

Gender and the Nation
in Popular Cambodian Heritage Cinema

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE DIVISION OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI'I AT MĀNOA
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS IN ASIAN STUDIES
MAY 2014

by: Jessica Austin

Thesis Committee:
Miriam Sharma, Chairperson
Barbara Watson-Andaya
Jonathan Padwe
Jonna Eagle

Keywords: Cambodia, Cinema, Gender, Nation, Popular Culture, Sihanouk

Dedicated to: My families, both near and far.

Acknowledgements

In researching this project for two years, I have been incredibly fortunate to receive the help, guidance, and friendship of a vast network of people living and working in Cambodia, Hawai'i, and the United States. None of this would have been possible without the support of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Hawai'i-Manoa, and generous grants from the Moscotti Foundation. I am also indebted to Severine Wemaerae, Gilles Duval, Rithy Panh, and Davy Chou for allowing me to naively interrupt many proceedings of the Memory! International Film Heritage Festival 1st Edition so that I could dive head first into the world of film archives, preservation, and filmmaking in Cambodia. The employees of the Bophana Audio-Visual Archive in Phnom Penh were extremely patient with me while I watched films and asked them incessant questions about film heritage, for which I am so very grateful. The youth organizations I worked with, Kon Khmer Koun Khmer and Preah Soriya student group at RUPP, were extremely generous with their time, and I extend my gratitude to all of the members of those groups. Of course this project was made so much richer and full of life by the addition of the voices of heritage filmmakers who kindly sat down with me for interviews. Thank you to Dy Saveth, Ly Bun Yim, and Ly You Sreang for sharing your memories and thoughts with me.

I have been supported by many people far and wide who now make up an amazing network of academics, community members, artists, and family members who have all impacted the trajectory of this work. I'd like to thank Paul Rausch, Miriam Sharma, Pahole Sookasikon, Chhany Sak-Humphry, Yati Paseng, Robin Tatu, Patricio (Jojo) Abinales and Angela Abinales, Duyen Bui, Robert Findlay, Van Sovathana, Sisotha Oeur, Phearun Kuch, Chhay Bora, Sum Sithen, Rithea Picheat, Chhoum Virak, Kuoy Langdy, Darlene Rodrigues, and Gordon Lee.

Thank you especially to my family for everything you do. Thank you Chris and David Austin, Matt, Mike, Wes, Megan, Lisa and Kennedy, and Jenny for your enduring love and support.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

The Filmmaker's Palace

Master filmmaker Ly Bun Yim lives in Ta Khmao, a suburb of Cambodia's crowded and energetic capital, Phnom Penh. During my first visit to see him in June of 2013, Mr. Ly gave an electrifying tour of his self-designed studio, which doubles as his home. He bought the property upon returning to Cambodia decades after he fled from the genocidal class-warfare waged by the Khmer Rouge soldiers between 1975 and 1979. While the studio is outfitted with upholstered walls meant to mimic the inside of a royal palace as well as absorb outside noise during filming, a palpable emptiness fills the space. The filmmaker has released only one film since his return, and that film, nearly ten years ago. Yet, as Ly Bun Yim excitedly mimed camera angles on his roof-designed-as-temple, traces of disappointment were hard to find. Similarly, on my second visit to interview the man behind some of the most innovative special-effects in the history of cinema in Cambodia, Mr. Ly told the story of the production of one of his greatest films, *Puthisen Neang Kongrey* (1967), with almost no breaks in his narrative to address the great losses he and his film collection have endured since that time. Only a small fraction of Ly Bun Yim's films have survived to this day.

Like the majority of the roughly forty films available to us that were produced during the cultural boom of the 1960s-'70s in Cambodia, any of Mr. Ly's films that reach us today have likely been copied from their original 35mm onto VHS and finally onto VCD format. The films suffer from washed-out colors, over-exposure, audio track irregularities, and other issues that detract from the original audio-visual experience.¹ These forty films represent around ten-percent

¹ Before volunteering at the Memory! International Film Heritage Festival in Phnom Penh in June, 2013 I had little to no knowledge regarding film preservation. I am indebted to the organizers and staff of the festival, including Rithy Panh, Séverine Wemaere, and Gilles Duval, for allowing me the opportunity to participate in all the screenings, events, and the conferences on film heritage and preservation.

of Cambodia's film heritage from what has recently been referred to as the “Golden Era” of Cambodian film production. Let me repeat that, but in the reverse. Between 1960 and 1975, it is estimated that over four-hundred films were produced by Cambodian filmmakers for cinema-going audiences in Phnom Penh and provincial capitals across the country. Cambodia's Golden Era has now become a renewed area of interest for many people around the world, and especially for a section of a generation of Cambodian youth who have no direct experience with the genocide that their mothers, fathers, and many aunts and uncles lived through. Curiosity about 1960s fashion, songs, posters, and films melds with a desire to know a bit more about the past. This has led to a revitalization of Cambodia's film heritage through public screenings, art exhibitions, and events held to honor filmmakers and the stars of the Golden Era. But what is film heritage, and why not just refer to old films as “old films?”

I owe my use of the term “film heritage” to the community of film preservationists, archivists, and organizers who gathered together in Phnom Penh in June of 2013 to coordinate the Memory! International Film Heritage Festival. Through participation in the festival, I gained an important perspective on film as heritage. “Heritage” invokes two important concepts about film: 1) that films are memories that have been handed down through generations; and 2) that there is a responsibility of “ongoing stewardship” for this art form that is “fundamental to the life of any and all cultures, and to the formation of a meeting ground between cultures” (“Memory!, A Festival...” 2013, 4; Scorsese 2013, 81). Film heritage is a living part of culture that should be carefully preserved so that regular screenings for the public are possible, because old films resonate with meaning in contemporary life, giving us, as Martin Scorsese wrote, “a fresh angle on who we were, who we are, who we could be...Sometimes all in one image” (2013, 81).² As

2 The official catalogue published for the Memory! International Film Heritage Festival (2013) is a unique

global film heritage attracts more attention, the roles of film scholars and students of Cambodian studies are called to question.

How do we place ourselves as both fans and resources for critical perspectives on Cambodian cinema? The purpose of this thesis will be to chart a possible course for scholars, such as myself, who desire to strike this balance. I intend to champion a place among other highly regarded eras of cinema for popular Cambodian films from the 1960s and '70s while, at the same time, engage in the critical analysis of those chosen for this study in order to reveal and map out some of the complex relationships between popular culture and society. Along this line of thinking, I analyze five feature films: *Apsara* (dir. Norodom Sihanouk, 1966), *La Joie de Vivre* (“*The Joy of Living*,” dir. Norodom Sihanouk, 1969), *Puthisen Neang Kongrey* (“*The Twelve Sisters*,” dir. Ly Bun Yim, 1967), *Sovannahong* (dir. Yvon Hem, 1967), and *Muoy Meun Alay* (“*Ten-Thousand Regrets*,” dir. Ung Khan Thuok, 1970). Specifically, I am interested in the way that themes of gender, the nation, and modernity were explored in popular Cambodian films during this period and argue that popular film created a space where gender stereotypes and conservative gender roles could be challenged and transformed. Furthermore, the cinematic format for telling popular stories encouraged the complex and dynamic negotiation of not only gender but also the conditions of the modern nation as it was being defined in that moment. The argument of this thesis is situated within three, equally important levels of analysis. The critical theoretical frameworks employed and historical contexts create the foundation for a close

resource on current themes in global film preservation. The opening pages introduce an important fact to remember: “Films are endangered everywhere in the world if they are not well preserved (notably by respecting humidity and heat control). Over 90% of films around the world made before 1929 are lost forever, as well as half of all American films made before 1950,” in “Memory!, A Festival Dedicated to Film Heritage, a Premier in Asia,” *Memory! International Film Heritage Festival Catalogue* (Phnom Penh: Memory! International Film Heritage Festival, 2013), 4-5.

examination of the films that occurs in the final two chapters.

The fact that cinema emerged as a major contender on the stage of cultural production in the decade after Cambodian independence points to its unique role as a trending visual and narrative medium that grew in popularity as the nation-state attempted to increase its industry and infrastructure. While it is common to accept that the structures and discourses of modern nation-states have immense impact on our daily lives, Jyotika Viridi poses the question, “To what extent does the nation influence cultural forms that carry its imaginative figuration?” (2003, 31). She further argues that cinema “has been seriously underrepresented and underestimated as a locus of both imagining the nation and creating a national imaginary” (28). Furthermore, the spectacle of public cinema creates the conditions for social interactions both on the ground as well as in the imagination, through images and storytelling. Cinema is therefore a critical entry point for the investigation of the development of the post-colonial nation in Cambodia;³ it generates a space where the relationships between an audience and their global and local contexts as well as their traditions and modern developments are contested.⁴

As a caveat, this work is preliminary in many ways and carries some of the weaknesses and tensions of adopting a broad and interdisciplinary perspective; not every detail is included nor every frame or idea fully fleshed out. Furthermore, my native language is English, and while I have strived to gain an ever deeper and fuller understanding of Khmer language, culture and society, there will always be meanings and images in films that exceed any theoretical frames

3 Three recent academic works that have revealed the cinema's ability to provide a window into the idea of a national imaginary, gender, and the experience of modernity that I hope to align myself with here are: Shuquin Cui, *Women Through the Lens: Gender and Nation in a Century of Chinese Cinema* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003), Jyotika Viridi, *The Cinematic ImagiNation: Indian Popular Films as Social History* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2003), and Viola Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema: Gender, Class, and Nation* (Cairo: American University, 2007).

4 In “Cinema, Nation, and Culture in Southeast Asia: Reframing a Relationship,” (*East-West Film Journal* 6, no. 2,

that I may find useful for analysis, an issue which is exacerbated by the significant obstacles to accessing the archive where some films and resources are only available through the individuals who originally produced them in Cambodia. That being said, I am privileged to have been allowed access to a community and an archive that has remained far underrepresented and largely inaccessible for an English-language audience, scholars, and the general public. The exploration of my relationship to film and the Cambodian film community—as an academic, a second-language learner, a fan and as a member of that community—will create a space for appreciation, curiosity, and new ways of looking at and understanding how complex a role popular culture plays in Cambodia.

At the present, current studies in the English language on Cambodia's popular film and music industries review these subjects from a historical, technological, and thematic point of view.⁵ Most often, these studies provide a context and basic overview of some cultural products

1992: 1-22), film scholar and cultural studies proponent Wimal Dissanayake discusses this particular way of moving film studies towards a conversation about both the technological, economic and social production of films juxtaposed with the socio-cultural meanings that can be read in film. Dissanayake envisions this as a critique of much of prior film studies, which tended to ignore the critical contexts and aspects of production of film as a commodity in favor of heavier close readings of the discourses on gender, race, class, and religion observed on screen. See also, Kwok-kan Tam, Wimal Dissanayake, and Siu-han Yip Terry, *Sights of Contestation: Localism, Globalism and Cultural Production in Asia and the Pacific* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2002).

- 5 Tilman Baumgärtel (ed.), *Southeast Asian Independent Cinema: Essays, Documents, Interviews* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012) and Baumgärtel, *Southeast Asian Film Studies Institute: The Cinema of the Philippines, Cambodia, Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam et al* (blog), 2012, <http://southeastasiancinema.wordpress.com>; Sornnimul Khut (ed.), *Kon: The Cinema of Cambodia* (Phnom Penh: VS Vann Sophea Printing House, 2010); Kristin Wille, *Film Production in Cambodia: Conditions and Structure of the Cambodian Film Production Market--Demand and Supply in Consideration of Film Genre* (Erfurt, Germany: TKG, 2009); Peou Chivoin, "Contemporary Cambodian Cinema: Gender and Generations," (PhD diss., Southern Illinois University Carbondale, 2008); Ly Daravuth and Ingrid Muan, *Cultures of Independence* (Phnom Penh: Reyum, 2001) and "A Survey of Film in Cambodia," in *Film in South East Asia Views From the Region: Essays on Film in Ten South East Asia-Pacific Countries*, ed. David Hanan, 93-107 (Hanoi: SEAPAVAA, 2001); Chea Chou, "Film Industry in Cambodia: Moviergoers's Perspectives," (Unpublished thesis, Royal University of Phnom Penh, Department of Media and Communications, 2005); LinDa Saphan, "Norodom Sihanouk and the Political Agenda of Cambodian Music: 1955-1970," *The Newsletter*, no. 64, Summer 2013.

ranging from the 1960s up to the contemporary period. These resources can be difficult to locate, as it seems that studies of Cambodia's pop-culture exist at the periphery of a wider disciplinary field of studies related to Cambodia—anything from archaeology to rural ethnography and political science.⁶ At this point, writers, film critics, scholars, and fans of Cambodia's pop-music and popular film have spoken up about the cultural products that deserve scholarly attention. Now is the time to engage with the community's heritage in a critical and fruitful way.

Obstacles in Studying Cambodia's Film Heritage

Besides the limitations reproduced by the general trend of academic studies on Cambodia,⁷ English language studies of Cambodian heritage film have been hindered in several ways. The major barriers are the lack of interest in heritage film research, the difficulties of working with this particular archive of films, and finally, the domination of cinema studies by a Euro-American and Hollywood-centric bias.

As the global film industry produces an exponentially larger amount of films every year, there is concern, even in the contemporary Cambodian cinema scene, that looking back to the past for too long will make catching up to the present too difficult a task. In an interview with upcoming filmmaker Rithea Picheat, the young Cambodian med-student-turned cinematographer and sound-designer expressed his constant thirst for new films:

Sometimes I watch nine hours of movies in one day because I don't like being behind on the trends. If American movies are using this kind of storytelling and effects, I

6 Prominent English-language scholars in Cambodian studies, such as David Chandler, Penny Edwards, Panivong Norindr, Judy Ledgerwood, Trudy Jacobsen, and Toni-Shapiro Phim currently do not have published works that delve into the history of pop-culture in Cambodia, such as cinema, rock 'n roll music, karaoke DVDs, etc.

7 As Leakthina Chan-Pech Ollier and Tim Winter comment in the introduction to the important collection of essays, *Expressions of Cambodia: The Politics of Tradition, Identity, and Change* (ed. Ollier and Winter, London: Routledge, 2006), English language academic studies on Cambodia before the mid-1990s were almost entirely split into two subjects: the ancient kingdom of Angkor and the Khmer Rouge Genocide (5). Other subjects that have gained attention over the last two decades are postcolonial studies of the colonial period, Cambodian dance, education, gender, religion, and diaspora (ibid., 5-6).

want to know. I am happy that we have film heritage in Cambodia, but I'm not interested in the old films as movies. I like the stories, but I want to see how to make good films in the current trend.⁸

For Cambodian scholars and film-lovers that see the utility of heritage films, the status of the archive itself is disheartening, given the low-quality of reproduced images, the seemingly “low-budget” feel of most films, and the challenge of poorly mixed and poorly preserved audio-tracks. At times, the biggest obstacle for any study or discussion of the Sihanouk era in Cambodia is to face the history of loss and trauma that violently ended a period of time generally referred to as peaceful and prosperous. Attempting to access the archive of cultural products from the time just before the genocide is an exercise in greeting ghosts, traumatic memories, and repressed nightmares. Every filmmaker I interviewed for this project had an intimate story of loss to share with me that took place during the genocide. Mr. Ly Bun Yim's brother Ly Var was a victim of the Khmer Rouge. Director Yvon Hem lost his entire family, a story he relates in the documentary film *Le Sommeil D'Or - Golden Slumbers*, directed by Davy Chou (2011). Many actors and people who worked on the production crews of the films I will discuss were also victims of the genocide.

