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. 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'.

WHILE PRINCE NORodom SIHANOUK was in power (1953-1969), he proved a proud sponsor of the Golden Age. For the first time, a Cambodian spirit, he instigated governmental fund 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. Remarkably, from 1970 to 1975, while the civil war that would bring the Khmer Rouge into power was raging outside of Phnom Penh, Cambodia's cinema drew its largest audiences. 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.

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 film copies of the 30 cinemas and an approximate 400 film productions in the period 1960-1975. Only in 2011 did two new large film theatres, Cinelplex 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 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. 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.

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 ‘suffers’ the foreign view on Cambodia. While KMF depends on foreign relevant issues and does not have the resources to show their personal fascination with the subject under study.1 In his point of view the celebrated documentary Where I Go, by Kavich Neang, which was presented at the 2013 IDFA ‘Emerging Voices from Southeast Asia program’. In his follow-up of the everyday life of a bi-ethnic young adult, while not passing judgment or reality examining 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 optimistic, however, that he could 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 Phnom Penh aptly states in his work on the reconciliatory dimensions of the new Cambodian documentary cinema - the Kon Khmer Koun Khmer opens up and expands on cinematic continuities and does not try to carefully approaching an absent center. While recent developments in Cambodian society bring an unprecedented number of peace-seeking young activists, mobilized through Facebook, to the streets in a so-called ‘Cambodian Spring’, the ‘cultural activism’ of this new generation of filmmakers bring the changing values of Cambodian society to an international audience.2

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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.


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: Vicky Films).

5 Blum-Reid, S.E. 2003. ‘Khmer memories or filming with the heart’, The Newsletter | No.68 | Summer 2014


8 Hamilton, A. 2012.


15 Hamilton, A. op.cit. p. 15


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