

## Book Review

**War Remnants of the Khmer Rouge.** Maureen Lambray. Brooklyn, NY: Umbrage Editions, 2011. Introduction, afterward. 136pp. \$44.26 cloth. ISBN: 978-1-884167-31-7.

**The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence.** Susie Linfield. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2010. List of figures, notes, bibliography, and index. xviii + 321pp. \$24.60 cloth. ISBN: 978-0-226-48250-7.

Reviewed by Ken Whalen  
*Universiti Brunei Darussalam*

‘Click to enlarge’ and you will see, more clearly and completely, a photographic reflection of human suffering and homicide sketched by the light of political violence. Would you click? Why would you? Why should you? Susie Linfield gracefully answers some of these questions in *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence* though she frames them differently. We have reasons for wanting to get closer, to gain a better perspective, and Linfield lays those on the table too. But her most profound insight inspires a passionate appeal for all of us to look *in*; in other words, to work to penetrate the image in order to find the historical circumstances that undermined the dignity, safety and freedom of those pictured. Engaging with images like these can lead to a greater sense of concern and respect for the fate of others who are not of the same family or tribe; however, this, as we all know, remains a challenging task. In *War Remnants of the Khmer Rouge*, Maureen Lambray faces what James Agee calls the ‘cruel radiance of what is’ (Agee & Evans, 1960, quoted in Linfield, p. xv) in a tortured land where human beings continue to be undone. She too wants viewers of her photographs to participate in reattaching ‘...Remnants...’ to specific events and experiences and not lose sight of them in the modern chatter of real-imagined imagery. Her stylized photo-essay may guide readers towards the kind of empathy that induces commitment to building a world free of atrocity and genocide.

*The Cruel Radiance* is a marvellously sophisticated synthesis of the histories and ideas that have shaped contemporary theories and criticism of photography. Linfield manoeuvres this into the realm of political theory and articulates a reason for why we should pay close attention to such photographs. Her book is divided into three parts: *Polemics*, *Places* and *People*. The first section makes the case that the ‘camera has been a key tool – perhaps the key tool – in enabling such empathetic leaps’ (p. 47) towards the tragic circumstances of other people in the world. As such, the production and transfer of photographs representing these tragedies has ‘globalized our conscience’ (p. 46) thereby forwarding the cause of Human Rights and garnering support for international organizations aiming to stem violence and suffering happening here and there. Her contemporaries such as Susan Sontag, John Berger, and Martha Rosler think otherwise; they claim such imagery is exploitative, voyeuristic, and pornographic. This is not to say that these extraordinary scholars, artists and critics are callous or reckless, but rather, they do not give photographs themselves the radiant agency that Linfield does, or presumes to do. The problem is that imagetexts saturate the modern life-world thus leading to

desensitization; and why not? In the age of the simulacrum the contents in and contexts of photographs are *make believe*; they have no inherent ability to foster empathy or care for others. Then there is the ‘aestheticizing horror’ which Michael Taussig warns us about: “for just to the side lurks the seductive tropes of fascism and the imaginative source of terror and torture embedded deep within us all’ (Taussig, 1992, p. 140). But from the rubble, Linfield reconstructs a way to view the image: ‘We are responsible for the ethics of seeing...this requires transforming our relationship to photographs from one of passivity and complaint to one of creativity and collaboration’ (p. 60). ‘We are responsible...’

In *Places*, Linfield offers an example of how to take responsibility by actively and critically engaging with traces of political violence captured in photographs. She returns to the shadowed grounds of Nazi Germany, Mao’s China and Sierra Leone’s Civil War, and confronts those of the Permanent War on Terror that, with a little self-reflection, we might find ourselves ignoring or, wittingly or unwittingly participating in. In her essay-photo-essay, words and photographs are in a dialogue, and readers enter. There are fewer photographs than one might expect in a book about photography, but the selection and their stories produce a carefully measured tone that counters the contemporary visual field filled with imagery flitting and flickering at the speed of light. The tone also reawakens the horror of events but transforms it into understanding, sympathy and caution all which bury the pandemonium and exuberance of violence that arouses the victimizer whose eyes we are capable of seeing through.

Linfield however does seem to undermine her stated belief in the transformative power of the photograph itself mainly by demonstrating that the empathy invoked by images are in many ways dependent on their context of words – essays and captions. Her dilemma of course brings to mind the age old and by now exhausted debate among philosophers and scholars who have argued over whether text or image can represent reality and convey meaning with more precision and clarity. Linfield does not give-up on her ideal though. The section of entitled *People* recalls the life and work of three respected war photographers and photojournalists: Robert Capa, James Nachtwey, Gilles Peress. She compares and contrasts their oeuvre and seems to reach a conclusion about the kinds of photographs that lend themselves to achieving an ‘ethics of seeing’. It seems they are not the kind illuminating Lambray’s *War Remnants*.

