

WIDE ANGLE COMPETITION
INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL
BUSAN
2019

TIPASA PRODUCTION PRESENTS

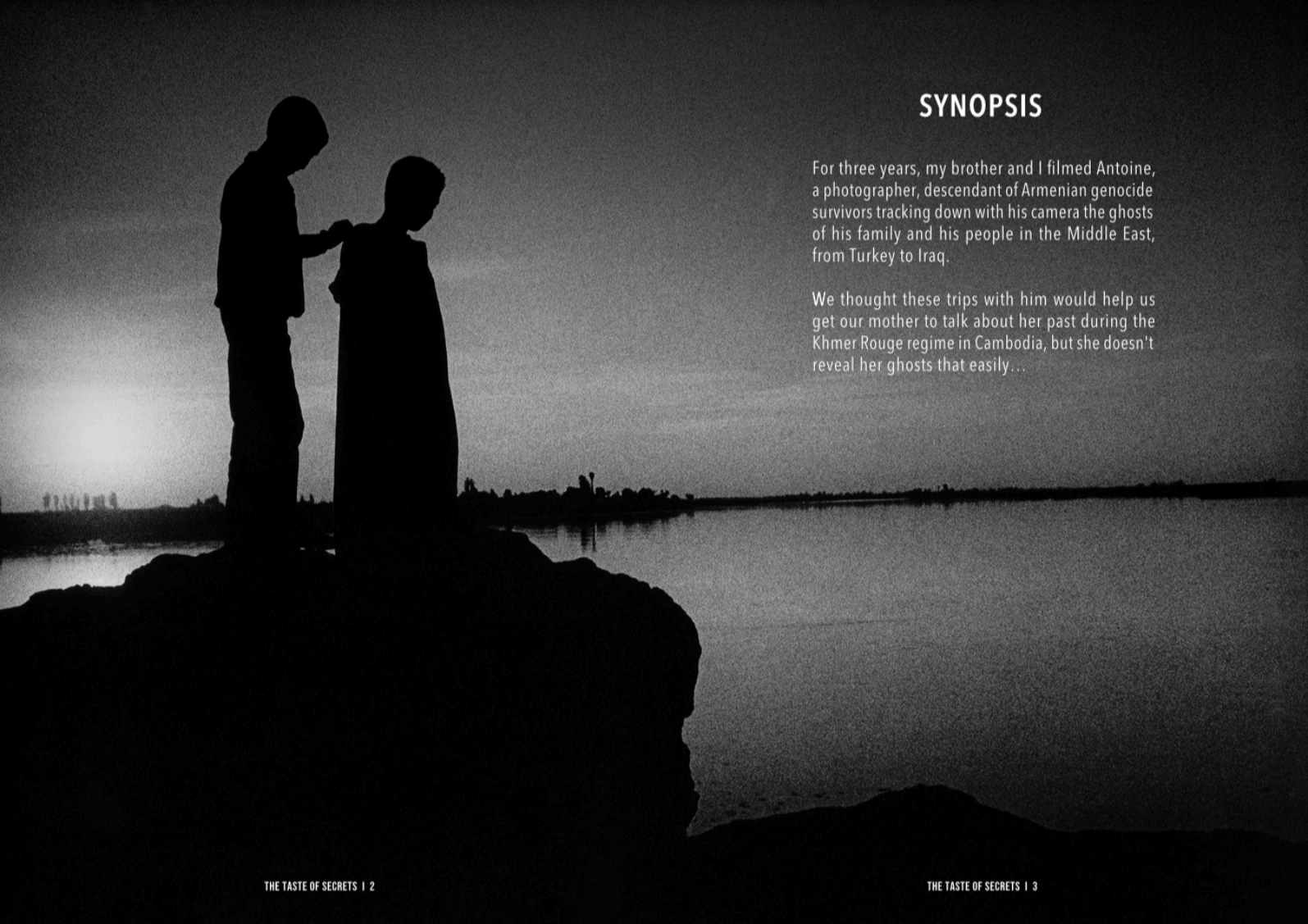
THE TASTE OF SECRETS

A FILM BY GUILLAUME SUON



REGIE: GUILLAUME SUON - SOUND: JULIEN PETIT - STARRING: GILLES VOLTA - PRODUCED BY: JULIEN ROUMY - DAVY CHOU - TIPASA PRODUCTION - ANTI-ARCHIVE - LYON CAPITALE TV - VOSGES
TELEVISION - CO-PRODUCTION WITH THE SUPPORT OF DEPARTEMENT DES ALPES-MARITIMES IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE CNC REGION NORMANDIE IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE CNC AND IN ASSOCIATION WITH
NORMANDIE IMAGES REGION PROVENCE-ALPES-COTE D'AZUR FONDS IMAGES DE LA DIVERSITE - COMMISSARIAT GENERAL A L'EQUALITE DES TERRITOIRES - (CNC) FONDS D'AIDE A
L'INNOVATION AUDIOVISUELLE (CNC) 2015 ASIAN NETWORK OF DOCUMENTARY (AND FUND)

TIPASA



SYNOPSIS

For three years, my brother and I filmed Antoine, a photographer, descendant of Armenian genocide survivors tracking down with his camera the ghosts of his family and his people in the Middle East, from Turkey to Iraq.