Scholar Alexander Hinton writes that, when the Khmer Rouge, a militant group inspired by Maoist ideology, successfully took over Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975, effectively initiating a new phase in an incredibly violent civil war that had already claimed 600,000 lives, their mission was total societal overhaul—to turn Cambodia into an “agrarian, communist state” (2005, 1). At the beginning, people displaced by the Khmer Rouge and re-settled into labor communes by new laws and policies enacted to re-educate the entirety of middle and upper-class Cambodians did not want to believe that everything about their way of life was going to be

⁸ Rithea Picheat, filmmaker, in discussion with the author June, 2013.

destroyed.⁹ Yet, from the first decisive moment of the evacuation of Phnom Penh, the Khmer Rouge regime quickly turned class-warfare into a genocide lasting nearly four years and leading to the known deaths of more than 1.5 million people from murder, disease, exhaustion, starvation, untreated infections, and other illnesses.¹⁰ In the process, cultural products, materials, books, magazines, various documents, and personal possessions that were considered to be related to the wealthy ruling class, all of these items had to be destroyed or abandoned. Thus the destruction or abandonment of hundreds of films, thousands of musical recordings, books, and more.

The loss of ninety percent of feature films pales in comparison to the loss of human life. The Khmer Rouge were specifically brutal in their attempt to eradicate those perceived to be elite members of society. Nearly eighty percent of all artists became victims of the twisted regime, including musicians, songwriters, filmmakers, authors, dancers, painters, and many more.¹¹ Although it is often difficult to accept, Hinton has argued that these types of atrocities that occur in a genocide are deeply connected to the development and experience of our “modern” world. He writes that:

[B]oth genocide and modernity...are bound by tropes of 'progress,' projects of social

9 Recent films by Rithy Panh (*The Missing Image*, 2012; UK: New Wave Films, 2014, DVD) and Chhay Bora (*Lost Loves*, 2010, Phnom Penh: unreleased) depict the disbelief that quickly turned to horror as the displaced peoples from urban centers were forcibly separated from their families and subjected to crueler and crueler conditions with little regard to their ability to survive.

10 There have been many important memoirs released and scholarly works published that reveal and examine the cruelty of Khmer Rouge and the horrors of genocide experienced under the rule of the Democratic Republic of Kampuchea between 1975 to 1979. Three influential academic works are: Ben Kiernan, *Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 3rd edition, 2008); David Chandler, *Voices from S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot's Secret Prison*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Alexander Hinton, *Why Did They Kill? Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

11 This pattern of executing known artists is discussed in Tony Shapiro-Phim's “Dance: The Spirit of Cambodia,” (Phd diss., 1994: “Chapter 4: Jail Without Walls”).

engineering, the reification of group difference (often in terms of racial categories), capitalism and the pursuit of profit, bureaucratic distanciation, the rise of the nation-state and its highly increased centralization of power, technologies of mass murder, and crises of identity and the search for meaning in a world of upheaval. (2005, 5).

Even though the historical processes listed above cannot be universalized,¹² they underline the experience and expression of modernity and genocide in Cambodia.

As a category of analysis, however, modernity's slipperiness has frustrated scholars for decades because, as Appadurai (1996) argues, there is no clean break between the pre-modern period and the modern era, no "moment" that elicits a total break from tradition, and to pursue such a moment would lead scholars to "distort the meanings of change and the politics of pastness" (3). Nonetheless, he still theorizes that modernity was *experiential* for elites growing up in the 1960s in the new nations that emerged after WWII. "The megarhetoric of developmental modernization (economic growth, high technology, agribusiness, schooling, militarization)" was "punctuated, interrogated, and domesticated by the micronarratives of film, television, music, and other expressive forms," that allowed the concept of modernity to be negotiated as a type of "vernacular globalization" (1996, 10). Yet there is a definite sense of rupture when we discuss the modern. Giddens (1990) has described this as "the separation of time and space," which accounts for new ways of organizing lived experience both temporally and physically as well as new strategies for zoning areas of knowledge and creating national boundaries (16). By looking for how modernity was depicted in popular heritage films in the Sihanouk era, we may be able to uncover the implicit tensions within historical processes like

¹² Ahmet Gürata and Louise Spence caution against this practice that, "Capitalism itself, even when it may dominate, cannot be universalized, as class formations as well as relations to the metropolises and circuits of exchange differ, both internationally and within particular areas. Nor can modernism be universalized. It, too, is experienced differently in different contexts" (2010, 134); Gürata and Spence, "Introduction" to "In Focus: Non-Western Historiography? A Polemic," *Cinema Journal*, 50: no. 1, Fall 2010, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press): 131-135.

“the rise of the nation-state” that expand our understanding of how those tensions were translated and transformed into class-warfare and genocide.¹³

An Introduction to the Critical Historical Contexts of the Rise of Cambodian Cinema

In a way, all narrative, feature-length films made within the context of the booming Cambodian film industry of the 1960s and '70s may be considered part of popular heritage cinema. However, this is different from films made by King Norodom Sihanouk, who was able to produce feature films that were never meant to earn a profit.¹⁴ That being said, entertainment value, critical acclaim, and commercial success within Cambodia and on an international level were all highly sought after by filmmakers at that time.¹⁵ The rise of the Cambodian film industry came about under very specific socio-historical conditions.

As a brief introduction to the important contexts surrounding the films at the heart of my analysis, let's consider the following historical points. First, after 1954 Cambodia began to transition from a French colonial territory to an independent nation-state. The colonial era was incredibly dynamic and complex, and it left behind many specters of oppression and trauma as well as ideas about economic progress, prosperity, and development. The energy of the post-colonial moment cannot be overstated in terms of cultural, economic, and political changes. Second, with this shift to a newly-independent nation-state came an economic shift from rural to urban whereby people began moving to the city, turning Phnom Penh into a metropolis while

13 The scope of this work is such that I have not included a lengthy discussion of how themes in heritage films relate to the Cambodian genocide. I hope that by furthering a discussion about the visual and cultural expression of modernity in Cambodia during the Sihanouk era, I can lay the groundwork for future studies that may discuss the connections between film heritage, modernity, and the genocide.

14 Eliza Romey discusses this aspect of Norodom Sihanouk's filmmaking ventures in “King, Politician, Artist: The Films of Norodom Sihanouk,” Phd. diss., La Trobe University, 1998.

15 Interviews and discussions held between the author and directors Ly Bun Yim, Ly You Sreang, Dy Saveth, and Davy Chou.

provincial capitals industrialized and grew as well (Osborne 1994, 132). A new elite was emerging in Phnom Penh, and with economic development and industrial projects spearheaded by King Norodom Sihanouk, many people in these urban centers began seeing some disposable income to spend at the cinema, clubs, and on music records (Chandler 2008, 200). Phnom Penh had well-established theaters that played international films before the 1960s, French, Indian, Chinese, and some American films were shown, but it was after 1960 when Cambodian filmmakers began producing feature-length narrative films for large, Khmer-speaking audiences (Sornnimul et. al. 2010, 6). Third, the former King Norodom Sihanouk had a vital effect on the growth and development of the film industry (ibid., 11). Not only was the King a filmmaker, but he also passed beneficial tax breaks for Cambodian studios and filmmakers.

It seems that at the historical moment of the 1960s-'70s people wanted to participate in building a national identity that was based on Khmer language, Khmer stories, and Khmer people. Just as in many places, when a society is experiencing fast-paced change, certain ideas began to coalesce in order to create a social, political, cultural center on which the new changes in society (many of these economic changes) could anchor themselves in order to appear as a natural progression rather than as random or abstract. Had “Khmer-ness” ever been so defined as it was becoming in this moment? I would venture no, because it really began to mean new and clearer things to more people during this period of history, and film played a critical role in the dissemination of this Khmer-ness.

It is also important to trace transnational connectivities and border crossings in order to understand the context of film production in Cambodia in the 1960s. Film production involved both the particular cultural and economic strategies of Sihanouk's nation-building project,

exemplified by the *Sangkum Riastri Niyum* (People's Socialist Community), as well as flows of capital and cultural discourses that cannot be contained within nation-state borders. Sihanouk referred to the Sangkum movement as the "chief instrument in forging the national unity which I had set as my goal," and this particular form of nationalism dominated official Cambodian political life and the official *mediascape*¹⁶ between 1955 to 1970, the year Sihanouk was ousted by a military coup led by General Lon Nol (Burchett and Sihanouk 1973, 162; Chandler 2008, 191).

It may seem that a simple answer to the question of why did Cambodia's film industry expand during the 1960s is that "nationalism" was the cause. Considering that nation-building is a project and that modernity was something considered to be "in-progress," film seems to offer a space where the rules to modernization can be re-written so that "Khmer-ness" could exist as an autonomous condition of modernity, a rival condition of Westernness, so to speak. But what I hope to entertain in this project is the piece-meal nature of nationalism, the fact that it is never as cohesive as it appears to be. The idea of the nation builds on other symbols, other ideas, and other relationships that people imagine between themselves, their neighbors, and the people who govern.¹⁷ However within these relationships are tangled and coded messages that are meant to discipline us along the lines of race, class, gender, and sexuality.¹⁸

In asking why Cambodian cinema flourished during the Sihanouk era and why certain

16 *Mediascape* is a term used by Arjun Appadurai in his influential text *Modernity at Large* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996 and 2001).

17 Benedict Anderson's seminal text on the origins of nationalism is still highly influential within studies of nationalism to this day; *Imagined Communities: The Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition, (London: Verso, 1991).

18 Two works that point to these Foucauldian intersections in the nation are: Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context*, (New York: Routledge, 1995); and Aihwa Ong, *Buddha Is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, the New America*, California Series in Public Anthropology, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

types of films were popular, I am really asking why and how did the idea of the nation form and how did people decide to participate in it? If that's the case, I would also like to interrogate how that “nation” appeared on screen; what did it mean to people to engage in nationalism when they went to the movies?

Language Learning and Lesser-Known Cinema Studies

For scholars who either do not work in Cambodian language or who have acquired only basic conversational skills, the mix of obstacles and deeply complex contexts of study are major deterrents. Few of us are encouraged to go beyond the demands of language study and academic analysis and emotionally engage with our resources (be they films, artworks, magazines, novels, etc.) and community. On the other hand, even if a student is ready and willing to negotiate the subjectivity involved with studies of trauma and the lived-experience of atrocities, the language barrier might present the largest obstacle. As of now, the majority of films from this historical period are not subtitled in English. While not impossible to engage with a film in a language you cannot understand at an advanced level, there is, of course, a deeper understanding with a greater grasp of the dialogue. The visual language of the films I analyze in this thesis plays a vital role in my overall interpretation, but Khmer language has played an even larger role in my life.

I became driven by my curiosity about Cambodia's history with film because of my training in Khmer language. What began as a desire to challenge the narrative I had been handed for my life, that of a privileged white woman working in the English language in academia, transformed into a specific goal to gain proficiency in a lesser-taught, Southeast Asian language. Through interacting with Khmer language, Cambodian friends, mentors, and cultural products, my curiosities and critical questions drove me towards a passionate exploration of the dynamic

history, culture, politics, and society of Cambodia. Eagerness to develop the ability to hear and understand people speaking in their own language, in their home language, has shaped my personal love-affair with films written and directed by Cambodian filmmakers in Khmer language and has led me to address the lack of discussion about Cambodian film in English-language resources.

The first Cambodian film from the Golden Era that I was able to access was *Neang Sak Puos* (english title: *Girl with the Snake Hair* or *Snake Girl*) directed by Huoy Keng in 1974 and starring the incredible leading-lady Dy Saveth. While enrolled in a summer study-abroad program to study Khmer language in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, I was determined to locate materials from Cambodia's pop-culture history, including film and music. After digging around for any and all materials (at that time, I was not aware that many Cambodian heritage films are available in parts or in their entirety on Youtube!), I finally found myself at Bophana Audio-Visual Archive, an organization that has continued to have a powerful impact on my work as a scholar. At the center, I sat and watched the full-length feature film, *Neang Sak Puos*, which tells the story of Oun, a young half-snake and half-human girl who is orphaned as a child after her mother dies giving birth to her in exile. Oun eventually falls in love with a young aristocrat from a disapproving family. In this film, Dy Saveth wears a wig of live snakes that she has described as being sort of heavy and nerve-wracking, as the snakes would sometimes bend towards her face and “kiss” her with their tongues.¹⁹ Needless to say that during my first viewing, I was spellbound. Fortunately, the Bophana archives are entirely digital and house hundreds of videos, songs, interviews and more. The organization, initiated by well-established Franco-Cambodian film director Rithy Panh, plays an important role in the development of heritage film studies as

¹⁹ Dy Saveth, actress and filmmaker, in a discussion with the author, June 2013.

well as the encouragement and support of an up-and-coming film scene in Cambodia.

I returned to the Bophana Center a year later in June of 2013 as part of a six-week period of field research and was lucky enough to be accepted as a volunteer at the Memory! International Film Heritage Festival that was held in Phnom Penh that summer. The festival was coordinated by a team of Bophana employees and the Cambodian Film Commission, as well as with international leadership from the French Technicolor Foundation. Not only was it a happy accident that the period for my scheduled field research coincided with the first ever heritage film festival to be held in Cambodia, but the festival's pedagogical views related to heritage film were articulated along very similar lines as my own.²⁰ That is, when I took part in the festival, I found myself working with and in a community of people dedicated to decolonizing the category and concept of “classic” or heritage films.

Decolonizing Heritage Cinema

The predominant, if largely unconscious, view of classic and heritage films has been that films that belong in the category of “classic” are Western-European and American films.²¹ There has always been some form of counter-narrative calling this value-judgement into question and challenging the cultural imperialism implicit in cinema studies. The Memory! festival was part of

20 The Memory! International Film Heritage catalogue highlights the fact that the festival's organizers believe that film heritage is global heritage and that heritage films from cultures outside of Western Europe and North America have a place right alongside “classic” films from those regions. The festival's organizers main goals were to: “Screen classics from several countries” for a large public audience for free; “Enable meetings and conferences” to connect film archivists, preservation specialists, students, and the general public, in which the “available means of film preservation” could be discussed; put forth a challenge to the community at large to join in the preservation of film heritage; and finally, to introduce people to the experience of cinema on the big screen; “Memory!, A Festival...” 2013, 4.

21 In the chapter entitled “From Eurocentrism to Polycentrism,” Ella Shohat and Robert Stam discuss how the regional division of film history and scholarship has been historically linked to colonial and imperial mindsets reaching back into the 19th century, influencing the perception of Western films as more valuable than films from their colonial territories; Shohat and Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, Sightlines, New York: Routledge, 1994.

a trend to dispute the regionalism of film heritage. The organizers were determined to screen Cambodian heritage films for their Cambodian audience alongside international films such as *Singin' in The Rain* (U.S.A., 1952) and *Lewat Djam Malam* (English title: *After the Curfew*, Indonesia, 1954). They were able to accomplish just that, showing four different Cambodian films at a total of six screenings, all of which were full-houses of around 400 to 500 people. Many of the international films screened at the festival did not pull in as large of an audience, which is not surprising, considering that those films were not subtitled in Khmer. However, by screening Cambodian heritage films in the same festival program as highly-regarded Western classics, the festival participated in disrupting the prevalent Western cultural imperialism that has, for decades, negated the global ownership of film heritage.

From preservation efforts and building archives with better access and programming, to organizing film festivals that portray Cambodian films as equal partners in global film heritage, my research and interests as a cinephile have been influenced and supported by the community of people working at the Bophana Audio-Visual Archive as well as the festival organizers at the Memory! International Film Heritage Festival. By adding my voice to the efforts already underway around the world, I hope that this thesis will be a post-colonial intervention meant to displace hegemonic views on film history and discourses that are tightly policed by Western attitudes and ideas about cinema.²²

As film lovers and film scholars we must find new ways to talk about films in order to

22 Ahmet Gürata and Louise Spence have recently discussed the boundaries that “generally “accepted” resources, framing devices, and parameters of understanding” place on our discussions of global media histories, such as film, photography, radio, and TV. Noting that Western concepts such as genre, community, and geographic “place” have been “altered and even sometimes transformed” in diverse local contexts, they write: “If we examine only institutions and practices that are characteristic of Western cinema and media history while taking no notice of those institutions and practices that may be important in the local context but do not have parallels in Western experience (or if we simply disregard such institutions and practices as anomalies), we lose the unique circumstances of other contexts and experiences;” Gürata and Spence, “Introduction,” 2010, 131-133.

challenge the dominance of a Western, Eurocentric point of view of cinema (Shohat and Stam 1994, 1). Western European and American cinemas have been set up as bench marks for what cinema is supposed to achieve, but this construction is a fiction with deep historical roots tied to Euro-American colonial empires and cultural imperialism. Thus, by interrupting the fiction of film heritage as Western film heritage, I am trying to address one of the mechanisms of historical and cultural erasure that even now consequently impresses those erasures into our present lives.

