

Irène Jacob

Grégoire Colin

Cyril Gueï

Bunhok Lim

Somaline Mao

MEETING WITH POL POT

A FILM BY **Rithy Panh**

INSPIRED BY A TRUE STORY



FESTIVAL DE CANNES
SÉLECTION OFFICIELLE 2024
CANNES PREMIÈRE





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MEETING WITH POL POT

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2024 | Drama | 1h52 | 1.33 / 5.1 | France - Cambodia - Taïwan - Qatar - Turkey
In French and Cambodian

INTERNATIONAL SALES

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SYNOPSIS

Democratic Kampuchea (Cambodia) - 1978. Three French journalists are invited by the Khmer Rouge to conduct an exclusive interview of the regime's leader, Pol Pot. The country seems ideal. But behind the Potemkin village, the Khmer Rouge regime is declining and the war with Vietnam threatens to invade the country. The regime is looking for culprits, secretly carrying out a large scale genocide. Under the eyes of the journalists, the beautiful picture cracks, revealing the horror. Their journey progressively turns into a nightmare. Freely inspired by journalist Elizabeth Becker's account in *When The War Was Over*.



INTERVIEW WITH RITHY PANH

***Meeting with Pol Pot* is a work of fiction based on a book by American journalist and war correspondent Elizabeth Becker, *When The War Was Over*. It attempts to explain why the Khmer Rouge imposed such a destructive regime on their country. How did you find out about it?**

Elizabeth Becker and I have known each other for a long time, when I contacted her while making my film *Bophana: A Cambodian Tragedy* (*Bophana, une tragédie cambodgienne*) in 1996. Bophana is a young woman who, during the Khmer Rouge dictatorship, was imprisoned, tortured and executed at the S-21 extermination camp for sending love letters to her husband. Elizabeth was the first journalist to investigate Bophana, and I based my film on her writings. Thirty years later, she was kind enough to cede the rights to her book *When the War Was Over*, which inspired the screenplay for *Meeting with Pol Pot*. Elizabeth Becker is one of the few women journalists to have covered the war in Vietnam and Cambodia in the early 1970s, and went on to follow the Khmer Rouge

as they spoke at the UN in New York, even though no information was filtering out about what was happening in the country. Perhaps it was her tenacity that led to her being invited to visit Democratic Kampuchea at the end of 1978.

In her book, Elizabeth Becker recounts, as you do in your film, her stay under close surveillance in Democratic Kampuchea (Khmer Rouge Cambodia), along with two other Westerners, and her attempt to bear witness to what was happening in Cambodia.

In the film, the aim was both to talk about the Khmer Rouge and to question the role of the journalist in the field, which is tending to disappear. These days, we are more concerned with immediacy, working on breaking news rather than substance. Newsrooms are more reluctant to send someone out into the field for three or four weeks. The film echoes these current events and reminds us that the absence of information, disinformation and manipulation of information - which are strategies for certain governments - constitute a danger, a vice in which we are caught. Then as now.

Although it focuses on the Khmer Rouge past, the film also evokes the current state of radical ideologies that exclude, lock and refuse to confront ideas. It evokes the resurgence of utopias that claim to think and act for

the good of all, but which slide into a quest for purity, a quest that leads humanist revolution astray. It denounces this edifice of thought pushed to the point of absurdity, whose effects on human beings are frightening. As if we couldn't change our minds, go backwards, or simply pause to think.

You effectively show how the three members of the Western delegation are immediately confronted with the government's official discourse, and with interviews whose answers are written in advance, with carefully chosen speakers.

The film also questions what we see, what we don't see, or what we choose not to see. One of the three members of the delegation had to be a photographer, played by Cyril Gueï. Cyril is French, of Ivorian origin, and I thought that his character, Paul Thomas, had already covered many other conflicts and photographed other countries in the grip of dictatorship. He doesn't talk much, he doesn't write: he is directly in the picture. Paul Thomas was the first to see what was happening in Kampuchea. I am haunted by the figure of Patrice Lumumba, and I imagined Paul Thomas had seen Lumumba's arrest when he was younger. He knows what propaganda means and can immediately identify the details hidden in the setting of the Potemkin village, revealing its cruelty and totalitarianism.

For the purposes of your film, the three main characters are all French. Elizabeth Becker becomes Lise Delbo, played by Irène Jacob, and the English Marxist academic Malcolm Caldwell, an ardent defender of the Cambodian revolution, becomes Alain Cariou, played by Grégoire Colin.

Lise Delbo is a tribute to Charlotte Delbo. I wish I could have met her, because her books have helped me a lot in my life. Theodor W. Adorno said: "Writing a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric". Charlotte Delbo believed, on the contrary, we must continue to write and create. She was absolutely right! After Auschwitz, more poetry was needed. It was time to write. Lise Delbo is also this character who lived and worked in Cambodia, who embodies these experiences, these emotions, who tries to analyze a situation, who keeps calling on the Khmer Rouge leaders to return to Cambodia and find her interpreter, of whom she has no news. What strikes her during her stay is the silence. Where have all the people gone? Genocide is also about silence. You don't see anything, you don't hear anything. The great terrors often correspond to a terrible silence, and the city of Phnom Penh, emptied of its inhabitants and totally silent, bears witness to absolute annihilation. No more schools, no more markets, no more shows, no more music, no more dancing...





