

It has now been over thirty years since the Khmer Rouge's four-year tyrannical governance of Cambodia was forcibly supplanted. However, many legacies of this painful period linger on; permeating all levels of what is still objectively a disadvantaged country. One effect of this continuing haunting is the stunting of Cambodia's creative industries. Although domestic production continues, Cambodia's film industry in particular has faced a troubled return to form, its trajectory being forever diverted into new forms and preoccupations.

Creative industries are best described as activities which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have the potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property. The film industry in Cambodia is one such industry, defined by basic economic properties such as uncertain demand, differentiated and durable product and vertically differentiated skills. A film is determined to be a product of the Cambodian film industry if a substantial portion of its creative production was undertaken by Cambodian companies and agents.

The Cambodian film industry is fifty-four years old, being officially born in 1958 with the production of *Phkar Rik Phkar Rouy* [*Blossoming Flower, Withering Flower*] by director Som Sam Al. As the first film to be directed and produced for a profit by Cambodians with Cambodian agency, using the Khmer language (in its intertitles), and targeted at a Cambodian audience, *Phkar Rik Phkar Rouy* can be firmly identified as starting the domestic industry. Until its release only international films and a small number of private, non-monetised shorts were shot in the protectorate/kingdom - although there had been a cinema showing imported films in Phnom Penh since 1909. *Phkar Rik Phkar Rouy* was shot on black and white 16mm film, and like all subsequent films until the mid-1960s, had no recorded sound. Films in this very early period were often exhibited with narrators providing sound and dialogue, and like in contemporaneous Thailand, and in Hollywood prior to the 1930s, some of these film narrators attained individual fame, drawing audiences into the cinemas and linking early Khmer cinema to live performance.

Although the development of cinema in Cambodia was conditioned by the colonial situation and the history of cinema has often been presented as a narrative of Western invention, film scholar Robert Stram (perhaps obviously) has pointed out that cultural forms and aesthetic philosophies precede the relatively recent invention of the film camera. This is relevant to Cambodia especially when examining the early days of its film industry, when silent films were synergised by the Khmer's long tradition of shadow puppet theatre (*lakhoan sbaek*), a centuries-long art form of shadow-projection, live narration and music. The formal connection became less tenable and more historic when sound came to the Cambodian film industry and narrators became obsolete, but the opportunities provided by pre-recorded audio gave way to even further opportunities for culturally-entrenched narratives. These were often based on folk stories, fairy tales and the Reamker, the Khmer version of the Hindu epic Ramayana. They also adapted *Jatakas*, which are stories about Buddha's former incarnations. This cultural content helped foster the popularity of the domestic industry that was to come. Put simply, the Cambodian film industry wasted no time in moving on from its genesis.

The period from the early 1960s to 1975 has been widely termed "the Golden Age of Cambodian cinema" for the immense numbers of films that were made, the profit produced, and the domestic and international popularity the films that was garnered. Somewhere between four-hundred to five-hundred films were produced over these fifteen years, mostly as passion projects from self-taught entrepreneurial directors, who often started film studios as family businesses. Over thirty movie theatres quickly opened in Phnom Penh alone, showing films remarkable for their wild imagination and

ebullience, leaping with colour and smelling of fragrant earth. Some Khmer films had exhibition runs of several months and could sell out for weeks on end. The frantic activity and immediate vibrancy of the film industry at this time was entirely organic – there not being a single film school in the country, nor any local film laboratories – indeed all films had to be sent to France for processing.

There were some meagre institutional measures taken to assist the development of the early Cambodian film industry, however. Up until 1970, Cambodian cinema was overseen by its most prolific participant, the contentious and powerful King Norodom Sihanouk. Growing up as the privileged child of royalty in Phnom Penh, then-Prince Sihanouk was enamoured with French and Hollywood film stars from the 1930s. He even recalls that his father, Suramarit, attempted to discourage this flowering cinematic passion by sending him away to school in Saigon. It didn't work - upon his coronation in 1941 the young King Sihanouk bought his first film camera and started experimenting with short films. From this moment onwards, Sihanouk's enduring passion for cinema translated into patronage of the country's film industry.