By opening a space for Cambodian cinema to represent itself, rather than as an exotic example of “foreign cinema” or as the foil to Western cinema's grand achievements, I hope to shift the dichotomy of the relationship between center and periphery entirely. With my particular set of circumstances as a student of Khmer language, a cinephile, and as a student of postcolonial and cultural studies, my goal is to disrupt and transform the way people think about the history of cinema and how people interact with films as social documents.

Developing Critical Curiosity as a Fan of Cambodian Heritage Films

The previous paragraphs have mostly addressed the dilemma of how to place myself as a scholar and a fan of films. Next, I will address the role of introducing critical perspectives on heritage films. It is not enough for me to end my journey by placing Cambodian cinema on a pedestal that idealizes and preserves films as if they exist in a museum. I must engage with how messages and stories are made and transmitted, what makes the meanings meaningful, and what makes the popular popular. Mr. Ly Bun Yim expressed to me in personal interviews that he has dedicated his life to making films, and the products of that passion are vibrant, entertaining, and fascinating works. Yet it would do neither the filmmaker nor the films much justice to ignore the complexities of ideas that reflect the dynamic contexts from which the films arose.

Framing Cambodian films in their own contexts rather than as failed copies of Western films invites questions and encourages curiosity about those contexts. Yet, it is important to tread carefully through the waters of “national cinema” because the term belies the kind of complex and contested imaginaries that have been shown to exist in the national cinema industries of India, Egypt, and China.²³ In the wake of the rise of photography and the development of cinema as a “world-transforming processes” the intersections of gender, race, and class captured and negotiated on screen became integral parts of the experience of cinema in Asia (Morris 2009, 5; Lamarre 2009, 262). For example, issues of class struggle and the stiff strata of social relations in Cambodia may be seen in films as deeply embedded aspects of popular narratives passed down for centuries.²⁴ Furthermore, works by Jyotika Viridi (2003) and Viola Shafik (2007) have given us a glimpse into how representations of gender in cinema, such as through portrayals of romantic melodramas, depictions of the trials of women enacting their (hetero)sexuality, and the projection of archetypal heroic men, have often been prime visual arenas for the negotiation of conflicts of gender, ethnicity, and class within the national imaginary. Viridi notes that a “national cinema” in India, reveals a “mélange of images and the polyphony of accompanying voices which respond, contradict, or challenge one another in a creative intertextual relay among the

23 Jyotika Viridi *The Cinematic ImagiNation* (2003); Shuquin Cui *Women Through the Lens* (2003); and Viola Shafik *Popular Egyptian Cinema* (2007).

24 For example, it is helpful to look at scholarly works by David Chandler in *At the Edge of the Forest* (2008) on narrative structure in Cambodian folktales, and an expansive English-language version (2005) of the popular tragic romance of *Tum Teav* translated and researched by George Chigas. Both scholars have discussed how issues of social and economic class characterize storytelling in Khmer language going as far back as the 16th century; David Chandler, Anne Ruth Hansen, and Judy Ledgerwood ed., *At the Edge of the Forest: Essays on Cambodia, History, and Narrative in Honor of David Chandler*, Studies on Southeast Asia, (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 2008); George Chigas, *A Study of a Cambodian Classic*, (London: University of London, 2002).

A further example of this is the popular folk tale of *Thun Chey*, a story dated back to an antiquated time of aggression between Mandarin Chinese and Cambodian royalty. The story focuses on a poor young boy who climbs the social and economic ladder using only his intelligence. Many different versions of this story can be found in print, contemporary video, and illustrated or comic book form.

films” (2003, 212).

I hope to uncover some of the social, political, economic, and cultural tensions embedded in the development of the nation that characterize the “Cambodian”ness of Cambodian cinema along a similar path of analysis, by looking at gender roles and their representation in Cambodian popular cinema we may gain access to some of the internal tensions that made “Cambodian” nationalism particularly “Cambodian” during the historical period of the Sihanouk era (1954 to 1975). For example, the tension between Khmer traditions and the development of the modern nation-state were often mapped onto film characters through structures of gender roles, stereotypes, and sexuality. While this idea will be explored in later chapters, it is important to point out that gender is a viable access point to interrogate the idea of a nation and the idea of modernity.

Interrogating the Nation, the Modern, and Representations of Gender in Heritage Films

The project of nation-building in Cambodia is an extremely important topic for discussion. It involved not only projects of industrial development meant to secure Cambodia as an independent political-economic entity, but it also brought about the self-conscious consolidation of “a national religion, a national space, a national past, and a national culture” due to the “intersection of European and indigenous worldviews” (Edwards 2007, 7). A critical characteristic of this transitional and dynamic period in Cambodian history was the expression and development of the idea of the “modern,” which was, as Anne Hansen describes, “shaped by factors joined to imperialism” (2007, 2). Hansen lists some of the key factors of this experience of modernity in Cambodia as the following:

[T]he relatively late arrival of print in the region, the gradual demarcation of national boundaries, participation in a global market economy, and engagement with

discourses of Western science, rationalism, and secularism...[and] interactions between colonial subjects and other non-Western and Pan-Asian alliances” that influenced modern Theravada Buddhist developments and modern educational projects. (Ibid.)

The experience of modernity and the experience of the nation are intertwined and underlined by what Anne McClintock has described as “contested systems of cultural representation that limit and legitimize people's access to the resources of the nation-state” and that have “historically amounted to the sanctioned institutionalization of gender *difference*” (emphasis in the original, 1997, 89). The portrayal and exploration of gender in Cambodian popular heritage films directly speaks to the existence of these “contested systems of cultural representation,” and thus provided a very useful comparative tool between different films from the Golden Era.

Perhaps one of the more shrouded reasons behind the booming success of locally produced cinema in Cambodia is that it provided a spectacle and experience for its audiences that linked the desires of the national imaginary with the internal tensions of the nation such as constituted by competing interests of gender, ethnicity, and class. Popular films in Cambodia of that time were predominantly romantic and, at the very least in the case of the common mixed-genre films, maintained these strong romantic undercurrents offering a rich field of vision for investigating gender dynamics.

Mapping a Visual Economy of Cambodian Popular Culture during the Golden Era

The bulk of this thesis will focus on how the presentation of gender, modernity and the nation on screen can assist in mapping the way that films interact with each other and with an audience as part of a “visual economy.” These concepts will be explored further in later chapters, but as a short introduction to the term it is important to note that Deborah Poole began a crucial conversation about the difference between visual economy and visual culture in her work on

early-modern images of the Andes.²⁵ She reminds us that, within an economy, objects circulate in predictable patterns, governed by predictable relationships between producer and consumer, and suggests that our field of vision is systematically organized in a predictable way that can help us grasp how images circulate within already-existing relationships of power and privilege/non-privilege (1997, 8). Beyond a description of practices, products, and symbols that are predominantly visual in nature, an exploration of the idea of a visual economy may be able to illuminate the reasons for and ways in which images and films circulate and gain or lose social capital, monetary and symbolic value in a society.

As an organizing framework, the idea of an “economy of vision” as discussed by Poole has helped me compare films that at first do not seem to be in conversation with each other except perhaps at a very shallow level. For example, what happens when you compare a film about a young woman who poses as a male taxi-cab driver in 1960s Phnom Penh with a film about a legendary young man who defeats an ogre queen to take back his twelve mothers' eyeballs? Both films, one a *reung samay* contemporary film and the other a *reung boran* or ancient legend, circulated within the boom of popular film production during the Golden Era. Yet, that's not what makes the comparison unique or helpful. Instead, this thesis will discuss how films can promote distinctly different messages about gender, tradition, and the modern nation, and how those distinctions and variations are revealed by juxtaposing the films and placing them in circulation with each other. Works of popular culture should be viewed as social texts that can

25 In *Vision, Race, and Modernity: A Visual Economy of the Andean Image World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), scholar Deborah Poole creates an argument about discourses of race and the development of ideas about disciplining vision. She builds on questions about how race became a key way of seeing, identifying, and valuing during the 18th and 19th centuries. In Poole's argument the modernity of visual culture and visual economy do not have a causal relationship, one does not bring about the other, but the two fields of organizing vision interact in unique ways in and outside of Europe of the 18th and 19th centuries to influence our way of seeing, looking, and our critical relationship to images.

help us understand historical shifts that “at different moments reveal gradual social reconfigurations— or a sharp break with what went before” (Virdi 2003, 17).

Chapters: A Road-Map to Exploring Cambodia's Golden Era Cinema Culture

In the following chapters, I hope to unpack many of the issues and themes that arose in this introduction. The next chapter, entitled, “A Tool-kit of Questions and a Box of Old Movies,” will examine the theoretical tool-kit that I found useful in approaching this material, research, and community work. I call this a theoretical tool-kit rather than a foundation or a review of theory simply because I believe theory should be in service to us as scholars and community members. Theories should open doorways to hallways of questioning and curiosity. When we have been given a wide range of theoretical tools for our work, we have the privilege of choosing only the questions that we find either the most fascinating or the most urgent, but hopefully both. In my work, I have found that my theoretical tool-kit has been influenced largely by three types of theoretical discussions. First, by discussions of popular culture--particularly those discussions that ask questions about both modes of production as well as symbolic meaning.²⁶ Second, gender and queer theory—seeing gender as a type of social technology that organizes society according to certain principles.²⁷ And third, the idea of the visual economy framed by the context of post-colonial Cambodia, briefly discussed in this introduction.²⁸ In the next chapter, I will

26 Wimal Dissanayake has written extensively about popular culture as cultural production in “Cinema, Nation, and Culture” (1992) and the introduction to *Sights of Contestation* (2002).

27 Aihwa Ong especially describes this as a “human technology,” similar to Foucault's concept of “bio-power,” in her work on Cambodian refugees in the text *Buddha is Hiding* (2003).

28 Deborah Poole, *Vision, Race, and Modernity* (1997); other authors who have worked with this concept of visual economy are: Shari Hundhorf, *Mapping the Americas the Transnational Politics of Contemporary Native Culture*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009); and Rachel Morris ed., *Photographies East: The Camera and Its Histories in East and Southeast Asia*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

In order to begin a sketch of what I imagine is the visual economy of Cambodia during this historical moment, I hope to bring Ingrid Muan's research on contemporary art in Cambodia into conversation with Deborah Poole's conception of the principles of a visual economy; “Citing Angkor: The ‘Cambodian Arts’ in the Age of

explore how all three sections of my theoretical tool-kit provide key questions for my approach to Cambodian films. I will also provide a discussion of the methods I used to complete this project, including primarily ethnographic as well as visual and textual analysis.

In Chapter 3, entitled, “Contexts and Memories of Cambodia's Heritage Films,” I will examine in more detail the critical contexts that informed the rise of the Cambodian film industry during the 1960s. Important information will include economic shifts, development programs, examination of archival magazines, images, and film reviews; as well as historical context at the local, regional, and transnational level.

In Chapter 4, entitled “Hardlines on Gender—Policing National Security in Tales of Domestic Romance,” I will examine two films by King Norodom Sihanouk, *Apsara* (1966) and *La Joie de Vivre* (1969), in conjunction with a film by director Ly Bun Yim, *Puthisen Neang Kongrey* (1967). The analysis will explore how the filmic eye invites the audience to participate in imagining and visualizing the nation by projecting the grandeur and beauty of industrial development and by employing the newest film technologies to present the visual splendor of Cambodian folk tales. Within these tropes of the nation, concerns about what that participation should look like were mapped onto hetero-normative relationships where worries about possible futures could be resolved through disciplining gender roles.

In Chapter 5, entitled, “Cracking the Code—Transgressive Storytelling in Popular Cambodian Cinema,” I will examine two films, one by Yvon Hem, *Sovannahong* (1967) and one by Ung Khan Thuok, *Muoy Meun Alay* (1970), in which gender representations and roles seem to transgress the boundaries that should be placed upon them by a seemingly dominant narrative of modern Cambodia. In this way, while “traditional” folk tales and projections of images of the

Restoration 1918-2000,” Phd diss., Columbia University, 2001.

modern nation-state in the realm of popular culture allowed for the condensing of national boundaries on gendered bodies, this same arena of popular cinema opened up a space for the renegotiation of modernity in Cambodia.

By the conclusion of this work, I hope to have challenged and shifted the conversation about heritage cinema not only in Cambodia but also on a global scale. Furthermore, I hope to inspire future academics, fans, and community members to engage in critical thinking and critical teaching when it comes to our passions for language, cinema and pop culture.

Chapter 2—A Tool-kit of Questions and a Box of Old Movies

Or, An Exploration of Theoretical Foundations and Methods

In the first chapter, I tried to unpack the puzzle of *why*: Why do I study popular Cambodian heritage films? The next puzzle is *how*? For this project I utilize three intersecting frames that help to reveal the complex interaction of images of gender and the nation in Cambodian films from the 1960s and 1970s. While diverse visual and cultural theories have influenced the study of cinema, the important questions that arise from incorporating theories about popular culture, gender, and the visual economy into analysis of Cambodian heritage films offer a strong introductory scope for critical curiosity about cinema and society. In the following pages, I describe how each frame informs the critical questions that underwrite this thesis. To begin, what does it mean to critically engage with Cambodia's pop culture heritage?

Part I: Pop-Culture as a Frame of Mind

When I was handing out fliers and screening schedules at *Psar Thmei* (New Market), referred to as the Central Market, in Phnom Penh for the Memory! International Film Heritage Festival, I tried to turn on my ethnographic eye and critical curiosity in the hopes of capturing my adventure in advertising as a learning moment about popular culture in Cambodia for my research project. It was the fifth day of my stay in Phnom Penh, and my second day volunteering for the film festival--the first day of volunteering had consisted of translating and working at the Bophana Center to finalize documents for an art exhibit related to Cambodia's Golden Era films. At midday in the market, I approached various stall owners, most of whom were women, and performed my well-rehearsed speech, in Khmer, about the film festival and the Cambodian films that would be shown. I had even decided to throw in the lead actors' names because I guessed

that people might recall the stars of the films. Beyond their initial pleasant surprise and laughter at my language abilities, the women I spoke to were immediately affected by reverie and a certain look of nostalgia. Many people seemed to look through me as if a memory had appeared in front of their eyes, maybe painful but exhilarating, that was my guess. Time and again, each woman turned to the woman in the stall closest to her to quickly spark a conversation about Kong Sam Oeun, the star of the film *Sobasith* (1965, directed by Ly Bun Yim) that would be screened at the festival.

Kong Sam Oeun was a prominent actor during the 1960s and '70s in Cambodia. He portrayed princes, heroes, legendary characters, and the contemporary heartthrob. He acted alongside nearly every major leading lady of the era. When I first saw a Cambodian feature film from the Golden Era, I was captivated by his talent and good looks. Director Ly You Sreang describes how in one of his more popular films, *The Sacred Pond* (1970), he had chosen to produce a scene in which Kong Sam Oeun would be standing in a pond, naked except for a lily-pod as a loincloth.²⁹ Ly You Sreang went on to explain how he knew that putting such a popular male star in his film in a sexually charged scene would attract a large female audience. He says, “I knew that women loved looking at Kong Sam Oeun, so I took advantage of that with this scene.”