As for Alain Cariou, he is the ideologue, the ultra-Maoist 1968 professor. It is for this reason that he is invited to Kampuchea. While Lise Delbo tries to do her job as a journalist, Alain Cariou is the last to become aware of the situation because he reacts above all to theory and ideas. These three were not the only Westerners to visit Cambodia at the time. Representatives from the Soviet bloc and Eastern Europe also visited, including members of the Swedish and French Communist parties. Most of them remained silent for a long time. Some never even spoke. Was it to avoid betraying the commitment of yesteryear, or out of denial or guilt?

How did you choose your actors?

It is all about meeting people. I work on instinct, on what happens in our exchanges and on what they suggest when we are on set. I give them a lot of latitude in their acting. Irène, Cyril and Grégoire, we send them out on a tarmac, deep in Cambodia, in fifty-degree weather, and they are happy to play!

This recurring image of the almost deserted tarmac, where your three characters wait, almost sums up the film, or at least your sense of historical reconstitution.

This tarmac is that of the Kompong Chhnang airport, whose construction was instigated by the Khmer Rouge and never completed. The construction site caused many deaths. On site, you can feel and I can feel the souls of those who worked like slave labor under the relentless sun, who drank the water from the ponds and who lost their lives. I believe you can't erase the traces of a human being. In the same way, in this insistent image of the tarmac, there is always a reminiscence of the out-of-frame, of the atmosphere that surrounds it. As Susan Sontag once said, certain images are bound to haunt us, and make us reflect on how we read and react to suffering.

Your staging combines real color shots, B&W archives, transparencies and overprints.

It is a form of writing I have been fond of for some time. I allow myself to be a pupil of Dziga Vertov or Chris Marker, and that allows me to think about a more organic cinema. I always use the same archives. I have others, but some I prefer. It is a form of persistence, ideas that I come back to. The scenes in the film correspond in part to Elizabeth Becker's book: how she prepared the interviews, how the Khmer Rouge prevented her from meeting certain



people and how they then reported back to their leader. Pierre Erwan Guillaume, the film's screenwriter, adapted this from the book. The rest relates to everything I have gathered about the Khmer Rouge regime. For example, the scene in which the Buddhist ensemble of Wat Phnom, the symbol of the founding of the city of Phnom Penh, is to be dynamited and replaced by a statue of Pol Pot guiding the crowd of soldiers, peasants and workers, is an anecdote that the painter Vann Nath told me because he worked on the model of the monument when he was a prisoner at S-21.

You're also returning to the clay figurines you used in *The Missing Picture* (*L'Image Manquante*).

I am a bit of a kid in my head, returning to primitive, dreamlike languages. These little hand-sculpted figures have a soul; they don't move, but they concentrate emotions. Light and camera angles are all that bring them to life. Nevertheless, switching from actors to figures, or from figures to archives as in *The Missing Picture*, doesn't always work. There are many sequences we did

not edit for this reason. A certain kind of poetry has to be created. With the poetics of the image, you can say a lot, even the most difficult things.

Why did you choose fiction for this film?

I don't think of it in those terms. For me, documentary is a way of "fictionalizing" reality and, conversely, in my fiction, there is always a documentary gesture. You know, it is unfortunately difficult for me to make fiction because I am labelled a documentary filmmaker. Basically, I want nothing more than to be happy making a film. That is what I told the actors and technicians, and I think we were very happy together on this shoot.

RITHY PANH BIOGRAPHY

Rithy Panh was born in 1964 in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. At the age of 11, like all Cambodians, he was interned in Khmer rouge camps for rehabilitation through labor. Four years later, in 1979, he managed to escape to the Mairut refugee camp in Thailand. A year later, he moved to France, and in 1985 entered the IDHEC film school. He has dedicated most of his films to his native country, traumatized by massacres of extreme violence - two million Cambodians, or one in four, exterminated in four years. "Without this war, I would never have become a filmmaker. I bear witness to give back to the dead what the Khmer Rouge stole from them. I am a passer of memory in debt to those who have disappeared."

