



Calhoun: The NPS Institutional Archive
DSpace Repository

Faculty and Researchers

Faculty and Researchers' Publications

2012

Film review by Sophal Ear of *Enemies of the People*, directed by Rob Lemkin and Thet Sambath

Ear, Sophal

2012 ISEAS

Contemporary Southeast Asia, Vol. 34, No. 1, (2012), pp. 14244
<http://hdl.handle.net/10945/43139>

This publication is a work of the U.S. Government as defined in Title 17, United States Code, Section 101. Copyright protection is not available for this work in the United States.

Downloaded from NPS Archive: Calhoun



Calhoun is the Naval Postgraduate School's public access digital repository for research materials and institutional publications created by the NPS community. Calhoun is named for Professor of Mathematics Guy K. Calhoun, NPS's first appointed -- and published -- scholarly author.

Dudley Knox Library / Naval Postgraduate School
411 Dyer Road / 1 University Circle
Monterey, California USA 93943

<http://www.nps.edu/library>

***Enemies of the People.* Directed by Rob Lemkin and Thet Sambath.
Old Street Films, 2009, 94 minutes.**

Enemies of the People is a documentary film extraordinary in the scope of its investigation. Indeed when art becomes evidence at a tribunal, you know this is not your average documentary.

The film's title, *Enemies of the People*, comes from a phrase coined by Nuon Chea, the Khmer Rouge's Brother Number Two (Pol Pot, who died while under house arrest in 1998, was Brother Number One), who now stands trial in the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, otherwise known as the Khmer Rouge Tribunal. However, the context in which this phrase appears is muddled. Who are the Enemies? Who are the People?

Through the magic of editing, it is not entirely clear to whom Nuon Chea refers to as enemies of the people. While it is frequently assumed that the reference is to whomever the regime killed or whose death it caused, it is probably more likely that he was referring to those people he saw as traitors to the regime — Vietnamese saboteurs, American spies, etc. — which then begs the question: were the 1.7 million people who died during the Khmer Rouge's rule all traitors or only the ones executed at Khmer Rouge torture centres like S-21 (Tuol Sleng)? The distinction seems pedantic, but places like S-21 were for the regime's elite or special cases needing interrogation and torture in the eyes of *Angkar* (the Organization).

Indeed, it is not clear to whom Nuon Chea refers to necessarily as “them” and later as “criminals” when he says the following in an exchange with filmmaker Thet Sambath:

Nuon Chea: Our policy was first to re-educate them to stop...

Then we gave them two or three warnings to stop their treacherous activities.

Next we required them to present their revolutionary personal history ... and make a self-criticism. If that didn't work ... they would be expelled from the party. If they still could not be corrected ... they had to be solved. These people were categorized as criminals.

Criminals.

Sambath: What did you do with these “criminals”?

Nuon Chea: They were killed and destroyed. If we had let them live, the party line would have been hijacked. They were enemies of the people.

But nevermind Nuon Chea, whom we can safely assume will be found guilty by the Khmer Rouge Tribunal sooner or later (if the Tribunal itself does not collapse from the sheer weight of its own incompetence) and who will spend the rest of his life behind bars, regardless. At its core, the film is really a case study of Pol Pot's willing executioners.

While Nuon Chea is the centrepiece, it is everyday killers — people like Suon and Khuon, low-level Khmer Rouge cadres — who really carry the film with their own confessions of how (if not why) they killed. They describe in explicit detail the murders they committed in the name of *Angkar* and even reminisce about the cannibalism they practised (eating the gall bladders of their victims). The “banality of evil”, to use Hannah Arendt's phrase, is apt. Cambodia's genocide was perpetrated by ordinary people who accepted that *Angkar* knew best.

Enemies of the People is a documentary within a documentary. Co-director Rob Lemkin, who joined the project after Sambath had already collected an enormous amount of video material, turned the camera on Sambath, bringing the filmmaker into his own documentary. Lemkin himself comes from storied pedigree — a distant relative of Raphael Lemkin, the man who coined the word “genocide” in 1943 from the root words *genos* (Greek for family, tribe, or race) and *-cide* (Latin for killing) and the father of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1948.

To be sure, some of the translations and transcriptions in the review copy I watched take liberties, small ones, but sufficiently frequent to become noticeable. Having written and narrated my own documentary (*The End/Beginning: Cambodia*, 2011, 47 minutes), this is not unheard of — we are not after all dealing with the precision of a doctoral dissertation. The number of ellipses in the quotation above by Nuon Chea should tell any viewer that words have gone missing from his mouth when translated and transcribed.

It is a tribute to his incredible tenacity that Sambath finds men and women to interview across victims and perpetrators, and does this over the course of a decade of meticulous trust-building. Viewers interested in the Khmer Rouge's Sorbonne-educated economist, Khieu Samphan, who served as Head of State for Democratic Kampuchea,

should also watch the award-winning *L'Important, c'est de Rester Vivant* (titled in English *Survive*, 2009, 97 minutes) by Indian-Cambodian director Roshane Saidnattar who is based in France. While *Survive* does not have an equivalent confession by Khieu Samphan, it is more personal than *Enemies of the People* in some ways and feels less scripted. The title comes from Saidnattar's mother who told her during the Khmer Rouge regime: "Work hard. Always harder than the others. Put up with all the hurt they inflict. What matters is to stay alive."

Andrew Cayley, the Khmer Rouge Tribunal's International Co-Prosecutor, played a clip from *Enemies of the People* on the second day of the opening statements in the case against Nuon Chea that began in November 2011. "Believe me if these traitors were alive, the Khmers as a people would have been finished. So I dare to suggest our decision was the right one", Nuon Chea tells Thet Sambath. "If we had shown mercy to these people, the nation would have been lost." Case closed.

SOPHAL EAR is an Assistant Professor in the Department of National Security Affairs at the US Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California. The views expressed above are his alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of the US Navy or the Department of Defense.