When I first learned that Kong Sam Oeun had died during the Khmer Rouge regime, his presence on-screen haunting, painful, and glorious. At the market that day, nearly forty years after his death, many of the stall-owners gathered together to glance at the screening-schedule and excitedly asked each other what time *Sobasith* was going to play. I heard snippets of their conversations, even though I was essentially ignored as soon as I mentioned that the film festival

²⁹ Ly You Sreang, filmmaker, in discussion with author, June 2013.

would screen a film from the 1960s. Fragments of conversation continued to build between shop-owners as our small group of volunteers, young university students as well as the festival's public relations advisor and I, made our way through the market speaking with any and everyone, including the posted security forces and shoppers, young and old. We kept hearing things like, “An original Khmer film, yes, a very good one,” “Kong Sam Oeun was so wonderful, I loved his films,” and “That's the one where Kong Sam Oeun plays a prince who can do magic, we should see it!”

Not only did my heart soar to hear people engage with heritage popular cinema in such a lively way, but I was also struck by how quickly the discussion of a film icon engendered a sense of community. In the act of remembering the plot of the film, the face of a beloved actor, or the last time the film was shown on public television (possibly the 1980s or early 1990s), the men and women in the market were redefining what this heritage of popular culture could mean in their lives and how it held an abundance of possibilities. From the possibility of connecting people through memorializing and the telling of oral histories to revealing social differences like the expression of heterosexual female sexuality separately from hetero-male sexuality, this moment of pop-culture being engaged and enlivened evoked both what being “Cambodian” meant in the 1960s as well as what it could mean in the 21st century.

Interrogating Popular Culture

Quite a number of ideas were reaffirmed for me that day and on subsequent days during the film festival. First, the intricate and varied forms of cultural production from the 1960s-'70s, that I could refer to as pop-cultural production, such as oral storytelling, print media, advertising posters, recorded soundtracks, radio shows, films, and more, are still very much alive in

contemporary Cambodia. Second, Cambodia's history, past and present, of popular culture would never have presented itself to a person like me—white, middle-class American woman—in the same way that American pop-culture or Hollywood presents itself to the rest of the world, as the deception that Hollywood is everyone's day dreams and fantasies realized. If I hadn't learned how to ask certain types of critical questions—of myself and my research--or how to position myself in the right situations, I would not have had any special kind of access or insight into Cambodia's heritage of pop-culture. In fact, I may have missed the vitality of its existence altogether.

When I began my language training in 2010, I naively did not understand how to properly acknowledge either the potential correlation between folk stories and popular culture or the tension between what is viewed as “traditional Cambodian culture” and contemporary arts, so to speak. So at that time, I was intent upon looking for pop-culture in what I hoped would manifest as Cambodian comic books, superheroes, action and spy films, and etc. Unsurprisingly, I did not find anything to satisfy my interest. I even had begun to ask my Khmer-speaking friends and colleagues about popular culture with questions like, “What's up with Cambodian films these days?” and, “Are there popular stories like comic books that everyone knows and reads?” Many people dismissed my curiosity as not appropriate to Cambodian society or culture. I was routinely told that Cambodian culture rested on Theravada Buddhism, traditions passed down from the Kingdom of Angkor (dance, sculpture, architecture) and rural society such as rice farming and the cycle of the seasons. The other common answer I received (and I believe the two answers are related) was that Cambodia was too poor or not yet developed enough to support any popular culture.

Those answers were quietly obscuring more complex realities that I was unable to guess because I was usually asking the wrong questions or asking good questions in the wrong ways. I had assumed that by identifying artifacts of what I knew as popular culture (read: Western popular culture), I could independently assess what those artifacts might reveal about how and why Cambodian culture was organized along ethnic, gender, class, religion, and sexuality boundaries. As it happened, this methodology for studying cultural things or phenomenon was biased to the point of nearly abject failure. In contrast, the third important idea that was reaffirmed that day in the market was that any artifact that could be accounted for within the frame of the “popular” is shaped, defined, challenged, and transformed by the lived experience of the people who interact with it.³⁰ In that sense, I was going about my initial investigation of Cambodian pop-culture all wrong. Whatever cultural products people interact with in a meaningful way and on a mass-scale, be it a repertoire of jokes or a moralistic children's story, these can be investigated from a pop-culture point of view—a point of view that asks how and why is this thing meaningful to people (symbols), and how and why does it circulate in society (structures)?

The Projects Pursued in Studies of Pop-Culture

This study looks at the dynamic relationships between people, things, and ideas. Since *culture* can be at times an unwieldy, constantly shifting category, it is important to locate *culture* within specific contexts for those relationships. Oftentimes these contexts will allow us to

30 Although many scholars articulate the ways that an audience manipulates a certain amount of agency and power within the realm of popular cultural production (Stuart Hall, Roland Barthes), I find that Craig Lockard's description is accessible and helpful to understand this phenomenon: “Even when the people themselves do not actually engage in the production of mass media texts (cultural products), they inevitably articulate the texts in specific ways, therefore participating quite actively in the production of whatever meanings these texts might possess or generate as they circulate in society,” *Dance of Life: Popular Music and Politics in Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998) 15.

discuss differences in the exercise of power, be it economic, social, political, or symbolic as well as differences in the experience and expression of power (this can apply to dominant, marginalized, and in-between groups of people)—the “experience and expression” part has more to do with the imagination. The key point here is that “differences” are not distinctly isolated from each other but are instead productive, meaning that places where differences happen are the places where *culture* is defined, challenged, made and re-made.³¹ The implications of this phenomenon are that by studying cultural products that have at one point or another achieved mass appeal we can 1) help further the study of history from below, a history of peoples and subcultures who do not dominate political, economic, or socio-cultural landscapes;³² 2) highlight the integral local and transnational contexts for mass-production and consumption in the hopes of mapping complex and dynamic historical moments;³³ 3) interpret and connect symbolic forms of knowledge that are communicated in pop-culture to society's larger, pernicious structures; and finally, 4) we can bring subversive readings to our study of popular culture, which means that we

31 In my work as a scholar, I have been highly influenced by several cultural theorists, but three names bear mentioning here: Edward Said, for his groundbreaking work on the tensions within colonial and postcolonial cultures (*Orientalism*, Vintage Series, 25th edition, London: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1979); Homi Bhabha, for his work on the idea of a “third-space” where we can recognize how productive difference can be (*The Location of Culture*, Routledge Classic Series, New York: Taylor & Francis, 1994 and 2004); and lastly, Arjun Appadurai, for his work on how different groups of people might interact with culture and the concept of modernity through use of the imagination (*Modernity at Large*, 1996).

32 A distinct but important effect here is also the way in which a discussion of popular culture can help “expose the ways in which the academy's production of knowledge is...the production of a social power through which it claims authority over other social groups,” which also reveals “the academy's own machinery of domination,” Norman Bryson and Michael Ann Holly et. al., *Visual Culture: Images and Interpretations*, (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1994,) xxvii. This idea is also explored in Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson's (ed.) *Rethinking Popular Culture: Contemporary Perspectives in Cultural Studies*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) “Introduction,” and Lockard's “Introduction” to *Dance of Life* (1998).

33 Both scholars Wimal Dissanayake (1992) and Benjamin McKay have commented on the need to provide more in-depth and multi-faceted contexts for our discussions of culture, specifically cinema; McKay, “Toward New Ways of Seeing Southeast Asian Cinema,” *Criticine*, Jan 2006, http://www.criticine.com/feature_article.php?id=25.

can look for moments in production-consumption of popular culture where there is a possibility for those large, pernicious societal structures to be critiqued and challenged.³⁴

While the above fields can result in seemingly vague gestures towards the place of popular culture or film in society, it is important to ground the study of Cambodian heritage films within specific and unique local and global contexts. Considering how cinematic technologies, modes of production, and images have circulated around the globe since the invention of the portable camera by the Lumière brothers in the late nineteenth century, these global and local contexts that cinema embodies both in production and on screen must be recognized as the experience and transformation of the global in the local is one of the markers of modernity.³⁵

Yet, even a global phenomenon like the film industry has always been tethered to the workings of transnational relationships, such as the important one for this work, France to Cambodia. Production, distribution, and reception have always been influenced by the various tensions between and among nations. Thus the “trans” in transnational is more appropriate than merely a global frame. As Aihwa Ong has pointed out, the “trans” in transnational also attends to both the movement of things, people, and ideas back and forth across borders as well as the way that the phenomena of traveling, in that sense, is transformative (1999, 4). However, transnational flows of ideas and images rarely present themselves as transnational, they merely

34 Many academics acknowledge prominent cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall as one of the first and strongest promoters of subversive readings of culture (Mukerji and Schudson 1991, 41).

35 Many volumes on film studies will provide this same history of the beginning of film, but I appreciate that Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden pay more direct attention to the transnational and global character of the development and growth of cinema; Ezra and Rowden, “General Introduction: What is Transnational Cinema?” in ed. Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden, *Transnational Cinema, the Film Reader*, London: Routledge, 2006. 1-13.
 Arjun Appadurai builds a rich case throughout *Modernity at Large* (1996) for the way that global phenomenon should not be seen as merely stamped over local practices in the fast paced cultural and economic exchanges that developed into what we now call our modern era, but that the translation of the global inside of local contexts of power, privilege, and inequality is what has strongly determined the trajectory of contemporary societies.

become the backside of national character or the secretive informers of what we know about ourselves and what we know about others. This circulation of knowledge is always already interwoven with histories of cultural imperialism and resistance where stories that portray certain messages about gender, race, class, ethnicity, and nationalism are influenced by earlier histories of European colonialism, cultural imperialism, and the politics of the decolonization process (Grewal 2005, 27; Appadurai 1996, 28; 30).

In this way, even if a film made in Cambodia never leaves the borders of the country, it is already transnational; the transnational is inside of the national imaginary at its conception. Thus, as I progress in this work on Cambodian popular heritage cinema, it is important to note how films convey a version of the national imaginary, what it means to be Cambodian in Cambodia, that descends from hundreds of years of the development and colonization of visual representations of Khmer culture. To this extent, we can venture that Cambodian heritage films presented an arena for challenging the national imaginary on a transnational visual playing field.

Visual Rivalries of the “Khmer” Self

We can imagine that one such rivalry would be between the one-time colonial masters, the French, and the newly established independent country of Cambodia. By putting to use Edward Said's theory that colonial politics used a powerful transnational imaginary called “orientalism” to control how people perceived the inhabitants and cultures of colonized territories, Panivong Norindr (1996) has concluded that Cambodia was represented en masse as part of a feminized “phantasmagoric Indochina” (17). Norindr further argues that the ancient religious sites of Angkor as well as the figure of the celestial *apsara* female dancer in particular were crucial pieces of the fantasy of France's Indochina and were contrasted with Western ideas

about national culture and social progress (19). The project of French cultural imperialism projected the idea, visually and in literature, that Khmer people were racially inferior to French people, and that Khmer people were the degenerate progeny of the glorious empire of Angkor.³⁶

During the era of post-colonial independence, this view of the self was directly challenged via political rhetoric, and state-sanctioned media, as well as by a rise in popular cultural production that incorporated global music and film trends into local Cambodian productions. Penny Edwards (2007), continuing along a similar analytical path to Norindr, has argued that the glorification of Angkor and the feminization of Khmer tradition were both incorporated as part of this era of post-colonial nationalism after independence (18). Visual and textual knowledge regimes that took shape during the colonial era were not displaced merely by the fact of successful independence and continued to influence the ways that people participated in imagining the new nation and its development during the Sihanouk era. These underlying tensions can be seen in films that incorporate both the idea of the splendor of ancient tradition as well as the tensions of developing a modern nation in the image of the industrial economies of France or America.

In this way, even Cambodian heritage films that do not explicitly project images of transnational movement or migration can orient their audiences to both local and transnational systems of meaning due to their situated historicity. During that sort of messy orientation, people

36 Enlightening works on colonial representation can be found in Julia Ann Clancy-Smith and Frances Gouda, *Domesticating the Empire: Race, Gender, and Family Life in French and Dutch Colonialism*, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998); Marco Deyasi, "French Visual Culture and 'Indochina': Modernism, Primitivism, and Colonialism, 1889—1931," Phd diss., Duke University, 2007; Nicola Cooper, *France in Indochina: Colonial Encounters*, (New York: Berg Press, 2001); Panivong Norindr, *Phantasmatic Indochina: French Colonial Ideology in Architecture, Film, and Literature*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996); Penny Edwards, *Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation, 1860-1945*, (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2007); Hideo Sasagawa, "Post/Colonial Discourses on the Cambodian Court Dance," *Southeast Asian Studies* 42, 2005: 418-436.

can act on that moment, a moment of agency, to challenge, accept, or negotiate truth-claims made by either local or outsider storytelling.³⁷

Illuminating Agency

The idea of agency is a good place to conclude this section on a pop-culture framework. Cinema, like many visual and physical cultural products, opens up many possible moments of agency, that is, the power to make a choice that can affect reality. From the women in 1960s Phnom Penh who chose to buy a movie ticket to see Kong Sam Oeun nearly naked, to the women at the Central Market in Phnom Penh in 2013 who chose to start a conversation about their memories of the same actor, to myself as a scholar choosing to watch and re-watch old Cambodian films—there is something intelligent and powerful expressed in these acts, in these choices. I find that a pop-culture framework of study can help give us access to the logic of those actions and can hopefully teach us that pop-culture doesn't exist in the artifact, the film, or the song itself, but in the the story we tell and what we reveal in the telling.

Part II: Gender as a Human Technology

When I ask my Khmer-speaking friends, mentors, and teachers about the state of gender studies in Cambodia, I have been taught to use a cognate form of the word or to explain that I am interested in the relationships and roles of men and women, as there is no word in Khmer that directly translates *gender* as a theoretical framework (Peou 2008, 29). However, points of differentiation among various types of gender studies—such as that of women's empowerment in the economic sector, for example, compared to the study of how femininity and masculinity are

37 Film scholar Andrew Higson (2006) sees this as a common characteristic of many “national” cinemas, which, when interrogated, reveal their transnational orientations. Furthermore, he argues that when we are able to identify those cinematic moments that reveal the fluidity of perceived borders, then the truth-claims that borders make are subject to being critically challenged—e.g. claims of tradition, exclusion, inclusion, ethnic boundaries, gender roles, etc; Higson, “The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema,” in ed. Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden, *Transnational Cinema, the Film Reader*, (London: Routledge, 2006) 19.

negotiated in cultural forms, or what I would refer to as the discourse³⁸ of gender appear relevant for students pursuing research related to gender in Cambodia.³⁹ Many of the nuances to these distinctions and intersections of different disciplines of gender studies, sociological, historical, economic, have come about as a result of a generation of transnational critiques of both feminism and academia.⁴⁰ For this project I asked: what is useful about the category of gender in relation to Cambodian cinema? The two broad ways that gender as a framework has influenced my research on Cambodian cinema are: 1) introducing critical viewing habits and 2) engaging with dynamic and complicated representations of gender roles.

Within a framework of gender studies, viewership and analysis become of immediate concern to those curious about portrayals of female and male characters, sexuality, relationships and roles played out between various characters, as well as visual elements of *mis-en-scène* and

38 Perhaps a simple way of defining discourse is this: a shared body of knowledge that gives meaning to the way people talk about things and communicate meaningful ideas. In other words, in order for people to communicate with each other about issues of importance such as political decisions, ethical choices, or even what to buy at the grocery store we must already possess an understanding of the shared terms of communication. For many years now, academics have developed many theoretical structures in order to describe, map, and dismantle various bodies of knowledge. One influential example is the discourse of “orientalism”--a way of talking about and imagining “Asia” as an exotic, phantasmagoric place awaiting European exploration and domination--that was initially described and critiqued by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1979).

Panivong Norindr has provided an in-depth analysis and description of how the French “orientalized” Cambodia during the French colonial protectorate era when Cambodia was part of French Indochina (1863-1953); *Phantasmatic Indochina* (1996).

