

# Carefully approaching an absent center<sup>1</sup>

In the early 1900s cinema arrived in colonized Cambodia. Mainly originating from its colonizer France, the first showings were documentaries that brought Western concepts and understandings to the Cambodian people. Documentary and fictional films started to be produced in Cambodia itself in the 1920s.<sup>2</sup> This, however, did not halt foreign influence but, rather, incorporated it into distinct local products. After its decolonization from French tutelage (1863-1953), Cambodian cinema went through two decades of modernization inspired by Western examples. In many ways, the 1950s through to the early 1970s can be seen as Cambodia's cultural 'Golden Age'.<sup>3</sup>

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Kavich Neang filming in Cambodia. Photo from private collection Kavich Neang.

WHILE PRINCE NORODOM SIHANOUK was in power (1953-1969), he proved a proud sponsor of the Golden Age. Fostering the postcolonial nationalist spirit, he instated governmental funding for indigenous cinematic productions and banned Western films. While foreign films would still enter the country from Thailand, India or Hong Kong, the local film industry blossomed.<sup>4</sup> Remarkably, from 1970 to 1975, while the civil war that would bring the Khmer Rouge into power was raging outside of Phnom Penh, Cambodian cinema drew its largest audiences.<sup>5</sup> However, most of the films that came out in these years were neglected and lost in the years of conflict that followed; as were the lives of many of the actors, directors and producers that had made the industry thrive.<sup>6</sup>

Formally, the Cambodian conflicts came to a halt with the 1991 Paris Peace Accords. However, it took decades for the restoration of the Cambodian film industry to receive governmental attention. For example, in 2010 only two cinemas in Phnom Penh were showing mostly low quality Cambodian horror films; compared to the 30 cinemas and an approximate 400 film productions in the period 1960-1975. Only in 2011 did two new large film theatres, Cineplex and Legend, open up in Phnom Penh and start to feature international films. Until then, internationally produced documentaries and art house films were only shown to a largely expat audience in the small setting of NGO and cafe film rooms.

## Reanimating Cambodia's cinema

Yet this is not to say that no filmmaking took place in post-conflict Cambodia. In the 1980s, video technology brought about a surge of regionally produced films that were watched at home or shown on local television. This small-scale revival, however, was already extinguished by the end of the 1990s.<sup>7</sup> Larger international productions, such as of course the *Killing Fields* (1984), were shot in Cambodia upon occasion, bringing technical expertise to the country and employing local staff. Additionally, the French Cultural Center (FCC) and other international NGOs, such as the German cultural center Metahouse (2007), started to focus on art, communication and media in order to serve as networking platforms and resource centers for the local creative community. The Cambodian film industry, however, suffered from negative perceptions as most films, and especially the documentaries about Cambodian subjects, were Western-made and conflict-focused.<sup>8</sup>

As one of the first local measures to support the development of a domestic film industry, the Cambodian Ministry of Culture's Department of Cinema initiated the foundation of Khmer Mekong Films (KMF) in 2006. This production company set out to produce Cambodian-made films that would not 'suffer' the foreign view on Cambodia. While KMF depends on international cooperation to build the needed capacity, its aims are rather nationalist in nature. The government aims to stimulate the production of non-political, non-social issue and non-conflict related pictures of Cambodia that will, in their idea, bring forward traditional values and "strengthen the nation". This initiative went hand-in-hand with plans to open a film school at the Cambodian Royal University of Fine Arts.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, so far, neither company nor school can be said to have materialized in reality.

## Kon Khmer Koun Khmer: Cambodian films, Cambodian generation

Parallel to this centralized development effort, a young and independent generation of filmmakers has been educating itself in expressing their views about Cambodian society through films and documentaries.<sup>10</sup> Inspired by Western role models such as Martin Scorsese and mentored by Cambodian French returnee Rithy Panh, individual members of this group have set about acquiring as much of the film-making skills available in Cambodia and on the internet as they can.

Known for ethnographic productions like *Rice People* (1994) as well as documentaries that directly confront the national Khmer Rouge trauma, such as *S-21. The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (2003) and Oscar nominated *The Missing Picture* (2013), Panh's support has been essential to the development of most members of this group, both locals and returnees. As no extensive film academy training is available in the country, the locals have had to take their own education in hand. In addition to NGOs and the Cambodian Film Commission that enlists visiting film crews, the support of the Bophana Audiovisual Center, which Panh helped establish in Phnom Penh in 2005, has been very important in this process. Bophana provides many of the (im)material resources that are vital to Panh's goal of giving Cambodian cinema its voice back.<sup>11</sup>

This piecemeal building of their know-how, forced a new generation of filmmakers to become active cultural entrepreneurs who set out, individually and by teaming up, to make the most of the available (digital) resources and international (funding) opportunities.<sup>12</sup> Independent of the government and formal institutions they found ways to develop their own cinematographic language. The shifting of generations thus brought about a shifting of themes and approaches in filmmaking.