We thought these trips with him would help us get our mother to talk about her past during the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia, but she doesn't reveal her ghosts that easily...

INTERVIEW WITH GUILLAUME SUON

The filming of *The Taste of Secrets* began on your return from a long stay in Cambodia...

I have been based in Phnom Penh for seven years. I directed four documentaries focusing on the Khmer Rouge genocide and its consequences on Cambodian society, in collaboration with filmmaker Rithy Panh. By immersing myself into my mother's country, I have been trying to reconstruct my family's history and free myself from the weight of our ghosts.

My mother lives in Southern France since the 1980s. After finishing my last documentary *The Storm Makers*, I moved back to France and I started filming my mother. This seems to me as the most intuitive and natural way to continue the work I have started in Cambodia. My younger brother Julien has always taken part in my research. As a journalist and a photographer, he has been working on the country's history. This time I asked him to join me as a soundman and a team partner.

You have been dreaming about making this film for a long time, haven't you?

I have always been asking myself questions about my mother's past, where she came from, what she has been through. I had an urge to find out whatever she was concealing from us. I have written about this unknown past since my first homework as a school kid.

In my early twenties, meeting photographer Antoine Agoudjian - the other character in the film - was decisive. He is a descendant of survivors of the Armenian genocide. Discovering his work at an exhibition touched me deeply.



In his photographs, I saw the same quest for ghosts, specters, shadows, traces that haunted him the way my own ghosts were haunting me. Antoine's work and lifetime commitment became an inspiration for me. Soon after, I went to Cambodia in quest of my own ghosts and tried to capture them with my lens.

When I returned to France in 2015, I knew I had to film Antoine. His photographs have always been in my mind. I sensed that he and my mother were articulated as in two sides of the same quest.

The shooting brought you very far to finally bring you closer to your mother...

The film begins with Antoine's photography exhibition in Turkey. From there he takes my brother and I to Iraq. Always in search of traces of the past, of his family and his people. It was April 2015. We discovered Yazidi mass graves, a few hundred meters away from the battlefield and from the territory occupied by ISIS. We didn't really know what we were doing. We went there as in a personal challenge, as *unconscious brats!* With the illusion of getting closer, of being as close to death as possible, of feeling it. "We wanted to face death," as Antoine says.

We were in the same area where Armenians were deported during the 1915 genocide. Antoine was able to explain very well this confrontation between memory and recent history. I became conscious of the overlay of different massacres on the same ground we were standing on. I was shaken but I had to talk about this too.

The moment you discovered a mass grave in Iraq is a key scene in *The Taste of Secrets*, why?

This particular scene reveals what genocide is. It shows the traces that war leaves behind. We needed to see this space, to feel this brutal and cold atmosphere, to understand why my mother refuses to talk to us, to understand what kind of images she keeps in her mind. Images like that Yazidi mass grave where you can bump into bones, barely buried in the ground.

This scene shows where survivors of genocides and massacres come from. My mother saw this, so did Antoine's family. This was a way to bring us all together: survivors, us, their children, and our ghosts.





The editing challenges the audience during the first 30 minutes of the film. No clues are given to let the viewer know where they are or what they see. They must let go and be carried away by the film with very little information.

Editor Gilles Volta and I wanted the audience to focus on the sensations that images can reveal, without giving too much information. Let the audience follow and listen to the characters, be carried away by what they see: the photographs of Antoine, a woman and her children in a kitchen, followed by the horror of mass graves, stories of massacres...

It is a question of surrendering and letting yourself be overtaken by the film. I remember my brother and I being completely lost in those areas where the film was taking us.

Then after half an hour, the editing follows a rather classical thread. The narrative progresses towards a relief that after all this tension has even more impact on the viewer.

You blame your mother for not talking to you, yet she is talking, what else would you like to know?

For a long time, I had the impression that my mother was hiding something from us. I was thinking that there must be something out there that is more important than the crumbs of information she was giving away. In the film, she answers my questions in the form of metaphors, inviting me to follow her. This dialogue between her and me is like an initiatory journey. She asks me: "How far are you willing to go to find out?".

If I hadn't been to Cambodia, if I hadn't learned her language, if I hadn't followed her in this hide-and-seek game, she would have never given me all this.

Do you think painful memories are to be shared with family, friends and those who have experienced the same thing?