39 This distinction can have a major impact on the way that economic development and nationalism take shape, an idea that is examined more seriously in Youna Kim ed., *Women and the Media in Asia: The Precarious Self*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). Kim explains that it is often assumed that women will be liberated from “traditional feminine identities through the achievement of economic independence and empowerment,” but she then points to the problematic existence of an abundance of media portrayals of women as hyper-feminine, hyper-sexual objectified bodies for male (sexual) consumption (3).

I located an example of a similar national-ethnic focus on women's economic and professional development in an issue of *Kambuja* magazine, a regular news and culture periodical, from December 1969. The article is titled, “La Femme Khmère” and profiles the first Khmer woman to receive a doctorate in medicine who was later appointed to Sihanouk's cabinet in the Sangkum Reastr Niyom Party.

40 See works such as: Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan ed., *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

cinematic photography—such as costuming, lighting, and camera angles/shots—all of which project rich and complicated notions of gender. Furthermore, this curiosity is often combined with a feminist film critique—generally acknowledged to have taken-off from Laura Mulvey's proposition (1975) that the camera's gaze is inherently imbued with a masculine desire to gaze at the female body as a sexual object. While this seems to be a simplification of complex patterns of femininity and masculinity, Mulvey and the feminist film critique made an important initial intervention that began to point out the drastic lack of women's perspectives in film and about film. Still, feminist film viewership must strive to avoid essentializing or collapsing complex structures of race, class, and gender that intersect and overlap in different contexts that often stem from Western-biases about the influence of patriarchy and sexism on visual culture.⁴¹

Beyond noticing new details in films through the use of critical viewing skills, gender studies as a framework encourages us to engage with the complex dynamics of gender as it acts like a *human technology* both inside the world of a film as well as in the local contexts that produced the film. Aihwa Ong has utilized the term “human technology” to describe the way that societies and governments often apply the categories of race, the body, and gender for the practical purpose of controlling members of that society or the citizens of a nation (2003, 6). Gender not only influences the way that we perceive and act in the world, but is different from the sexual organs that are a part of our physical bodies. Gender is also performative in that we act out gender in daily habits, choices, and mannerisms within a constructed set of hierarchies—

41 One example of a dangerous erasure that can happen when feminist scholars approach representations of gender without recognizing their potential biases is described by Claudia Groneman when she points out that interpreting images of colonized women “merely as colonial propaganda and eroticism fails to acknowledge that racism and sexism are also perpetuated within societies and cultures and that every representation contains various layers of meaning;” Gronemann, “A Hybrid Gaze from Delecroix to Djebbar: Visual Encounters and the Construction of the Female 'Other' in the Colonial Discourse of Maghreb,” in ed. Harald Fischer-Tine and Susanne Gehrman, *Empires and Boundaries: Rethinking Race, Class, and Gender in Colonial Settings*, (New York: Routledge, 2009) 159-160.

differences of male versus female roles, attitudes, etc.—that we have been “enculturated” to view as “natural, inevitable, and immutable.”⁴²

Gender studies asks us to consider the mechanics of those gender structures that influence us. What do they look like when expressed in cultural products like films and music? How is masculinity/maleness portrayed and defined in comparison to femininity/femaleness? Even the assumption that masculine and feminine, and thus heterosexuality, form the distinct pillars of our experience of gender and sexuality has been challenged by developments in queer theory that encourage us to see diverse forms of gender performance and sexuality, including androgyny and transsexualism, on a spectrum that is both highly fluid and highly contentious and unequal in terms of the power afforded to the commonly considered center—the heterosexual masculine-feminine complement.⁴³

Studies of early-modern Southeast Asia (before the consolidation of colonial empires in the region) have revealed a wide range of “gender pluralism” that allowed for a variety of transgendered identities.⁴⁴ In contemporary Thailand, the diversity of gender identities can be

42 These ideas have been written about across various gender studies projects but have been clearly articulated in the following three works: Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge Classics, (New York: Routledge, 2006); Raewyn Connell, *Gender*, (Cambridge: Polity; Blackwell Publishers, 2002); and Patricia R. Pessar and Sarah J. Mahler, “Transnational Migration: Bringing Gender In,” *International Migration Review* 37.3, (2003): 812-46.

43 Megan Sinnott and Stephen Valocchi's views on queer theory are helpful here. Sinnott describes queer theory as “an analytical approach that renders visible the cultural processes in which sexual and gender norms are constructed, reproduced, and made to appear natural” without assuming the primordial importance of “heterosexual/homosexual normativity,” Sinnott, “The Romance of the Queer: The Sexual and Gender Norms of Tom and Dee in Thailand,” ed. Fran Martin et. al., *Asiapacificqueer*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008) 132.

Valocchi writes that, “[D]ominant taxonomies fail to capture the complexity of individual gender and sexual subjectivities and practices even among those who may define themselves in terms of those dominant taxonomies,” Valocchi, “Not yet Queer Enough: The Lessons of Queer Theory for the Sociology of Gender and Sexuality,” *Gender and Society* 19.6 (2005), 765. It is therefore up to projects of queer theory to destabilize and disrupt “heteronormative cultural presumptions and hegemonic sex/gender orders” (Sinnott 2008, 132).

44 Michael G. Peletz's groundbreaking work on gender in Southeast Asia provides key research on this topic: *Gender Pluralism: Southeast Asia since Early Modern Times*, (New York: Routledge, 2009).

seen in both popular media as well as on the streets of Bangkok today.⁴⁵ However, it is important to remember that concepts of gender shifted, transformed, and became disciplined over time by interactions between indigenous communities, their perceptions and expressions of gender relations, and European people, and their respective ideas about gender.⁴⁶

Gender in Cambodian Cinema

Cambodian cinema is no different in that respect, as there are plenty of gender signifiers to experience and de-code from both a local and global perspective. However, to de-code these in a helpful way, we have to contextualize the portrayals of gender on screen by studying previous constructions of gender in Cambodia.⁴⁷ While more of that context will be described later, I found that in researching how gender is constructed in a uniquely Khmer context, there is an important intersection in Cambodian film where representations of gender become superimposed with ideas of the nation. By that, I mean that both men and women on screen participate in stories that relate to societal cohesion in a time where the very fabric of national independence was new and potentially threatened from the outside. In the midst of diverse symptoms of

45 Read more in Megan Sinnott, "The Romance of the Queer" (2008).

46 Barbara Andaya's seminal works on gender in pre-colonial Southeast Asia have broadened our understanding of this phenomena. See works such as: *The Flaming Womb: Repositioning Women in Early Modern Southeast Asia*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006); *From Temporary Wife to Prostitute: Sexuality and Economic Change in Early Modern Southeast Asia*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998); *Other Pasts: Women, Gender and History in Early Modern Southeast Asia*, (Honolulu: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Hawaii at Manoa, 2000).

47 Important works on gender in Cambodia include Judy Ledgerwood, "Changing Khmer Conceptions of Gender: Women, Stories, and the Social Order," PhD diss., Cornell University, 1990, and "Khmer Kinship: The Matriline/Matriarchy Myth," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 51.3 (1995): 247-61; Ashley Thompson, "Introductory Remarks between the Lines: Writing Histories of Middle Cambodia," Barbara Watson Andaya ed., *Other Pasts: Women, Gender and History in Early Modern Southeast Asia*, (Honolulu: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Hawaii, 2000); Kate Frieson, "Sentimental Education: Les Sages Femmes and Colonial Cambodia," *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 1, no. 1 (2000); Trudy Jacobsen, *Lost Goddesses: The Denial of Female Power in Cambodian History*, Gendering Asia, (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2008); and Penny Edwards, "Womanizing Indochina: Fiction, Nation, and Cohabitation in Colonial Cambodia, 1890-1930," in Julia Clancy-Smith and Frances Gouda ed., *Domesticating the Empire: Race, Gender, and Family Life in French and Dutch Colonialism*, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998).

decolonization in the region—violence, civil war, cultural anxieties, and triumphant nationalism—successful films interpreted social and cultural contexts largely through romances between men and women.

Even films made by King Norodom Sihanouk negotiated concerns of national security through stories of romance, heartbreak, and true (heterosexual) love. While it could be argued that melodramas and romances were popular film genres because people wanted an excuse to escape from the chaos of everyday life—an argument of entertainment for the masses as a distraction from social ills—that hypothesis is unsatisfying for a student and fan of pop-culture, because there are too many coded messages that seem to reinforce or challenge gendered discourses on the nation to be ignored. In this way, both a gender studies framework and a pop-culture mindset work together to probe the question: in what ways are visual representations of gender injected with symbolic, monetary, and exchange value? Why are they popular? And what does that have to do with the idea of the “nation”? To help answer the question of, “Why is the popular popular?” or, “Why do people like what they like at a given historical moment?” I will now move on to the final section of this chapter that deals with the concept of the visual economy.

Part III: Visual Economy

The third conceptual field I employ is that of Deborah Poole's “visual economy” that has been used by some scholars to analyze art as well as photography.⁴⁸ In her book on Andean photography in the 19th century, Poole foregrounds the “inequalities that characterize representational domains...a stress on unequal flows and exchanges: hence [visual] 'economy'

48 Loraine M. Cox, “Cultural Sampling and Social Critique: the Collage Aesthetic of Chris Ofili” in Kembrew McLeod and Rudolf Kuenzli eds., *Cutting Across Media: Appropriation Art, Interventionist Collage, and Copyright Law* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011; 199-218); and Christopher Pinney and Nicholas Peterson *Photography's Other Historys* (Durham: Duke University Press: 2003; 8).

rather than [visual] 'culture'" (Pinney 2003, 8). In her description of how fields of vision have been re-ordered in the modern era, she states, "Economy suggests that this organization has as much to do with social relationships, inequality, and power as with shared meanings and community" (Poole 1997, 8). The action of seeing or looking is therefore disciplined by both power dynamics as well as the imagined and structural ties that bind communities, from local to national to transnational in practice. In this way, visual culture is infused with economies of power that are never solely confined to the national, which is particularly relevant to cinema as a realm of visual culture that has global origins.

Poole sees the visual economy working along three principal fields of interest: 1) the organization of production, 2) the circulation of goods, and 3) the ways that images accrue value, which can be through already existing cultural systems of meaning (symbolically), through exchange value (monetarily), and also through the content that is presented in the material—noting that these three general ways that images become valuable do not always happen at the same time and sometimes work in tension against each other.⁴⁹

While Poole's initial project sketched a pre-cinema but post-photography visual economy, her theory is helpful in trying to understand how films engage audiences in ideas about modernity. Not only does she recognize that the reorganization of the field of vision, from before the invention of photography to the collapse of global imperial empires, is an essential component of the experience of modernity, but she also focuses on bringing together technological production, consumption, and the images themselves, which can help illuminate

49 In this explanation of the visual economy, I have attempted to condense the complex ideas that Deborah Poole describes in her introduction to her major work entitled *Vision, Race, and Modernity* (1997). There is an inherent danger of oversimplification in the attempt to present Poole's theory of the visual economy within three major principles, but I hope to do better justice to the richness of this theory by approaching it from the description of Cambodia's visual economy.

the way that films communicated a sense of the modern. For example, using special effects on screen can help portray an ancient hero wielding a magic staff and fighting off giant monsters, which does not immediately gloss to images of modernity. But if we recognize that the technical specifications of the camera and the skills of the operator and filmmaker who produced the effect are also part of the visual economy, then ultimately the fact that the audience can see the magic happening on screen because of modern technological developments in the industry shapes the way that they engage with the visual modern.

For example, during the post-independence period in Cambodia many films sought to portray princes and princesses in romances and adventures, images which did not mirror the visual development of the nation that was happening outside the theater, including the restructuring of the local government when the King of Cambodia stepped down from the throne and gave up the Kingship. Yet, would it do the films justice to discount them from engaging with the contemporary period simply because they do not visualize it directly? Within a visual economy of the Sihanouk era it could be that regardless of genre, films, with their unique link to modern technologies, innovation, and progress, were capable of negotiating modernity. Thus, various cinematic experiences, such as in gender-bending stories and critiques of hyper-masculinity, circulated at the same time within a domain of the visual economy and engaged the audience in diverse negotiations of the modern. If we then compare films with different types of rules that govern the story, the relationships in the story, and the images themselves—how do we understand their combined and combative social documentation? A visual economy theory can challenge us as thinkers, witnesses, historians, and members of a community to grapple with different types of cultural products that circulated and were consumed around the same time.

For a project bounded in part by a historical era, perhaps an introductory investigation of the visual economy is, after all, a description of different types of historical contexts: industrial production, social structures that influence circulation, and the context of ideas. However, this is an important pursuit for Southeast Asian film studies where it has been common practice to treat a film primarily as a text with contextual background noise, which comes secondary to the close reading of the film.⁵⁰ The framework of the visual economy works through those specific and often neglected contexts, and it also highlights and accepts the fact that certain technologies have had an unimaginably complicated impact on the nature of vision—how we see, what we see, what we gain through seeing, our experience of the past, memories, and our experience of the future, and possibilities.⁵¹ At the same time, people began to socially invest in new mechanisms of aesthetic pleasure and visual desire--what we like to look at and what provokes desire when we look. Desire, fantasy, and pleasure are important areas of interest for students of visual studies, and this is where visual studies and gender studies often intersect when we look at how certain images of femininity and masculinity are framed as pleasurable while others are framed as grotesque and ridiculous, thus often dangerous to social cohesion.⁵² Furthermore, the idea of the visual economy provides a very broad framework within which we can see diverse expressions of popular culture. While no framework can capture the immense complexity of producing and viewing films, the intersection of pop-culture, gender, and the visual economy

50 Benjamin McKay argues that many studies and reviews of Southeast Asian films ignore “modes of production, ideological patterns, and the very history of the film industries and cultures that [they] purport to address” including, “temporal realities of our engagement with the cinemas of the region as well as the economic and political imperatives that shape production and ultimately the cultural products themselves” (2006, 3).

51 Poole 1997, 14; 81; Morris 2009, 8-9.

52 Celine Parrenas Shimizu, *Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American on Screen and Scene*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); and Claudia Gronemann, “A Hybrid Gaze from Delecroix to Djebbar” (2009) are important examples that illustrate this intersection of visual and gender studies.

creates necessary guidelines for the work, one of the most important of which is to develop context for film research. But another important tool for analysis that arises from these three frames colliding is that the relationships between images, producers, and consumers are all fluid and “come and go constantly, making it impossible to define the boundaries” of these “dynamic transactions” (Roberts 2010, 1).

In building a relationship with Cambodia's heritage films and the community interacting with those films today, I have experienced an intense sense of dissonance and tension whether it is in researching archival materials, conducting interviews, watching films, meeting people, or being present in Phnom Penh. The three frameworks I have tried to unpack in this chapter seem to help me celebrate that dissonance and tension as an integral and revealing part of the work. In this way, I hope to further the project of “destabilizing the idea of a single sense of authority, opening up our sense of history to multiple authorities, and valuing the subsequent instability of multifaceted, intertwining modes of analysis,” in order to “rethink and reevaluate how we commonly “do” film and media history,” (Ahmet Gürata and Louise Spence 2010, 135). To conclude this chapter, I discuss the methods used while working on this project.

Section IV: Methods

My methods have been primarily visual, textual, and ethnographic. Initially, this project began with an analytical question about watching and interpreting Cambodian films produced during the Sihanouk era: “What do representations of gender in Cambodian films from the post-independence/ pre-Khmer Rouge period reveal about the construction of the modern Cambodian nation-state?” From that point, my methods expanded to include archival research and interviews, ethnographic work and volunteer work at the research site in Phnom Penh, Cambodia

in June and July of 2013. I examined archival documents, newspapers, magazines, and monthly serials at the National Archives of Phnom Penh as well as magazines held at Sinclair and Hamilton Libraries at the University of Hawai'i-Manoa. With assistance from the University of Hawai'i, I was able to conduct field research in Phnom Penh for which I prepared interview questions for two sets of participants, older people who had memories of going to the cinema during the Sihanouk era and younger people who could reflect on what the history of cinema meant to them in their daily lives.