First, in the late 1940s Sihanouk sent a number of promising filmmakers to France in order to study film production. He also established an Office of Film under the Ministry of Information in 1951, which by the early 1960s had expanded to include a production section. Finally, Sihanouk instigated the inaugural annual Phnom Penh International Film Festival in 1968. While there is no doubt that these measures assisted the development of the industry to a degree, the efficacy of the initiatives is checked somewhat by the aforementioned paucity of film schools and laboratories. Indeed, it appears that although Sihanouk certainly desired a robust Cambodian film industry, he was perhaps more preoccupied with his own film career than with those of the creative individuals in his populace.

For following in the footsteps of his great-great-grandfather King Ang Duong, King Norodom Sihanouk saw himself not only as a leader but also an artist. Responsible for over forty-six films, Sihanouk is by far the most fecund filmmaker in Cambodia's history – and also the only Cambodian filmmaker to have had the means of such an achievement. Interestingly, while the cinematic activities of other twentieth century political leaders such as Stalin, Mussolini and Hitler have been analysed in terms of their perceived exploitation of the medium for the purposes of political propaganda, Sihanouk's films have received little of such treatment. In fact, most interested scholars and researchers, including Osborne, Meyer, Chandler, Gordon, Hanna and Shawcross have limited their analyses to the simple claim that Sihanouk's filmmaking was self-destructive and politically detrimental. These analysts are referring to the fact that in the later years of Sihanouk's reign he disaffected the Cambodian elite, spent more and more time making movies rather than governing, and eventually came to be deposed in 1970 by Lon Nol with the support of the United States.

Sihanouk's filmmaking may have led to the frustration of those with wealth and power in Phnom Penh, but these people constituted a minority of the films' intended audience. Some argue that Sihanouk knew exactly what he was doing, in that his film-making is a demonstration of his political awareness and sensitivity to the peculiarities of Cambodian politics, that his films created rapport with the otherwise politically distant Khmer. His films were primarily a new means to continue the traditional communication between monarch and peasant with their narrative conclusions appearing logical according to traditional Khmer beliefs and values. This thesis gives political agency to Sihanouk's film-making – in this way Sihanouk's direct and indirect sponsorship of the film industry was a tool of governance. At the very least his films remain a permanent, poignant record of his leadership – a modern twentieth-century Angkorean bas-relief.

Although Norodom Sihanouk was the ultimate film star (as hereditary God-King, Prime Minister and prolific director and actor) he was not the only larger-than-life figure to light up the silver screens of Cambodia during the “Golden Age”. The development of the film industry in the 1960s brought the emergence a genuine star system, with many leading lads and ladies cultivating and commodifying their images for profit. Examples include Kong Sam Ouern, who reportedly acted in over a hundred films in his fifteen-year career, Vichara Dany, who sung or acted in up to two hundred films, Chea Yuthorn, who performed in seventy-six films in twelve years, and finally the most widely recognised Khmer star, Dy Saveth, the girl who started her film career at the age of seventeen, performed prolifically, fled to France in 1975, worked as a waitress for a decade then returned to Cambodia and resumed acting in 1993. Saveth has a nickname appropriate to her journey: “the actress of tears”.

Film work in the Cambodian provinces became nearly impossible as the civil war intensified in the lead-up to 1975. By the end of 1974 all the cinemas in Phnom Penh were closed, heralding the end of the “Golden Age” and ushering in the “Dark Age” of Cambodian cinema. On April 17, 1975 the Khmer Rouge marched into Phnom Penh, and over the next three years, eight months, and twenty days the rulers of the newly named Democratic Kampuchea would prohibit money, markets, formal education, Buddhism, books, private property and freedom of movement. This unprecedented attempt at social engineering is now rightly identified as an example of genocide, with approximately 2.12 million people estimated to have lost their lives through murder, malnutrition and worse.

