

# *We Want (U) to Know*<sup>[1]</sup>: The Challenge of Participatory Filmmaking

Ella Pugliese (Filmmaker)

As we arrived in Thnol Lok village and made a proposal to the people living there: to actively join our film project, we had no pre-imagined plan of what direction our work together would take. The concept of “participation” was, indeed, pretty new to the Cambodian context. Even some colleagues from the NGOs implementing the project (Cambodians as well as Internationals) were irritated by the fact that we really did want the villagers to lead us. *They* should tell us what kind of film could help them and their countrymen to find relief from the past.

Some of the first feedback that we received from villagers was their desire to reconstruct the brutal killings of their family members. Nou Va and I reacted in a rather skeptical way, well aware of the difficulties of re-enactments of tragic events and also of the possible implications, especially the risk of re-traumatization. However more and more survivors pointed out that it was the moment of loss that needed to be reflected upon and worked on; specifically the situation in which their beloved ones had been taken away or killed. They wanted to give this very moment that was largely unknown from their current life, a concrete shape. Still full of doubts about the opportunity/legitimacy/danger of taking on such an endeavor, we realized that we had to give it a chance.

Participation means to me that I open a panel of possible solutions, although I may give some coordinates. The protagonists, in this case the survivors of the Khmer Rouge, then decide if and how to participate. I know and try not to forget that I am the one “bringing,” “offering,” and thus in a way I am in a position of power in the relationship. However, if I offer to give up at least

some of the authority that the situation gave me, open it up and share it, I also need to take responsibility accepting the risk — not knowing where the process I started would lead all of us.

We decided to do it.

Few days later, large group of survivors were re-enacting a scene of execution, spontaneously deciding who would act which role, where the scene would take place and how it should look like. What a power! What an emotion. This scene and the steps to get there form the core of the film. However, one aspect of the process is not so evident: during the preparation people were having (really) a lot of fun. At first they concentrated on discussions of where and how the specific people had been taken away by the Khmer Rouge. As they started to look for tools like weapons and Pol Pot-style clothing to dress up the local village youngsters, they realized, we all realized, that they looked like “real Khmer Rouge.” At the moment the humoristic side of the situation prevailed and all of a sudden, everybody was laughing, the elderly people, the children and us.<sup>[2]</sup> I remember the shiver going down on my back at first and the thought running through my mind, “Is this not extremely dangerous?” Yes, it is — or at least it *may* be. But in this very moment it was a form of collective liberation, catharsis in its ancient Greek meaning. It was the act of reproducing a traumatic moment in an absolutely non-traumatic frame, and using humor to make it more distant, more inoffensive. It was everyone joining together in laughter three decades later to say: this cannot be. Not here, not now. Not anymore.

[1] *WWWU2K* is the documentation of a process of self-healing and conciliation with the past, which took place in a Cambodian village among survivors of the Khmer Rouge Regime and their community. It was initiated through participatory practices by a team of psychologists, NGO workers and filmmakers from Cambodia, Europe and the US. I was the artistic director of the project.

[2] This is not an evident element of the film because our Cambodian colleagues who watched and discussed the film with us during postproduction were worried it may lead to misunderstandings and give a wrong image of the Cambodian villagers to the outside world, so we ultimately decided not to include it.

## ■ Screenings

*We Want (U) to Know* [NAC] ..... 10/12 13:30– [F3] | 10/13 10:30– [F5]