While interviews did not proliferate as I had planned, I was given an unexpected opportunity to volunteer for the Memory! International Film Heritage Festival, which provided me with a chance to conduct ethnographic and field research on a broader range of topics affecting Cambodia's heritage cinema—a topic that was discussed in the introduction to this thesis. I volunteered as a translator for texts that were printed alongside the art exhibition “Birds of Paradise” at the Chaktomuk Theater, and I also supplied logistical support at screenings of films at all three film venues (Chaktomuk Theater, Bophana Audio-Visual Archive, and the French Institute) as well as at the four-day long conference on the preservation, restoration, and circulation of film heritage. I also joined a group of volunteers to advertise the festival for which we traveled to highly trafficked areas of Phnom Penh, such as the major markets, to hand out flyers and programs for the festival and speak with the public about the film screenings and events.

Through contacts made at the festival, I was able to schedule in-depth interviews with filmmakers Ly Bun Yim, Ly You Sreang, and Dy Saveth, who all currently live in or near Phnom Penh. Other interviews I conducted included conversations with filmmakers Davy Chou and

Chhay Bora; Bophana employees Sopheap Chea and Sophorn Lim; the undergraduate students in the historical society Preah Soriya; local cinema historian Chhoum Virak; founding members of the film group Kon Khmer Kon Khmer, Sum Sithen and Rithea Picheat; the head of the Cambodian Film Commission, the government body that regulates all foreign filmmaking in Cambodia, Sin Chhan Saya; and finally, my Khmer language teacher and mentor Van Sovathana.

In the process of researching films and talking with people who either participate directly in the film industry from the past to the present or people who are highly invested in the film industry, I had to approach film as a social text and a product of culture, asking questions from historical, political, economic, ethnographic, and aesthetic perspectives. I did not find it difficult to approach film as a subject in this way because I already approach my academic work with an ontological curiosity that extends through language, life, community and education. In this way, while preparing for field research in Phnom Penh, I felt that it was necessary to listen and be present in the present that is carrying the legacies of the past, even if unknowingly. Because of this, I needed to be present in Phnom Penh, to walk the streets, see the facades of old theaters now turned into casinos and pool halls as well as listen to stories. Oftentimes during interviews or casual conversations about film heritage, someone would begin to reveal a painful memory of loss and suffering during the Khmer Rouge genocide. At that moment, there is no distinction between the past that you are curious about uncovering and the present that you are living. The memories and histories of film heritage, pop-culture, and loss, death, destruction are all intertwined. Only by engaging with and listening to one will we gain any appreciation for the other.

There's only so much anyone can “get” from an image or a film, and most of the

ephemeral value of a cultural product is not “get-able” or “know-able.” There will always be an abundance of meaning that exceeds any ability to frame research objectively outside of the “self.” In that sense, ethnographic work is intertwined with autoethnography, and I tried to embrace those opportunities where the two overlap and interact in order to reflect on my position as a privileged, white, middle class American woman conducting research and participating in community events aimed at encouraging public participation in the arts. There is no comfortable resolution between my research, Cambodia's heritage films, and myself, a scholar and a fan already coming to the subject with biases and structures learned in Western academia. Yet, I hope that by not imposing a method for easing the tensions between ethnographic and auto-ethnographic research, I present the more complete, if unresolved experience of this project. On the other hand, I would not have the same ability to question and approach this research if it wasn't for my academic training in cultural and gender studies, as explored in this chapter.

Chapter 3 - Contexts and Memories of Cambodia's Heritage Films

Introduction

One of the critical projects of pop-culture research and analysis is to use historical, socio-cultural, and political-economic contexts to elaborate the relationship between pop-culture and public consumers. First, I will briefly discuss some of the obstacles to mapping these contexts for Cambodian cinema. Following, I will summarize and review the critical socio-cultural and political-economic events and characteristics of the colonial era and the Sihanouk era, the era after independence, in order to better understand the conditions that paved the way for the growth of the film industry. Next, I will provide a short account of the types of archival materials that remain accessible today, which can help flesh out the way that the nation-state of Cambodia was imagined in print media. Finally, I will discuss the development of the local film industry and the popularity of cinema in Sihanouk-era Cambodia.

Wandering with Fractured Memories—Negotiating the Obstacles of Historical Research on the Sihanouk Era

In the past decade, scholars have become interested in describing the historical trajectory of Cambodia's film industry from its nascent, black and white beginnings in the 1950s, through a period when studios and actors were often producing multiple films simultaneously, to the struggles that filmmakers encountered in 1973 and 1974 as war drew nearer and nearer to Phnom Penh, signaling the imminent violence that would dramatically alter their futures.⁵³ Some scholars have used the history of heritage film in Cambodia as a background for a discussion of contemporary issues that have affected the present-day, local film industry since the 1980s.

⁵³ The most complete and accessible historical record in this regard can be found in Ingrid Muan and Ly Daravuth's publication *Cultures of Independence* (2001) as well as similarly in their co-authored article, "A Survey of Film in Cambodia" (2001).

These issues include: the technological disparity experienced by contemporary local filmmakers like Poan Phuong Bopha and Chhay Bora as compared to the higher production quality of films by Rithy Panh. This often translates to the disparity between critical and international reception of films; and the prevalence of bootlegged DVDs in the markets of Phnom Penh and provincial capitals, which has led local film production companies to hold off on releasing any of their films on DVD, effectively clamping down on access to new Cambodian films after theatrical release.⁵⁴ There is still a large amount of historical research to be done in order to provide a solid educational foundation for future scholars and community members interested in Cambodian cinema and its place in regional and global film histories.

The main obstacle to developing this historical context is that a vast amount of what would be archival information today has been lost, destroyed, or deteriorated beyond recognition. When the Khmer Rouge entered Phnom Penh in April of 1975, routing the cities inhabitants, they also set a precedent for the destruction and projected deterioration of countless documents, books, film reels, music recordings, and more. Staff at the National Archive and National Library in Phnom Penh have related stories to visitors of how the archives and libraries were turned into storage houses for pigs and animal feed, while documents and archival materials were torn, shredded, and scattered around the floors.⁵⁵ Even as people moved back into Phnom Penh in 1979, many families squatting in abandoned residences decided to throw away sometimes large amounts of files, film reels, or other artifacts that they felt they could not use or

54 These topics have been lightly discussed in works that are more difficult to access for both the general public and scholars alike. These works include: Kristin Wille. *Film Production in Cambodia* (2009); Chivoïn Peou "Contemporary Cambodian Cinema" (2008); Chea Chou, "Film Industry in Cambodia" (2005); Tilman Baumgärtel, "A History of Cambodian Cinema" in *Memory! International Film Heritage Festival Catalogue*, (2013) 101-104.

55 This story was told to me by a staff member when I first visited the National Library in Phnom Penh in June of 2012.

did not want to keep. Van Sovathana, a professor of literature at the Royal University of Phnom Penh, and also my Khmer language instructor, once described to me a scene from her memory of resettlement in Phnom Penh after the Khmer Rouge forces had been overturned and pushed into peripheral areas of Cambodia by the Vietnamese in 1979. Ms. Van, who was just entering early adolescence at that time, remembers one day when she was walking to the market, she recognized eight or ten reels of 35mm film that had been placed in a cardboard box in front of a neighbor's door. She related to me:

My heart felt sick seeing all those films, because I remembered how many Khmer movies used to play in the theaters, and I thought the films were probably important to someone. I asked my mother if we could take them in from the street, but she said no. The next day, the whole box of films was gone. I wonder what was on them, but I'll never know now.⁵⁶

Over the next two decades as civil war continued in Cambodia, more and more films, radio clips, musical recordings, and documents were forgotten, lost, and neglected. The student group Preah Soriya at the Royal University of Phnom Penh has doggedly pursued information relating to the preservation of cultural products from the 1950s through 1975. Chhoum Virak, the founding member of the group, told me that when he asks the older generation what happened to old films and musical recordings, he learns that as new technologies were introduced in Cambodia in the early 1990s, such as DVD and VCD technology, people simply made copies of the original material and threw out older materials, VHS and some 35mm films.⁵⁷ Thus, Chhoum and his fellow student partners believe that the accidental destruction of cultural products actually escalated after the Khmer Rouge were kicked out of power due to a lack of knowledge

⁵⁶ Van Sovathana, professor of world literature at the Royal University of Phnom Penh, in discussion with the author, June 2013.

⁵⁷ Chhoum Virak, university student and head of Preah Soriya student group, in discussion with the author, June 2013.

about the importance of preservation and related techniques and requirements, like turning over 35mm film reels to a government authority that might have been able to ensure a more stable environment.⁵⁸

Although the process of deterioration is disheartening to archivists, fans, and scholars, it is an important aspect of heritage films that can help us learn about the contexts surrounding films and film footage. Filmmaker Davy Chou describes the damage to the original image as a window into reading “its history through the symptoms of its successive mutations: missing images, VCR streaks, pixel pies” (2013, 110). If mutations and fractures in memory can teach us something of the history of film in Cambodia, then there is a wealth of information with which scholars and fans may interact. Certainly, Chhoum Virak, Davy Chou, the Bophana Center staff, and many interested academics and individuals are not just dismayed, as they continue to explore local and transnational avenues to build this historiography. For example, on a recent research trip to Thailand, Chhoum located well-preserved posters for Khmer films that had been translated into Thai for release in Thailand in the 1960s. It will take time to expand international connections and resources, but there is a great deal of enthusiasm regarding the as-yet-undiscovered artifacts that may appear. For the time being, I have relied on both written and oral histories of the Sihanouk era as well as archival materials and interviews in order to bring some of the history to life.

Independence and the Context of Cambodia in the Sihanouk Era: A Historical Point of View

Every time I enter a DVD/VCD shop in a market in Phnom Penh, the quickest way for me to find out if the owner has any old Khmer films is to refer to them as “original Khmer films” or “films produced during the Sihanouk period,” using the name of the former King Norodom

⁵⁸ Students of Preah Soriya, in discussion with the author, June 2013.

Sihanouk, the ruling monarch who stepped down to become head of state in 1955 and was then cast out of power in 1970 by a military coup led by General Lon Nol (Osborne 2010, 224). There are many ways to refer to the period that saw burgeoning local film, music, radio, and print media industries. It is referred to as the era of independence or post-independence Cambodia, the Sangkum era (referring to the ruling political party, led by Sihanouk), the Sihanouk era, and the Golden Era, by film and music lovers. All of these terms have a unique significance in the history of the contemporary nation-state, but they all signify one important aspect of the period: the transition from French colonial rule to independent nation-state. The relationship between imperial France and Cambodia opened up a space and time of great change that ruptured previous ways of experiencing and understanding the world. Thus, it is valuable to briefly glance at some characteristics of colonial Cambodia before independence in 1953.

A Window into Colonial Cambodia

Scholars on colonial Cambodia, referred to as *La Cambodge*, in French, have stressed that while the French colonial mission in Cambodia was not a monolithic project of domination, colonial policies were mainly “extractive,” aimed at obtaining and exporting resources—such as timber, minerals, and rubber—a trade that economically benefited the French colonial elite and was not oriented towards building welfare programs or internal, government institutions, like an education system or other elements of infrastructure (Frey 2003, 397). Colonial intervention in Cambodia was, on the whole, not painstakingly controlled by government officials in the metropole, Paris, but was driven largely by French who had settled in Cambodia following a particular type of “colonial logic” that involved personal prestige, symbolic national pride, and opportunity (Muller 2006, 82; 221). Gregory Muller describes colonial-era Cambodia as a “busy

marketplace where temporary coalitions were made, abandoned, and remade between a large number of relatively independent participants” (2006, 222).

The marketplace, as it were, was also organized by concepts like race, gender, and class. First, the French as a people were seen as racially superior to the Khmer race, as well as further along the seemingly naturalized journey of human progress, even in that the French were portrayed as the natural heirs to the Kingdom of Angkor (Norindr 1996, 27) Second, structures of gender maintained that men and women were naturally, biologically different and, thus, filled separate and sometimes complementary, sometimes unequal roles in society. Furthermore, French men were allowed unique access to both French and Khmer women due to their racial superiority, although these liaisons were accompanied by societal fears and paranoias about racial mixing (Stoler 2010, 80). Finally, shifting formations of class and capitalism resulted in a remarkable amount of tension between indigenous elites and French bureaucrats as well as frustration for the general population that sometimes bubbled over into rebellion.⁵⁹ In the metropole, this tension was downplayed, and the colonial encounter was likened to a love affair between France and its territories, which included present day Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia as one geographically bounded entity called *Indochine*, or Indochina. The dominant projection of France's relationship to its territories was as the “protective mother figure” and the “patriarchal and authoritative father figure,” which created a convoluted and antithetical discourse that was never able to reconcile the supposed purposes of the colonial encounter: protection and authority (Cooper 2001, 133-34).

59 The ideological structures underlining the period of colonial encounter in Cambodia are explored in depth in works such as: Nicola Cooper, *France in Indochina: Colonial Encounters* (2001); Julia Ann Clancy-Smith and Frances Gouda, *Domesticating the Empire* (1998); Panivong Norindr, *Phantasmatic Indochina* (1996); Penny Edwards, *Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation, 1860-1945* (2007); Kate Frieson, "Sentimental Education: Les Sages Femmes" (2000); Anne Ruth Hansen. *How to Behave: Buddhism and Modernity* (2007); Gregor Muller, *Colonial Cambodia's 'Bad Frenchmen'* (2006).

These two identities, protector and authority, reveal that the project of French colonialism and imperialism was constantly trying to establish legitimacy in an environment where French dominance was contested. A fundamental method used to secure the legitimacy of France's imperial and colonial projects in Asia and elsewhere was the control of the production of knowledges about France's colonies. This included the circulation of specific types of images from the colonial territories (e.g. postcards of exotic, Asian beauties ripe for French conquest), tropes of colonialism (e.g. the aforementioned “mother figure”), tales of indigenous barbarism or backwardness, and the reiteration of the goal of civilizing the natives.⁶⁰ While no single person or political entity controlled the dissemination of these kinds of knowledges, people consumed and reproduced similar ideas about Southeast Asia--her peoples, her culture, her economic viability—which reinforced the legitimacy of France's colonial empire that was always slightly unstable. The instability and tensions that existed during the colonial period continued to affect the development of nationalism in Cambodia as well as the transition to independence in 1953-1954, where, thereafter, modernity and “progress” were up for negotiation (Edwards 2007, 9-10). With the legitimacy of the new, sovereign government of Cambodia hanging in the balance, much like it had teetered for French colonial rulers, projects of industrial development, economic growth, and cultural flourishing took center stage during the post-independence era.

Capturing the Moment of Modernity Rising—Projecting an Image of Independent Cambodia

Independence from the French colonial authority in 1954 forced the newly formed government of the nation-state of Cambodia to plot a trajectory for socioeconomic development

⁶⁰ Read more about the circulation of images related to French colonies in Marco Deyasi "French Visual Culture and 'Indochina'" (2007). Also, in the conclusion to “Part I: Pop-Culture as a Frame of Mind” in Chapter 2, I discuss some of the complex ways that images representing Cambodia circulated between the metropole and the colony.

and modernization in what was sometimes projected in magazines and photo exhibitions as a game of “catch-up” to the West.⁶¹ While there were many nation-building projects in Southeast Asia that captured a sense of “regional movements towards modernization,” there were also unique qualities to Sihanouk’s post-independence leadership through which he imagined and enacted Cambodia’s particular place in the modern world (Ong 1999, 36). For example, Sihanouk maintained a policy of political neutrality during the early years of the Cold War that allowed him to exploit already-established trade and foreign aid relationships to both the U.S. and France as well as build new relationships with North Vietnam, China, and the Soviet Bloc (Slocumb 2010, 109; Chandler 2008, 192). Cambodia’s neutrality fascinated foreign scholars and journalists at the time, and the few people who were invited into Sihanouk’s close circle praised him as a leader for his attempt to negotiate the complicated period of decolonization (Osborne 1994). Sihanouk was also able to manipulate the nascent political system in Cambodia by abdicating the throne in 1955 only to become the head of state, which arguably created ruptures and tensions within the political environment, adding to the strained relationships between different political factions such as the Sangkum Reastr Niyom (Sihanouk’s party), the Khmer Serei (the “Free Khmer” party), and the quietly growing communist movement that would take shape as the Khmer Rouge (Osborne 2010, 224).