Yes, several scenes show genocide survivors recalling their lives under the Khmer Rouge regime. I have always felt this separation between "them, the survivors, and us, the rest of the world". This film was born from this question: Why are we excluded?

For the first time in my adult life I was able to witness this dialogue between survivors within my own family.

I was quite shocked by the way they speak with each other, making jokes about the Khmer Rouge. As if to avoid the pain brought up by memories. It was disturbing to hear my mother talk so harshly about massacres or summary executions.

How would you explain the survivors' silence?

I think it is difficult to tell such a terrible and violent story to your own children. After leaving Cambodia as a young refugee in the early 1980s, my mother started a new life in France. She was trying to reconstruct herself but at the same time, she had to fully embody her role as a single mother, to raise us and educate us. She could not be a survivor anymore, an emaciated person who had been surrounded by death. She was also probably ashamed.

Why would you tell your children about this? Maybe she would talk to my own children more easily about it.

Her reluctance to talk developed my taste for secrets. Hence the title of the film. I wanted to go and find this other persona that she had been before in Cambodia. When she used to speak another language and live another life. What remains of this little girl? I always knew, despite the horror, that she was still there somewhere in front of us.

Searching for her was a need, a way to free myself from the ghosts that were transmitted to me.

What about the transgenerational transmission of trauma?

Taste, for example, can be traumatic. Because it is linked to deprivation and starvation. "Today, we are lucky to eat therefore we will eat well, we mustn't eat in a hurry...", I have heard this sentence during all my childhood as almost all the children of survivors have... Cambodian music and smells are also impregnated with memories, as if they were haunted.

At night, my brother and I could hear our mother scream in Khmer language while she was having nightmares that woke her up...

Even I had this dream where the executioner sits in front of you and tells you: "You are going to have a hard time." The feeling of fear and horror, the moment when you understand that everything is lost - this feeling would wake me up. It was difficult to understand and overcome for me as a child or as a teenager. My mother had never told me about such scenes before. My imagination built them from the films I saw such as Roland Joffe's *The Killing Fields* or later Rithy Panh's films.

How did you position yourself as a director and son to film your mother?

My brother Julien plays an important role in the film. He is the one who comforts my mother when I go too far with my questions, the one she pushes in front of my camera when she doesn't want to answer me. I quickly understood that the film should be built around this triangle that the three of us formed.

As a director, I had to agree to go and get my mother's intimate emotions and challenge her. But I also had to show her beauty, her sensuality, her body. It was difficult to do so being her own son. I realized that in all my previous films I was filming Cambodian women who were about my mother's age, as if I was looking for her, or training to film her.

What did your mother think of this film?

She feels that my brother and I have told her own story. She liked the presence of Antoine and his mother. She recognizes herself in them, with the impression that she is not the only one living with this burden of a violent story in the back of her mind. Now she pushes us to move towards life. She insists that the fantasy of death that we sought in the Iraqi desert is a lure: "Death is ugly, you must not approach it...", she says.

This film is a coming of age journey. We leave the fantasies of childhood to become men. At the end of this chaotic path I think we managed to find relief.

Interview by Christine Chaumeau. Paris, September 2019.

*Christine Chaumeau is a journalist and writer. For nearly 18 years she covered Southeast Asia for French and English media. She is in charge of Southeast Asian coverage at *Courrier International*. Her work has been published in *Le Monde*, *Le Monde diplomatique*, *Télérama*, *Les Echos*, *The Far Eastern Economic Review*, and other media. She is also the co-author of *S21 - The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (2009, Flammarion) with Cambodian filmmaker Rithy Panh.*




BIOGRAPHY

Guillaume Suon is a French-Cambodian filmmaker who has focused his first documentary films on the Khmer Rouge genocide and its aftermaths in Cambodian contemporary society.

For 7 years, Guillaume Suon collaborated and was trained by the Oscar-nominated filmmaker Rithy Panh, at the Bophana Audiovisual Center in Phnom Penh. Suon is also a graduate of the French national film school La Fémis, an alumnus of the Berlinale Talent Campus, a fellow of the Sundance Institute and IDFAcademy.

His last documentary film, *The Storm Makers*, was broadcast on ARTE France, PBS – POV and BBC, and won awards at Full Frame, Busan and Milan festivals.





France/Cambodia | 2019 | Documentary |
Color | DCP | 16:9 | Dolby 5.1 | 110 min
Original languages: French, Khmer, Kurdish, Armenian

Director: Guillaume Suon

Producer: Julien Roumy
Co-Producer: Davy Chou
Production Company: Tipasa Production
In co-production with: Anti-Archive

Director of Photography: Guillaume Suon
Screenplay: Guillaume Suon
Editor: Gilles Volta
Sound Designer: Julien Petit

In co-production with Lyon Capitale TV (France) and Vosges
Télévision (France).

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