Countless stars, jobbing actors, directors, musicians, and other workers in the film industry were among the dead. Indeed, to even identify as a creative or an intellectual in Democratic Kampuchea was to invite maltreatment or death, so stringent and desperate were its administrators and citizens. This treatment translated to the celluloid representations of these figures, too: out of the more than four-hundred movies made in the years directly preceding the Khmer Rouge’s administration, no more than thirty have survived, a mess considered to be possibly the biggest loss in the history of Southeast Asian cinema. But the film industry did persist, in a way.

All films produced from 1975 – 1975 were commissioned by Angkar, the central government, and were not for the purposes of market consumption (obviously there was no “market”). In this way the film industry was nationalised and absorbed into the state by the Khmer Rouge so as for it to be utilised specifically for the purposes of propaganda. It has been argued that the Khmer Rouge benefited from Chinese filmmaking and propaganda techniques with their propaganda films being made with the assistance of Chinese filmmakers - but both China and Cambodia strongly deny this. Whether independently produced or not, at least seventy-eight films were made during the failed utopian era, the majority being black and white, silent, and of poor quality. Interestingly, Saloth Sar, the supreme leader of the Communist Party of Kampuchea, otherwise known by his adopted name Pol Pot (“Political Potential”), was personally working on a feature film when the Vietnamese army invaded Cambodia and drove the Khmer Rouge into the provinces in 1979. Sar wrote the script himself, a story about the Khmer Rouge’s sufferings and rise to power in Ratannakiri during the 1960s, and a team shot the film under Sar’s direction on location. Thankfully this, the first feature-length film to be produced by the Khmer Rouge state, was also the last, and a kind of twisted echo to Norodom Sihanouk’s legacy as the film-ascribing leader was avoided.

The Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia and the establishment of the People’s Republic of Kampuchea coincided with a hiatus in the country’s film industry. In the initially famine-stricken, ravaged and brutalised Cambodia of the early 1980s there was simply no capacity for a vibrant creative

economy of any substance. After this abrupt end to the propaganda film industry it would take eight long years for private film production to return – in 1987 Yvon Hem's *Sror Morl Anthakal* [*Shadows of Darkness*] became the first Cambodian feature film to be made since 1979. Hem, a veteran film director from before 1975, used equipment put together from scavenged spare parts to shoot this confronting, autobiographical film about the fate of his family under the Khmer Rouge.

Following 1987, the immediate renewal of the industry came to be shaped by the politics of the cold war. The Vietnamese occupiers showed preference for exhibiting films from “socialist brother countries” rather than encouraging original Cambodian cultural content. They even banned all screenings of Cambodian films dating from the time before the Khmer Rouge. This two-year awkward resuscitation of the industry finished with a Cambodian-Czech co-production named *Devet Kruhu Pekla* [*Nine Circles of Hell*]. This love story in the Czech language was another tale of dislocation, featuring a narrative about a Czech doctor and a Cambodian actress who are torn apart by the Khmer Rouge. After the Vietnamese withdrawal in September 1989, Cambodia's creative shackles were finally unleashed – aided and abetted by the (comparative) affordability of new and accessible videotape technology.

A “camcorder revolution” flourished in the wake of the Vietnamese withdrawal and in the lead-up to two years of United Nations administration, boosting Cambodia's filmic output to levels previously unseen. The inherently flexible analogue video camera is estimated to have been responsible for the production of up to two-hundred tape films in 1990 alone. Complemented by the amateur bustle video cameras provided early in the decade, film production continued to potter along throughout the 1990s, but the industry found it difficult to compete with imports from Thailand, whose film industry was by then extremely robust. Demand for local content was not what it could be – at least until 2003, when anti-Thai unrest swept Cambodia in response to insensitive, racist comments reportedly made by Thai actress Suvanant Kongying (though never proven). Suddenly Cambodians, swept up in a surge of patriotism and pride, stopped buying Thai movies and turned to inward-focused consumption.