In a discussion about Capa’s and Nachtwey’s work, Linfield draws a distinction between their method of picture taking and the resulting aesthetic aspects of their images. Capa’s photographs, or at least those most appreciated, were taken while he was in view of wild-eyed moments. His camera reacted spontaneously therefore his pictures are candid. Their slipshod naturalness, Linfield argues, gives the images an immediacy that draws viewers in as participants in the scene; here they can more easily identify with and develop an intimacy with victims of war and atrocity. In contrast, Nachtwey’s intense concern for the artful particulars – frame, colour, balance – of his photographs promises participation but as a picture taker rather than as a vicarious victim. It seems a veil of film comes between the viewer and tormented Other. While the perceived immediacy of Capa’s photographs hold-out the possibility that we are not too late to effect change, Nachtwey’s stylized remote sensing places us beyond reach.

The war remnants in Lambray’s photo-essay are prisons, battlegrounds, torture rooms, minefields, killing fields, but mostly portraits of Cambodians whose bodies have been ripped and mangled by land mines and other explosive devices that were scattered across the countryside of Cambodia during the Second Indochina War and reign of the Khmer Rouge. Some these have been lying dormant for 50 years. In 2003, Lambray began documenting these remnants after realizing that a major cause of the country’s poverty is the paralyzing effect on human mobility and interaction caused by unexploded ordnances.

A preface, written by Lambray, and an introduction and afterward compliment the photo-essay. They help readers to understand her personal relationship with the region, but also the history of ‘Samay a-Pot’ – ‘the time of (Pol) Pot’ (1975-79). Pot was the leader the Khmer Rouge, a communist political party which wrested control of Cambodia and established Democratic Kampuchea. He aimed to create a modern utopia by imitating the revolutionary verve and purge of Mao’s Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution. Mass murder and torture were the closest he and his cadres got to this ideal. Almost 2 million people or rather one-quarter of the population of Cambodia lost their lives during this genocide. In the book’s preface, Lambray writes: ‘We need images as reminders of how quickly genocide can happen, and the past becomes the present.’

Besides her photographic reminders, Lambray includes two black-and-white maps that visually confer intellectual depth while conveying information about events of the past. The map at the beginning of the essay shows the location of refugee camps set along the border of Thailand and Cambodia for those who had escaped the Khmer Rouge. Toponyms are in typewriter font, words and phrases are scribbled in places. Lambray may have used this map while in the region in 1979. In any case, the design elements – archaic font, haphazard scrawls – encode immediate participation in the past, a hallmark of Capa’s work, according to Linfield. The second map, published by the Documentation Center of Cambodia, appears at the end of the essay, and uses Khmer and English languages to pinpoint the locations of killing fields, prisons, mass graves and genocide memorials throughout Cambodia.

The photographs are stunningly dark: they appear in the blacker shades of greyscale which makes them only look like they were taken a moment after twilight. This is the veil of film or high level of stylization that Linfield finds in Natchwey’s and Peress’s work. It becomes most obvious along the margins and in the background of many photographs where it cloaks clear skies and covers the leaves of mangrove, palm and banana trees. Imagining the splendid blues and greens of the tropical landscape creates an urge to peel away the veil in order to make the image more transparent and authentic. Yet, if the images were colorized, they may make the extraordinary look ordinary thereby desensitizing viewers most of whom will reside outside of Cambodia and be already caught in the total flow of the 24/7 superhighway of images and text. The grey hues do their part in pushing the story out from the flow, even if only momentarily, and perhaps not frustrating the cruel radiance.

Then there are the bodies – scarred, unbalanced – like the hollow sagging buildings etched by mould and algae, or the dripping crumbling rooms furnished with rust, or disfiguring disorder of the wetlands and forests both concealing potential eruptions and traces of past human lives. This book is not a cabinet of grotesqueries; it is a gradual journey across the faces and into the eyes of people who somehow, against all odds, endure a deathblow. Who are you? What happened to you? What will you do? Where will you go? Lambray’s poignant photographs, as well as her pithy captions seemingly hand-written, offer us some answers.

Cambodia has been globalizing, and like most other countries engaged in the process it is developing a tourism industry. The government of Hun Sen, if there is such a thing especially since the former Khmer Rouge henchman had turned-coat and ever since has positioned himself as liberator and strong-arm leader of Cambodia, is relocating the maimed out of sight so as not to offend the sensibilities of tourists in the capital city of Phnom Penh. In 2013, Cambodians registered their dissatisfaction with the regime during an election which gave Sen a slim margin of victory even though national and international claims of voting irregularities are substantial. Demonstrations by opposition parties continue as do the surreal trials of some of the chief architects of the Rouge’s murderous policies. ‘Thirty years after the appalling transgressions of the Khmer Rouge,

much of the country still lives in fear', writes Margo Pickens in the *Afterward*. Lambray's photographs let us 'face the cruel radiance of what is'; though, who among us will empathize, then take action?

## References

- Agee, J., & Evans, W. (1960). *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin. (p. 11).
- Taussig, M. (1992). Culture of terror—space of death: Roger Casement's Putumayo report and the explanation of torture. In Nicholas B. Dirks (ed.), *Colonialism and Culture* (pp. 135–173). Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.