In general, the Sangkum period in Cambodia was marked by projects to industrialize and develop the nation while constructing and projecting an identity for “modern Cambodia.”⁶² These

61 This observation comes from my exposure to and exploration of archival materials such as magazines, photos, and other publications produced in Cambodia between 1954 and 1970.

62 In Ingrid Muan’s 2001 dissertation “Citing Angkor,” Chapter 3, the section on “*Independence*,” she discusses in detail how print media such as the locally-produced magazine *The Free World* along with events like the 1955 International Exhibition in Phnom Penh “echoed the forms proposed by international modernism, visually asserting that Cambodia had not only joined the community of nations but had entered the look of the modern” where the public could find “the established forms of the modern world and thus a new identity for Cambodia”

projects were both aimed at the development of infrastructure such as highways, hydroelectric dams, electricity development, schools, and bridges, as well as the inclusion of cultural and social projects such as *Khmerization*. Khmerization can be described as new laws that established policies for inclusion into the national project by foregrounding “assimilation to Khmer customs, morals, and traditions” as “a condition of eligibility for citizenship,” as well as the codification of new ethnic categories such as Khmer Leou which became the term used to collapse a highly diverse population of distinct ethnic minorities living in upland areas of Cambodia into one ethnic category (Edwards, 2007, 251).⁶³ Khmerization can also more specifically refer to the shift from using French language in schools and official business to using exclusively Khmer language for education and government purposes, except for private schools and businesses that were French-owned.⁶⁴

Even as the policy of Khmerization encouraged the idea of cultural and political sovereignty within the nation-state, Cambodian policy-makers and ministry officials could not avoid a dependence on foreign aid and foreign nationals to fund infrastructure projects and staff technical positions where skilled human resources were lacking due to deleterious neglect imposed by French rule (Slocumb 2010, 77). Foreign aid arrived from various sources, such as France, the Soviet Union, and the U.S.⁶⁵ In fact, the U.S. supplied nearly the majority of the

along with “a post-independence shift away from the colonial French sphere of influence towards allegiance with an imagined broader Asian community” (204; 208).

63 The project of Khmerization is also explored in David Chandler, *A History of Cambodia* (2008); and Margaret Slocumb, *An Economic History of Cambodia* (2010), Chapter 2.

64 Film director Yvon Hem describes Khmerization in terms of language in education and government in an interview with Reyum publishing in 2001 (Daravuth and Muan 2001, 166).

65 It should be noted here that the transnationally tense environment of the Cold War had a strong impact on how political-economic relationships developed between the United States, Cambodia, the Soviet Union, and more. For example, quoting from her research in the General Records of the U.S. Department of State, Ingrid Muan exposes a document that describes Cambodia's position in the Cold War as “strategic” in preventing the entire

budget for the Royal Cambodian Armed forces until 1963 when Sihanouk decided to cut off all foreign aid from the U.S. due to suggestions that the U.S. government was planning to encourage a military coup to get Sihanouk out of office. This was the same year that Sihanouk also nationalized imports and exports, insurance, and banking, a move that continued to drive a wedge into both the economic disparity gap in the country as well as the tensions between various political factions (Chandler 2008, 200; Slocomb 2010, 111).⁶⁶

On the other hand, key cultural and social projects related to modernization seem to have been widely socially and politically accepted as successful, like the promotion of a canon of Cambodian folk stories within the education system. Filmmakers Ly Bun Yim, Ly You Sreang, and Dy Saveth all expressed to me in interviews that after the first decade of independence from France, folk stories began to be used in schools from primary to high school level and that the link between required reading and the cinema became a commercial dream for the local cinema industry.⁶⁷ Contemporary architectural projects, referred to as “New Khmer Architecture,” were also highly popular and widely publicized as presenting a uniquely modern Khmer perspective, especially works by Van Molyvann.⁶⁸ International exhibitions, photography competitions, film festivals, and United States Information Service programs were all publicized in magazines and newspapers of the era and often come up in conversation with people about their memories of the

Southeast Asian region from falling to communism, which provides a political context for U.S. interest in aiding Cambodia's military development (2001, 212).

66 The income disparity gap in Cambodia during the Sangkum era can be characterized by the fact that the “125,000 richest people” made up “thirty percent of the national income” (Prud'homme qtd. in Slocomb 2010, 89).

67 In discussion with the author, June 2013.

68 For more information on “New Khmer Architecture,” see Chapter 1 of Daravuth and Muan, *Cultures of Independence* (2001).

post-independence era in Cambodia.⁶⁹ Thus, while economic development was not felt equally among people within nation-state boundaries, the proliferation of new cultural forms such as popular music on the radio, “speaking theater,” popular cinema, and innovations in architecture and painting circulated in rural and urban spaces, especially with the help of an increased ability to travel between rural and urban areas due to newly built roads and transit systems like buses.⁷⁰ In many ways, the fact that the former King Norodom Sihanouk was incredibly involved and publicly and politically supportive of these various activities made him the symbol of modern Cambodia.

A survey of Mary Fisher's annotated bibliography published in 1967 also displays that Sihanouk was not only highly visible and popular on the local level, but was also intensely involved in the international community. Fisher lists speeches the former King and head of state gave, articles he wrote, and visits he made to the United Nations (after Cambodia was admitted in 1955) in her notes on Sihanouk's overwhelming presence in print media.⁷¹ Osborne's biography of Sihanouk (1994) reinforces this international orientation and positions it alongside what Osborne interprets as a love of European leisure activities like horseback riding and making films. Yet, Sihanouk remained grounded in his approach to modernizing Cambodia by

69 “Chapter 3: Display” of Muan's “Citing Angkor” (2001) provides a thorough examination of archival print materials as well as interviews that Muan conducted that reveals the various and furious amount of activity that went on during the post-independence era that constructed and supported an idea of “modern” Cambodia.

70 For an introductory look at cultural production in the Sangkum era see Daravuth and Muan's *Cultures of Independence* (2001).

For a description of how the access to mobility between the provinces and urban centers of Cambodia changed during the Sangkum era see Milton Osborne, *Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994) 132.

For a well-researched account of the general economic changes that occurred in Cambodia during the Sangkum era see Margaret Slocomb, *An Economic History of Cambodia In the Twentieth Century* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2010) Chapter 2: “Post-Independence Economic Change, 1953-1969.”

71 See Fisher's section entitled “International Relations;” Mary Fisher, *Cambodia: An Annotated Bibliography of Its History, Geography, Politics and Economy Since 1954*, (Cambridge: Center for International Studies Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1967).

maintaining a personal relationship to those whom he referred to as his “children,” citizens working on their rice fields and living their daily lives across Cambodia's countryside (Osborne 1994). David Chandler writes that in order to nurture his relationship with the public, Sihanouk “crisscrossed his kingdom, inaugurating schools, dams, parks, factories, and hospitals” and would “deliver speeches for hours” while speaking of his love life, his enemies, foreigners, and the glories of Cambodian society rooted in mythologies of ancient Angkor (1992, 88).

A Brief Tour of the Archives

Suffice it to say, through historical accounts we can see that King Sihanouk dominated the face of Cambodian politics during the post-independence era. The King's personal influence on the economy, development projects, and the political positioning of Cambodia cannot be downplayed, and the visual archive of this historical period is also incredibly important not only for how Sihanouk is photographed and portrayed in a large number of available publications, but also because Cambodia is represented as already developed. For example, the visual themes that range across countless issues of magazines, such as *Cambodian Commentary: Review of Khmer Opinion* (1963-1967), *Le Sangkum: Revue Politique Illustrée* (1966-1969), and *Kambuja* (1968-1969), include wide, clean urban spaces (showcasing contemporary architectural achievements), rural areas transformed by industrial farming or factories, Buddhist ceremonies and processions, military parades (highlighting helicopters, planes, and jeeps), and leisure activities such as athletics and tourism.

Placed within this visual landscape of the print-media archive is the image of Sihanouk himself in various diplomatic and popular settings, such as greeting the delegation from an international film festival or holding the weathered hands of a farmer in Svay Daunkeo [pictured

below], one of the more remote areas from Phnom Penh. Turning the pages of any of these magazines reveals Sihanouk's image, his smiling face, and gracious demeanor over and over again as if he existed everywhere in the country and in many foreign places all at the same time. Sihanouk is even pictured in many political cartoons, penned by the Khmer political cartoonist Huy Hem. In one cartoon, Sihanouk is a doctor with an oversized hypodermic needle poised at the ready to inject “Buddhist Socialism” (as is displayed on the needle) into a patient.⁷² Not that these cartoons or images ever lambast the head-of-state straight on, because whenever Sihanouk is represented in a global context, he is either the victim of bullying by other cartoon versions of U.S., French, and Soviet political leaders, or he is stubbornly standing in defiance of imperialist forces, who are usually represented by wrinkly, old white men. Similarly, in printed materials within the magazines and newspapers—Sihanouk's letters or letters to him, copies of speeches given over the national radio, articles detailing his political maneuvers or travels, opinion pieces on his policies, and other such commentary—Sihanouk is positioned at the crossroads of global and local, negotiating the future of an independent Cambodia.

⁷² “Buddhist Socialism” was sometimes also called “Khmer Socialism” and was used by Sihanouk to describe the political and economic policies being implemented during the post-independence era, which mixed “agrarian socialism leavened by traditional practices of mutual support” and amounted to the state being allowed to intervene in any sector of the economy at any time deemed appropriate (Slocumb 2010, 79).



“Sihanouk in Svay-Daunkeo a la moisson” from
Le Sangkum: Revue Politique Illustrée,
 Phnom Penh. N. 24, July 1967. 50.

Yet, where is “popular cinema” located in the same archival landscape? There is a noticeable lack of pictures of movie stars and cinemas and film reviews are rarely found in the archival materials of national magazines and newspapers. Similarly, there are few or no photographs of musicians, clubs, or popular music venues. This sort of missing picture in the archives could be due to any number of reasons. For example, the fact that film stars often had publicity photos sent out by studios as posters for advertising the films might have meant there was less overlap between cinema advertising and printed news sources.⁷³ Furthermore, filmmaker Ly You Sreang explained to me that advertising for films was widely varied but that radio ads and sound bytes were one of the best, easiest, and cheapest ways to promote a film.⁷⁴

⁷³ We can trace the extensive visual record left of film stars because researchers like Chhoum Virak and the Preah Soriya group as well as Davy Chou, the documentary filmmaker of *Le Sommeil D'Or - Golden Slumbers* (2011) have located some originals and many reproductions of these types of photograph-posters and promotional material for various films, even many films that have been lost. Additionally, in the magazine *Réalités Cambodgiennes*, a staff-writer who goes by Tvear remarks in interviews with actors Som Van Soudany and Nop Nem (1968-1969) that these two stars had definitely achieved fame because their faces were on posters all over the city.

⁷⁴ Ly You Sreang, filmmaker, in discussion with the author, June 2013.



The Golden Apsara Award
From *Le Sangkum*. N 41,
December 1968 (Cover)



Caption: “Prince Sihanouk jokes with the actors and actresses, who are the stars of the evening. The handsome star, who is just as attractive in real life as he is on the screen, is Kong Sam Oeun of Prince Sihanouk’s film *La Joie de Vivre*, *Joy of Living*. He received the Rudolph Valentino Cup as the most popular actor among women audiences.”

From *Kambuja: Monthly Illustrated Review*. Preah Kantha Bopha Villa: Private Residence of Chamcar Mon, Phnom Penh. October 1969, N. 55. 32.

Another important factor limiting the circulation of images or news related to cinema in print media was likely that the intended audiences for print media and popular film and popular music were different. Many of the magazines were printed in French and some in English, and articles or photographs of popular film culture are few and far between unless the event is a film festival—there were at least two significant film festivals that got covered in these archives. Many newspapers, periodicals dispersed by the Buddhist Institute or Ministry of Education (e.g. *Komsat Chet*), and the like were printed in Khmer, but similarly did not directly address popular film culture in Cambodia at that time. However, there were serialized *reung*, stories, in Khmer language such as the widely known folk tales about Prince Sovannahong and the characters Puthisen and Neang Kongrey, also used in the education system and the inspiration for films by popular filmmakers Yvon Hem and Ly Bun Yim, respectively. Still, literacy was not universal by

any means, and so perhaps the lack of popular cinema coverage in these archives reveals a social gap between the readers of *Kambuja* and the people buying tickets to Khmer films, listening to the radio, and collecting posters of movie stars and soundtracks recorded by popular musicians.

This social gap revealed in the archives may translate to tensions in the visual economy at the time. With the attention in print-media focused on realistic photographs, sports, architecture, global and local politics, and Sihanouk as a figure for and negotiator of the nation, industrialization, and rural and urban development, popular films that portrayed fantastic folk tales, with elaborate sets, special effects, and bejeweled costumes may have created a visual rivalry in the presentation of modernity that was not wholly resolved. While some magazines have sections on “culture and leisure,” these sections are small and include anything from a review of a restaurant to that of an occasional film. According to a variety of other sources, however, the cinema industry did exist at large and people throughout Phnom Penh and provincial capitals wanted to see ancient legends and folk tales projected on screen in all their overtly decorated and magic-creating glory. In fact, it has been important for me not to assume that one archive may provide objective truths about the past in light of the massive and traumatic disruption to society that was instigated by the Khmer Rouge regime. On one hand, the archives help to draw a critical preliminary sketch of the visual economy of Cambodia as it was changing shape and responding to freedom from French colonial rule as well as to contemporary trends in visual modernism, as Ingrid Muan pointed out (2001, 208). On the other hand, the archive also indicates how modernizing the nation was a collective project that required participation from citizens, while at the same time, it also created the conditions for excluding certain people from the benefits of modernity.

Norodom Sihanouk, the Filmmaker

With these aspects of the visual economy of Cambodia during the post-independence period in mind, the late King's cinematic representations of his country resonate with social value and ideological power. As a filmmaker, Sihanouk was interested in putting modern Cambodia on the global map of film production in the 1960s, at least partially as a response to orientalist imaginings of Cambodia as an exotic and primitive location in Western films (Osborne 1994, 178). This era was also extremely important in the history of world cinema. The “Third World” cinema movement mobilized “Third World” filmmakers to imagine and visualize local and culturally specific conditions of modernity as a mode of resistance to the continuous presence of colonial political-economic structures and European cultural hegemony.⁷⁵ As Julio Jeldres writes, Sihanouk's form of resistance seems to have aimed at the “task of rebuilding Khmer Identity and National Pride around the historic monarchy, Khmer history and culture and Buddhist teachings” (2013, 53).

