you know, you really need to pay attention, is that Panh is really up against someone who is good at turning the tables and laughing when it's to his advantage. And he had a terrifying laugh. And of using his charm in order to get off the hook, and Panh nearly lost his sense of well-being. Nervous breakdown comes to mind. Although I don't know that I would be so bold as to suggest that, but he was certainly pushed to his limit.

And finally, he had the awareness that he was the director. He was the one who would edit the film. He would have the last word and in the end, that shifted the balance for him. And the viewer who watches this film is going to see Duch doing his very best, representing himself as the victim in his own right, and Panh turns the table.

But you've got to be paying attention. You've got to be listening in that film.

AL: I mean, that film, maybe more than any, describes both the suspicion that Panh has with spoken language and the sophistication with which he speaks a cinematic language.

DB: Well put, I agree.

AL: I mean, that's where he lets Duch speak in circles. The lies begin to become apparent. And it's all through a very subtle and minimal use of a cinematic language that all of this is allowed to sort of unravel.

DB: Well, just to add to that. Two cameras were used for the 200 hours that he spent interviewing Duch. And Panh held the camera that was mobile, and his

cinematographer, held the stationary camera, and it was very important for there to be those 2 records and Panh seeing Duch from a certain angle at certain points. Duch would tend to look off to the left and the upper corner and Panh said, this is where he retreated to when he didn't want to be challenged. And you begin to see this in the way in which the camera follows him. So you're absolutely right in pointing to how Panh's use of camera placement tells you everything you need to know about who is following whom and who has the upper hand at a given moment. And he does this in his other films as well. But this is the most confrontational and perhaps the most important in terms of getting as close as we're ever going to get to the people who are responsible for the genocide.

Your listeners may not know, but Duch was the first prisoner to be tried and found guilty of crimes against humanity in the Cambodian Genocide Tribunal. So this was a very important film for us to see. And it gave us an intimate connection with Duch that none of the recordings that were authorised by the Tribunal allowed. And Panh tried his very best to help them do a better job of recording and it was constantly rejected and so this film is an essential counterpart to that because we get to learn so much more than was ever revealed in the tribunal itself.

AL: Maybe it's important to say that his film *Duch: Master of the Forges of Hell*, was shot in the two prison rooms that Duch was held.

DB: Right

AL: It’s just the most minimal film. And it's somehow, you know, “the master of the forges of hell,” you know, we sort of descend into those forges with Panh

DB: Yeah.

AL: So I'm going to go back to this question of trauma a little bit because you do something really interesting in the book that I think deserves to be kind of pulled out. Often, we hear Panh's films referred to in relation to trauma and trauma studies, which have really kind of grown up almost a cottage industry through Holocaust studies. And the Holocaust remains at the centre of this paradigm. And we often use Western theories about trauma, often psychoanalytic theories. You do a little bit of that, of course, but you actually broaden this field in a way that I haven't seen anyone do in English anyway, where you integrate theories of this Cambodian cultural theorist and genocide survivor, Boreth Ly. And he introduces very different terminology. So you introduce us to a term called "*baksbat*" which means broken body or broken courage (interesting that it could be both of those things), to analyse

this phenomenon of trauma and that it resists the notion of healing. That is so interesting. It's more about maybe remaking the self.

DB: Within community. This is what I learned from reading. He's the author of a book called *Traces of Trauma*, and I found that really, really helpful. But the notion is that it's not about the healing of the individual. It's about when gestures have been so compromised and you need the strength of the group and the community as a whole is what's required. And when you think of the marvellous scene in *The Missing Picture*, when you see Panh lying on the couch with Sigmund Freud's portrait over him, and then he quickly shifts from being an adult male to the boy that we see throughout *The Missing Picture* with the polka dot shirt, right? And he's talking as if to Freud. But as this scene evolves, people start to appear, and those people are his family members and the members of the community. And so you have both. This is my interpretation. I'm not sure if this is how Panh envisioned it, but you have Western psychiatry and you have Cambodian cultural support system and it's in that community that one finds a balance. So for me, what Boreth Ly writes about in *Traces of Trauma* puts it in a context that isn't just psychoanalytic. And yet there's a resonance there.

AL: You draw, I think, in very rich ways on many kinds of Western cultural theories and philosophies. There are a lot of threads of Arendt in the book, but I think being absolutely careful to not impose a paradigm that may not fit and to actively seek out another that is very much more tied to this context, for me was really refreshing and necessary and opened up a possibility because I think there is a way trauma studies, really, you know, isn't necessarily tailored to every cultural context. And I think you've done a great service to the field to open up another avenue to think with.

DB: Oh, thank you. That's kind of you. I had training as a clinician, not as a theoretician. And for me the theory took on a different meaning when you were actually working with people.

AL: You talk about the non-narrative and using non stories to defetishize trauma. It sort of resists naturalising events. It resists a kind of a sense of completion. It resists in ways that can allow trauma a space of representation. This, for me, was a very powerful moment in the book and I'm wondering how you tie it to Panh's work.