This increase in demand, although sparked by a regrettable incident, was just what the Cambodian film industry needed. The film industry flared back to life, subsisting throughout the decade, before starting to dim once more. Thirty-five movies were produced in 2007, twenty-five in 2008, and thirteen in 2009. This trend reversed in 2011, when over a hundred film production companies were registered, producing a total of twenty films – but auspiciously, there are still no film schools in Cambodia, and most cinemas remain derelict. The emergence of digital technology could be partly responsible for the recent increase in productions – it is certainly a factor in the growing independent cinema scene (independent films are those not produced or distributed in association with a Cambodian production company). The reach of Cambodian film, through independent productions, is organically expanding to produce strong cultural exports that benefit from foreign markets outside the country.

However, there are strong criticisms levelled at the state of the present-day film industry, including from those who help constitute it. Chom Vichet, director and owner of film production company Abpi Monkul, claims Cambodia's film industry is crippled by low funds and insufficient equipment. He believes that to resolve the problem and support the Cambodian film industry the government needs to establish a film school to train future filmmakers. Davy Chou, director of *Golden Slumbers*, a 2010 French-Cambodian documentary about the “Golden Age”, is more positive. He has pointed out in interviews that the past few years have seen official organisations doing a lot of positive things such as creating workshops, attracting international film shoots and hosting the Cambodia International Film Festival.

Other similar capacity-building events exist, such as Cambofest, which claims to be the first international independent movie festival in Cambodia. It is intended to be an independent platform for showcasing international and local film and video makers in order to help revive a bona fide cinema industry and movie culture in Cambodia. But Cambofest is not enough to satisfy Son Socheat Ta, a working Cambodian actress, who believes that unchecked competition from foreign product is the key problem. She says that Cambodian people simply do not support films made in Cambodia.

A lack of copyright enforcement in Cambodia means pirated DVDs and online distribution are becoming the standard method of film consumption in the country, substantially reducing distribution revenues, and imperilling the film industry. But this has positive aspects to, as the proliferation of affordable instances of world cinema enabled by piracy is giving upcoming Cambodian filmmakers hitherto unprecedented access to international film forms. This exposure is affecting the development of young, emerging filmmakers, in that this excess of accessible world cinema acts as a substitute for a more regimented film education. So, lax copyright enforcement is a double-edged sword, undeniably affecting the development of the film industry in Cambodia.

Contemporary Cambodian cinema also suffers from a relative paucity of stars. Whereas prior to 1975 there were a number of incredibly popular performers working in Cambodia, with highly cultivated images and profit-making potential, such an entrenched star system has not reappeared. The most widely-known and popular actress (domestically and internationally) in the Cambodian film industry remains Dy Saveth – riding on her fame from before 1975. This outcome points first and foremost to the Khmer Rouge's slaughter of the majority of the film industry's workforce in 1975. It should be noted, however, that although Cambodia no longer produces film stars in the same capacity that it used to, the post-Khmer Rouge period has enabled its first internationally and locally-recognised auteur. Rithy Panh was born in 1964 and fled to Thailand in 1979, then to Paris, where he studied film before returning to his homeland. Panh's films, which are mostly concerned with the Khmer Rouge, are widely recognised for their artistic continuities, marking him as an auteur in the league of other critically acclaimed international film directors.

As has been touched on earlier, most films before 1975 involved some kind of fantastical element, either being based on fairy tales, religious or supernatural legends. This culturally identified narrative tendency is still strong, but has been augmented since 1987 by heightened explorations of the real, with fictional and documentary airings of the scars caused by the upheaval of the 1970s becoming commonplace. Films such as *Sror Morl Anthakal* [Shadows of Darkness], *Lost Loves* and most of Rithy Panh's oeuvre are representative of a much deeper tendency now running through Cambodian film. Escapism is still the norm; but so is therapy, cleansing, and the washing of what massive collective wounds. In other words, the Khmer Rouge era caused the development of a wound culture in Cambodia, similar to Yugoslavia later, and of which its films are now preoccupied with. Put another way, the clearest difference between pre and post-Khmer rouge films is that of fantasy and reality.

There are obviously a number of other factors which have shaped the Cambodian film industry, from the Vietnamese occupation, to globalisation and digital piracy. But nothing has touched the psyche of Cambodia, nor affected the development of its creative industries, quite like the Khmer Rouge revolution on April 17, 1975.