FILMOGRAPHY

- | | | | |
|-------------|--|-------------|--|
| 2024 | <i>Meeting with Pol Pot (Rendez-vous avec Pol Pot)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Festival de Cannes - Official selection
Cannes Premiere | 2002 | <i>S21 the Khmer Rouge Killing Machine (S21, La Machine de Mort Khmère Rouge)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Festival de Cannes |
| 2022 | <i>Everything Will Be Ok</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Berlinale - Silver Bear for Outstanding Artistic Contribution | 2000 | <i>Que la barque se brise, que la jonque s'entrouvre</i> |
| 2020 | <i>Irradiated (Irradiés)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Berlinale - Golden Bear for Best Documentary | 1999 | <i>The Land of Wandering Souls (La Terre des âmes errantes)</i> |
| 2018 | <i>Graves Without A Name (Les Tombeaux Sans Noms)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Venise Giornate degli Autori• Toronto Film Festival | 1998 | <i>Van Chan a Cambodian Dancer (Van Chan, une danseuse cambodgienne)</i> |
| 2016 | <i>Exile (Exil)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Festival de Cannes - Official Selection
Special Screening | 1997 | <i>10 films Against 110 000 000 mines (10 films contre 110 000 000 de mines)</i> |
| 2015 | <i>France is our Mother Country (La France est notre patrie)</i> | 1997 | <i>One Evening After the War (Un soir après la guerre)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Festival de Cannes - Official selection |
| 2013 | <i>The Missing Picture (L'Image Manquante)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Festival de Cannes - Un Certain Regard
Winner of Best Film• Oscar 2014 - Nominated for Best Foreign Language Film | 1996 | <i>Bophana, a Cambodian Tragedy (Bophana, une tragédie cambodgienne)</i> |
| 2011 | <i>Shiiku (Gibier d'élevage)</i> | 1995 | <i>The Tan's Family (La famille Tan)</i> |
| 2011 | <i>Duch, The Master of the Forges of Hell (Duch, le Maître des forges de l'enfer)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Festival de Cannes - Official selection | 1994 | <i>Rice People (Les Gens de la Rizière)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Festival de Cannes - Official Competition |
| 2008 | <i>The Sea Wall (Un Barrage contre le Pacifique)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Toronto Film Festival | 1990 | <i>Souleymane Cissé</i> |
| 2007 | <i>Paper Cannot Wrap Embers (Le papier ne peut pas envelopper la braise)</i> | 1989 | <i>Site 2 - Aux bords des frontières</i> |
| 2005 | <i>The Burnt Theater (Les Artistes du théâtre brûlé)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Festival de Cannes - Official selection | | |
| 2003 | <i>The People of Angkor (Les Gens d'Angkor)</i> | | |

BOOKS

- | | |
|-------------|--|
| 2020 | <i>Peace with the dead</i>
Grasset - with Christophe Bataille |
| 2011 | <i>The Elimination</i>
Grasset - with Christophe Bataille |
| 2009 | <i>S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine</i>
Flammarion - with Christine Chaumeau |
| 2007 | <i>Paper cannot wrap up embers</i>
Grasset - with Louise Lorentz |

ELIZABETH BECKER BIOGRAPHY

Elizabeth Becker is an American journalist and author. She began her career as a war correspondent in Cambodia for the Washington Post. She was also a correspondent for the New York Times. She was one of the two Western journalists authorized to visit Democratic Kampuchea in 1978, during which she met Pol Pot and Leng Sary. In 1986, she published *When The War Was Over*. In 2015, she testified before the Khmer Rouge War Crimes Tribunal, known as the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC).

EXTRACT FROM THE BOOK *WHEN THE WAR WAS OVER* COURTESY OF ELIZABETH BECKER

"I was one of a handful of young Western reporters who had got their start covering the war. We came of age in Cambodia.

We lost friends in the war, and we witnessed, unknowingly, the start of one of this century's major catastrophes.

At war's end most of us did not want to believe the first terrifying stories from the refugees for fear it meant the Cambodians we had befriended were now at risk.

Most of us felt that we had seen the worst during the war — the devastation and bombing, the fast decline of the country that was unlike the war in Vietnam. [...] I was as surprised as everyone at the evacuation and subsequent destruction of the Khmer society. I decided I had to get back to Cambodia and see the revolution for myself.

[...]

We three arrived in Cambodia with varying appreciations of the revolution. Caldwell had a political stake in its success; I had a longstanding personal and professional commitment to uncover its meaning; Dudman had an enviable detachment to the story.

Quickly we discovered what Cambodia meant to each of us. What we did not know was that before we arrived it was decided that one of us would be killed."

With	Irène Jacob Grégoire Colin Cyril Guei Bunhok Lim Somaline Mao	A production	CDP and Anupheap Production
Director	Rithy Panh	With	le Centre national de la Cinématographie et de l'image animée, Canal +, Ciné+, le Fonds Image de la Francophonie, La Banque Postale Image 16
Screenplay	Pierre Erwan Guillaume, Rithy Panh based on <i>When The War Was Over</i> by Elizabeth Becker	Producers	Catherine Dussart, Rithy Panh Justine O., Roger Huang Fatma Hassan Alremaihi, Hanaa Issa Mehmet Zahid Sobaci, Muhammed Ziyad Varol Mirsad Purivatra, Jovan Marjanović Georges-Marc Benamou
Cinematography	Aymerick Pilarski, Mesa Prum	French distribution	Dulac Distribution
Editing	Rithy Panh, Matthieu Laclau	International Sales	Playtime
Sound	Nicolas Volte, Tu Duu-Chih, Eric Tisserand, Tu Tse-Kang		
Set Design	Mang Sareth, Sou Kimsan Chanry Krauch		
Costume Design	Ariane Viallet		
Production manager	Sovichea Cheap		
Music	Marc Marder		
Music coproduced and recorded by Under the direction of	Mitch Lin, Shao-Ting Sun Yu-An Chang		





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