The 'new generation' of collaborators and friends calls itself the Kon Khmer Koun Khmer (lit: Cambodian films, Cambodian generation) and may be distinguished by their own involvement in contemporary subject matters. As if carefully avoiding the pain and trauma that accompanies the Khmer Rouge conflict for so many, they focus, rather, on the pre-and post-conflict periods, thus approaching but never touching on this painful cultural 'void' in Cambodian history. While the consequences of the consecutive civil wars are certainly present in their work, these do not take center stage. Carefully, the gap that was struck in Cambodian filmmaking history is approached through, for instance, the reconstruction of cultural histories or following small stories of everyday life linked to personal experiences of the filmmaker. In this sense their ways of storytelling are not 'new' but firmly embedded in Cambodian history, traditions and culture as well as in international practice. In contrast to the government-related KMF organization, however, they do not shy away from socially relevant issues and do not hesitate to show their personal fascination with the subject under study.<sup>13</sup>

A case in point is the celebrated documentary *Where I go*, by Kavich Neang, which was presented at the 2013 IDFA 'Emerging Voices from Southeast Asia program'.<sup>14</sup> In his following of the everyday life of a bi-ethnic young adult, while not passing judgment or explicitly recounting history, important aspects of the recent Cambodian past are revealed. Neang doesn't attempt to answer the questions he brings forward, but simply acknowledges the fact that they exist. On his motivation for filmmaking Neang states that, as a local, he has insights into current Cambodian culture that those born abroad would just not be able to put into film. He is emphatic, however, that his work is not meant to be political and can be said to practice mild 'self-censorship' in order to not suffer the scrutiny that government critics in Cambodia are subject to.

Thus Neang illustrates how – as Hamilton aptly states in her work on the reconciliatory dimensions of the new Cambodian documentary cinema – the Kon Khmer Koun Khmer opens up and expands on cultural continuity and survival while carefully approaching an absent center.<sup>15</sup> While recent developments in Cambodian society bring an unprecedented number of peaceful young activists, mobilized through Facebook, to the streets in a so-called 'Cambodian Spring', the 'cultural activism' of this new generation of filmmakers brings the changing values of Cambodian society to an international audience.<sup>16</sup>

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## References

- 1 The author thanks Kavich Neang and Davy Chou for their helpful insights and constructive feedback during the writing of this article.
- 2 In this article I consider the Cambodian film industry to include fictional as well as documentary filmmaking as the technical expertise and creative insights for their production are largely the same.
- 3 Daravuth, L. & I. Muan. 2001. *Cultures of Independence. An introduction to Cambodian Arts and Culture in the 1950s*, Phnom Penh: The Prince Claus Fund and Reyum Publishing.
- 4 Bearing witness to the importance of filmmaking to Cambodian popular culture, it is a member of the new, generation of filmmakers, Cambodian French returnee Davy Chou (Chou, D. 2011. *Le Sommeil d'Or – Golden Slumbers*, film produced by Jacky Goldberg, Paris: Vycky Films).
- 5 Blum-Reid, S.E. 2003. 'Khmer memories or filming with Cambodia', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 4(1): 126-138
- 6 Hamilton, A. 2012. 'A National Cinema in Cambodia?', in Margirier G. & J-P. Gimenez (eds.) *Southeast Asian Cinema*. Lyon: Asiexpo, pp. 68-74.
- 7 Hamilton, op. cit.
- 8 Barton, C. (23 Aug 2007) 'Cambodian film makers aim to rebuild tattered image', *Phnom Penh Post*. Available at: <http://tinyurl.com/tatteredimage> (accessed 26 Feb 2014)
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- 12 Hamilton, A. 2013. 'Witness and Recuperation: Cambodia's New Documentary Cinema', *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 39(1): 7-30.
- 13 Barton, op. cit.
- 14 Neang, K. 2012. *Where I go*, film produced by Rithy Panh, Cambodia/France: Bophana Production.
- 15 Hamilton, op. cit. p. 15
- 16 Oaten, J. (22 July 2013) 'Young Activists take the streets ahead of the Cambodian Elections', available from <http://tinyurl.com/jamesoaten> (accessed 26 Feb 2014).