DB: *Graves Without a Name* is a very personal film for Panh, but at the same time it's one of his most embracing, because he's really looking at the land of Cambodia, the ground in which the dead weren't buried in and looking at the need to embrace all of Cambodia and so there is a thread in that film of his searching for all different strategies that were used and continue to be used by survivors: going to psychics, going to monks, going to various kinds of healers, in order to somehow connect with,

make one's peace with, fulfil the obligations towards the dead. And there is that very personal narrative in the film, and there is the moment when we have this amazing experience along with Panh when there is a psychic who begins to call out to Panh and to weep, and call him my son. And Panh puts down his camera and kneels at this woman's feet, and she puts her hands on his head, as I recall. And it's a very powerful moment in the film, whether or not he believes that he's in touch with his father is almost irrelevant because you see what the need is to make that connection.

But even bigger than that in this film is the way in which Panh uses drone photography, for the first time ever, to look at the land in which he had been searching for the mass graves of his own family members. And you see this camera going off into the horizon, seeing a sunset, and you see how this is not just about this one man at the foot of a tree. But this is this impulse, to somehow connect the history with the land and how the land is the place of the dead. For me, this is narrative that isn't dependent on language. It isn't dependent on Aristotelian, you know, rising action, falling action, denoument. It is something where you have to become actively involved in interpreting what you're seeing and making the connections. Panh is giving you the images, but really you have to put them together. You are working along with the filmmaker to put the elements together.

AL: That may be as good a place to end as any, because you're allowing us to understand the power of his filmmaking without explaining too much. I think this is really beautiful.

I am wondering if there's anything you want to say about his approach to documentary because you talk about it in a way that resembles participatory, documentary or through ethnographic film. The way he makes films with people and not about them, that's also something Trinh T. Minh-ha has brought in. You know, stylistically, he's kind of vast. He will use any tools at his disposal, like drone cameras, but never for entertainment purposes, never to kind of catch you. Is there a way to characterise, especially his documentary filmmaking?

DB: Well, Panh is always on a quest, does not know where it will take him. And you, as the viewer of his film, join him in that quest. You know, documentary, it's not about a script. You don't know where it's going to take you. In fact, it may be a complete bust.

You know when Panh was trying to figure out how to make *The Missing Picture*, he spent a year interviewing people, and at the end he just threw up his hands and said this isn't it. And it was only then that he came upon the figurine. So you don't know

where you're going with a documentary, if you are a documentary filmmaker like Panh, and you allow the journey to take you where it needs to go.

It took Panh ten years to make *S21*. Ten years. He was making other films during that time, but he couldn't put the elements together until he had all of the pieces. So I think documentary in Panh's way of looking at it is something that takes time. That you have to surrender yourself to the journey. And then the viewer has to allow themselves to go on that journey with him.

AL: Is there anything that I haven't asked you about that you wish to add.

AL: Your reading of the book does me a great honour and I am grateful for the degree of serious attention you've given to my thinking and my interest in sharing this work with a wider audience and maybe the only thing I might add here is that, I don't think there's ever been a time when it's more important to be looking at the work of someone like Panh, who has lived through being a refugee, who has lived through authoritarian society, who has lived through the loss of family and culture and language, and had to rebuild themselves. This is the time we're living in now. And there are people out there who can give us a deeper insight into what it is to be able to survive with one's humanity intact.

AL: Thank you, Deidre.

STL: That was a great interview. Alisa. I haven't gotten a chance to read the book, but I definitely intend to.

AL: I also think it's a great companion for teaching his films.

STL: Speaking of his films, where can people find them?

AL: Well, but that's a little tricky. I mean, some of his better known films like *S21* and *The Missing Picture* are streaming on Amazon. And also you can find them on Kanopy. But you know there are a lot of his films that you need to really make an extra effort to find and

STL: He has a new film.

AL: That's right*, Meeting with Pol Pot* from 2024. It screened in Cannes. I expect that that one will be available.

STL:Deirdre Boyle's book *Ferryman of Memories: The Films of Rithy Panh* is available from Rutgers University Press and we will have all the information about the Rithy Panh films and the book, along with transcripts to all our shows on the website: www.reframe.sussex.ac.uk/avm1.

STL: Listeners might also be interested in our episode, which features our conversation with Asmae Almudir, the Moroccan film director of the fabulous documentary *The Mother of All Lies* (2024), in which she talks about how she's been influenced by the work of Rithy Panh.

AL: *Animal Vegetable Mineral* is produced by Samuael Topiary Landberg myself, Alisa Lebow and Ritika Kaushik. This episode was edited by Topiary. The sound mix was done by Niks Gjortz, and AVM is published by Reframe, University of Sussex. Our website URL is www.reframe.sussex.ac.uk/avm1.

STL: Thanks so much for listening to this episode of Animal Vegetable Mineral. Bye for now.