Eliza Romey, a scholar of Sihanouk's film archive, has explored how the head-of-state put an immense effort into making and disseminating films that projected a specific image of Cambodian modernity to his subjects, people living within Cambodia's nation-state boundaries (2001, 107). As she points out, Sihanouk was determined not to market his films as commercial ventures but instead as part of a personal and kingly desire to develop contemporary artistic activities in Cambodia (2001, 13). Sihanouk regularly screened his films in urban centers, provincial capitals, and during visits to villages as far away as Rattanakiri province. While it would be difficult to find hard statistical evidence to represent the size of Sihanouk's intended

⁷⁵ For a discussion of global film industries in the twentieth century see chapter one, “From Eurocentrism to Polycentrism,” of Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism* (1994), 25-27.

audience, I spoke with many people in Cambodia about their memories of Sihanouk's films being shown in various places within the nation. One man who grew up in Kampong Chhnang province remembers how villagers would gather at the provincial town hall when Sihanouk passed through on a regularly scheduled tour to listen to a speech in the daytime, and later they would sit and watch a projection of one of the King's films during the evening. His entourage of officials had brought along film and projection equipment from city to city, like many private film companies also did at the time.⁷⁶ Sometimes the films were synced with an audio track, sometimes only the images were shown on screen. However, in an interview with the Bophana Center's managing archival historian, Chea Sopheap, I was told that it would be a mistake to assume that the King's cinematic goal was to connect with his audience through artistic license and special effects or elaborate plot lines.⁷⁷ Instead, Mr. Chea stated that the former King wanted to help villagers “see the real Cambodia” in all of its grandeur, natural beauty, and the progress that had been made to modernize the nation. Sihanouk’s films were not the most popular, the most technologically advanced, or the most entertaining films to circulate during the Golden Era, but they held special significance within the context of Khmer society because of his social standing as the monarch. Even after he had renounced the position, the moral and social importance of the kingship remained with him (Chandler 1992).

Memories are Not the Past; They Live in the Present

When Davy Chou set out to make the documentary film *Le Sommeil D'Or - Golden*

⁷⁶ Stories about town-hall meetings and film screenings came up in many conversations I had with older Cambodians in Phnom Penh. These two details in particular came from conversations with filmmaker Ly Bun Yim and the manager of public relations for the Memory! International Heritage Film Festival, Kuch Phearun, June of 2013.

⁷⁷ Chea Sopheap, lead historian at Bophana Audiovisual Archive, in discussion with the author, June 2013.

Slumbers (2011), he wanted to provide extensive interviews with Cambodian filmmakers from the Golden Era who had survived through the societal upheavals of the Khmer Rouge genocide, decades of ongoing civil war, and the shifting political and economic contexts of the UN peace-keeping mission followed by the beginning of prime minister Hun Sen's supposedly democratic control of the nation's political and economic development.⁷⁸ While filmmakers Yvon Hem, Ly Bun Yim, Dy Saveth, and Ly You Sreang share stories from the hey-day of the Cambodian film industry on screen in Chou's documentary, they also relive the traumatic memories of loss and the despair that followed the end of the Golden Era. Under Chou's direction, the camera maps loss across long, lonely, panoramic shots that enter haunted spaces such as abandoned theaters, empty studios, and unoccupied concrete lots where the heartbeat of the Golden Era would have echoed decades earlier.

In our interview, Chou described how his vision for the documentary changed when he realized that the kind of energy that existed in those spaces in the 1960s had not completely disappeared or been erased but had morphed into something like an amnesia, a waking slumber. Chou eventually became interested not only in hearing the emotionally charged stories of surviving filmmakers but also in visually documenting spaces like the abandoned Hemakcheat theater, which would have been one of more than thirty operational movie theaters in Phnom

⁷⁸ Davy Chou is the grandson of one of Cambodia's most successful film producers from the Golden Era, Van Chann. Mr. Chou was not fully aware of or curious about the extent of his grandfather's fame until already in his mid-twenties. I interviewed Chou in Phnom Penh near the end of my field research period, June of 2013. Mr. Chou has given many interviews about his documentary, in both French and English, to various online and print sources, as *Le Sommeil D'Or - Golden Slumbers* (2011) gains circulation on the international film festival circuit. At the time of the interview, Mr. Chou had been brought to Phnom Penh from Paris to work as one of the local coordinators for the Memory! International Film Festival. He helped provide much of the historical information about Cambodian heritage films that was used for the "Birds of Paradise" exhibition at Chaktomuk Theater, which was one of the two main art exhibitions connected to the Memory! Festival's program. Mr. Chou was also scouting locations and developing a script for his next film project, which he hoped he would be able to film in Cambodia.

Penh during the Golden Era and was previously owned and operated by master filmmaker Ly Bun Yim. Other provincial capitals across the nation supported movie theaters, including Battambang with at least seven and Kampong Cham with at least four.⁷⁹ It is impossible to resurrect the Golden Era, but life with the memories and records we do have continues to move forward so that we can imagine what day-to-day life surrounding popular film culture would have been like in that time.

The 1960s in Cambodia saw relative prosperity in urban areas and currents of migration from rural to urban spaces supplied new audiences for a growing film industry. In 1960, there were only one or two Cambodian men attempting to turn film into a commercial project for Cambodian citizens, Sun Bun Ly and Som Sam Al.⁸⁰ However, within three years, there were a number of other people opening up film studios and producing their own films, including directors Ly Bun Yim, Biv Chhay Leang, and Yvon Hem. Until the early 1970s, all of these directors had to send their film to France to be developed, but recording audio to play in-sync with films became possible in the early 1960s, which presented a decisive moment for Cambodian cinema (Daravuth and Muan 2001, 151-152).

The movie-going audience is thought to have been made up mostly of low-wage earners, such as migrant agricultural workers, urban construction workers, vendors, and hospitality workers (Daravuth and Muan 2001, 151-152). For people in the provinces and countryside, early experiences with film happened through interactions with foreign film crews using the rural areas as a backdrop, which often brought local Khmer-speakers on set for basic jobs related to

79 Personal research archive of Chhoum Virak, in discussion with author, June 2013.

80 Yvon Hem recalls the origins of Khmer cinema in an interview with Reyum publishing in 2001 (Daravuth and Muan, 168). Ly Bun Yim and Ly You Sreang recalled some of the same information with me in personal interviews, June 2013.

film, and where some early filmmakers like Nary Hem and Yvon Hem gained foundational skills in film production, acting, cinematography, and directing (ibid., 145). The United States Information Service began shooting documentaries in Cambodia during the 1950s and held screenings of films that showed “American life, health, education, and contemporary domestic and foreign affairs to village audiences” (ibid.). Later, the USIS “cinecars” were either transferred, sold, or handed over to some local film crews and Khmer production companies.⁸¹

There were many pathways to becoming involved in the birth of Cambodian cinema that involved transitioning from experience with international films to local film production. Early on, King Sihanouk sent a few individuals abroad to study film techniques in order to return to Cambodia to work with him on film projects (ibid., 144). A different example is the actor Or Dom who first began working a side-job in college translating French films into Khmer language, because they did not have the technology to use audio tracks, Or Dom also provided the live dialogue at screenings of these films (interview in *Réalités Cambodgiennes*, 1968). He later was able to become involved with Khmer filmmakers because of his experience with film dialogue.

Another factor that led to success for industry newcomers like Ly Bun Yim and Dy Saveth was a mid-1960s tax law, penned by the Sangkum party, that took a forty-percent tax on movie tickets in order to cycle twenty percent of box-office earnings directly back to local, Khmer film production (Daravuth and Muan 2001, 101). While many theaters screened foreign films from the likes of Thailand, India, Japan, Hong Kong, France and more, it wasn't until the mid-1960s that any theaters began to incorporate things like new seats, higher-quality sound and

⁸¹ This point is mentioned in Daravuth and Muan's *Cultures of Independence* (2001) as well as Ingrid Muan's “Citing Angkor” (2001). I also asked Ly Bun Yim and Ly You Sreang about their memories of “cinecars,” which they both remembered as having transitioned from U.S. to Cambodian ownership over a period of years in the mid-1960s, but neither gave details as to exactly how, and when, and where the cinecars were used.

projecting equipment, and larger auditoriums, which happened to work well for local filmmakers who had only recently acquired access to higher-quality cameras and the ability to sync audio-tracks with films (*Réalités Cambodgiennes*, 1967).

Cambodian films that portrayed legendary stories, action-adventure, romance, comedy, horror, drama, and special effects (often all in the same film) were extremely popular with local audiences. In an interview with Dy Saveth, the veteran actress explained how the films that portrayed legendary characters and folk tales were always a hassle to film because of the large budgets, elaborate costumes and make-up, ornate sets, difficult dialogue, and highly detailed shot sequences.⁸² However, some film stars, like Dy Saveth, were asked to visit up to three production sets every day, working from as early as six in the morning until as late as midnight. Sometimes this meant working for three different production companies, but sometimes, because the production companies were so invested in the rapid turn-over of popular films, they would film multiple projects at the same time. Dy Saveth explained that she favored acting in contemporary stories because the style was more natural and somehow less exhausting to portray a modern-day character. This sentiment is echoed in an interview with the film star Kim Nova in the December 6th issue of *Réalités Cambodgiennes* (1968) in which Nova says she likes acting in modern films because she is a young woman with “a sense of the times” compared to the effort she had to put forth to portray ancient heroines.

Besides the acting and dialogue concerns in fantastical films that showed ancient folklore, the budgets for these films increased as more special effects were used.⁸³ Many

82 Dy Saveth, actress and filmmaker, in discussion with the author, June 2013.

83 Cambodian language is stratified by social class and propriety. This means that there are different words used when addressing a member of royalty or when speaking the role of royalty. For authentic portrayals of ancient legends, actors had to be well-versed in these particular vocabularies, and it was not always the easiest task, as Dy Saveth explained to me in an interview in June of 2013, “There are just so many words to remember.”

filmmakers were not trained in creating effects, but would use various kinds of mechanisms, machines, and camera tricks to achieve their visions. Ly Bun Yim describes this as such:

When I could see it in my imagination, like the scene in *Puthisen Neang Kongrey* where the skull rises out of the ground laughing at Neang Kongrey, I just figured out a way to make it happen. At that time we could use our imaginations to solve any problem. I don't think the young filmmakers today are as confident as we were, and the technology has changed so much. I would like to see the young filmmakers using high technology, but there is no replacement for imagination first.⁸⁴

The imaginative and vibrant films produced during the 1960s drew people back to the theaters time and time again. Contemporary filmmaker Chhay Bora remembers when he first saw Ly Bun Yim's *Orn Euy Srei Orn* as a young child, and how he went back to see the film more than one time because he was so intrigued and inspired by what a Cambodian director was doing with film.⁸⁵ Although it took Chhay Bora decades of pursuing other careers before he returned to making his own films, he still recalls the feeling of being enraptured by the possibility of filmmaking during the 1960s and '70s. This same spell-bound fervor gripped filmmaker Davy Chou when he helped facilitate screenings of Khmer heritage films like *Tep Sodachan*, produced by Van Chann, for Cambodian youth in 2009. Davy reflects on his experience of seeing the same group of young people come in to watch the same film three-hours after their first viewing. He writes:

[T]he film is towering up above us...it gathers all its remaining energy in order to heroically resist and to persist in existing. And when I turn towards the young faces watching it, I am not merely witnessing a similarity of behavior or a vague allusion to the past. No, for an instant, these are the same faces that were here three hours ago, the same faces that were here forty years before. (2013, 110).

84 Ly Bun Yim, filmmaker and inventor, in discussion with the author, June 2013.

85 Chhay Bora, filmmaker, in discussion with the author, June 2013.

Conclusion

As I have attempted to describe in this chapter, the birth and rise of the Cambodian film industry during the post-independence period became a “Golden Era” for cinema within very specific and complex historical, economic, political, and cultural contexts. In the moment of transition from French colonial rule to independent nation-state, much of Cambodia, especially the urban centers, experienced relative prosperity and peace along with an upsurge in the mobility of migrant workers, consumer goods, as well as print media, radio, and film. As the dominant political party pursued development projects to modernize Cambodia, there was also a renewed interest in Khmer storytelling and popular arts in new formats. With the former King and head-of-state Norodom Sihanouk acting as both producer and supporter of popular film, there was the sense that the Cambodian film industry could rival international film industries with their successful productions of popular films made for Khmer-speaking audiences. Finally, it came down to the sheer raw and powerful creative forces of filmmakers like Yvon Hem, Ly Bun Yim, Dy Saveth, and many, many more influential people working in the industry as they wove their entire lives around the production of quality films that would mean something to their audience and to their nation.

Film offers a unique and difficult experience to untangle through academic study, which is perhaps why a close analysis of films is appropriate for this project so that I can engage more deeply with the myriad details and processes of filmmaking. Yet, however separate film studies seem to be from other types of visual studies or academic inquiries—historical and anthropological—films exist in an image world, an arena of cultural production, that people experience every day. Our favorite film may use our favorite song in the soundtrack and might

have been produced by our favorite production company. We may have collected photographs of “behind-the-scenes” or news stories or advertisements, or we may have just noticed these in passing. These same experiences existed in Cambodia for the cinema-going public during the Golden Era, so that different kinds of cultural products that circulated in people's lives formed the ways they consumed and responded to popular culture. That is why it is essential to attempt to expose the field of vision, if at all possible, through an examination of photographs, archival materials, advertisements, interviews, and more.

These contexts that I have described as influencing the growth of the film industry are not just a background canvas for the stories that Cambodia's heritage films tell on screen. The cultural products, magazine articles, trending themes in photography, and film—all of these things are intimately bound up together as they create and reflect the ever-changing systems of meaning and value in society. The ties that bind these forms of cultural expression may exist in a variety of forms such as: symbolic, e.g., representations of a powerful cultural and political figure, like King Sihanouk; ideological, e.g., images and discussions of development projects that show how these projects have positive effects and are desirable; gendered, e.g., women exhibited in sexual poses or clothing and framed as objects for gazing at and desiring; and, economic and social, e.g., products that are produced by the wealthy and privileged for a consumer class that is markedly non-privileged, working-class, which reveals economic and structural disparities. There are many more forms than I can list here, but the point is that “truth” may lie in how these interconnections between film, photographs, print media, folk lore, music, theater, and, of course, fans and consumers, all occur at the same time. They also interact and influence each other. There is still an incredible amount of work that could be done to explore,

describe, and frame these types of connections that exist in Cambodia's popular culture. Yet, I hope that from this exploratory work, other scholars and fans can be inspired to grapple with the tensions implicit in popular culture, tensions that I will engage with next through an analysis of films.

In the following two chapters, I hope to wrestle with films that have, in the words of Davy Chou, “heroically resisted” history's disruptions and tragedies. While my analysis will present one perspective from which to experience Cambodia's heritage films, I hope that my enthusiasm as a fan and as a scholar can inspire people to return to the theaters, return to the memories, and listen to the stories over and over again as something new is revealed in every interaction.

Chapter 4 - Hardlines on Gender: Policing National Security in Tales of Domestic Romance

Introduction

This chapter will discuss three films, a romantic drama, a romantic comedy, and a legendary action-romance, that at first glance do not appear to share much beyond superficial, categorical similarities. Two of the films in this chapter, *Joie de Vivre* (1969) and *Apsara* (1966), were written, produced, directed, and partially scored by the late King Norodom Sihanouk and both have a contemporary setting, including 1960s era costumes, cars, and music. *Apsara* follows the story of two couples, a wizened general with his mistress and a young dancer with her pilot boyfriend, caught up in the theater of war in the 1960s. As the national borders come under fire, relationships are tested, but true love prevails. *Joie de Vivre* presents a bawdy account of sexual trysts, gambling, and a dangerous love triangle that characterizes the rock-n-roll lifestyle of the Phnom Penh elite. At the heart of the jealousy and general lawlessness is a woman who doesn't like to spend the night alone. These two feature films represent a small part of the late King's cinematic archive that has been discussed in depth in Eliza Romey's "King, Politician, Artist: The Films of Norodom Sihanouk" (1998).

One aspect of analysis that is missing from Romey's detailed study, and considered here, is a discussion of the broader culture of popular cinema that existed alongside Sihanouk's films with such classically great productions as Ly Bun Yim's *Puthisen Neang Kongrey* (1967), also known by its English title *12 Sisters*. *Puthisen Neang Kongrey* tells the story of twelve young women who are imprisoned by their husband, the King, after he has been put under a spell by an ogress with exceptional powers of deception. Their only hope is young prince Puthisen, the sole surviving child of the union of the King and the youngest of the twelve sisters, who travels to the

ogress's kingdom where he has to choose between true love or the salvation of his mother, his eleven aunts, and the restoration of the kingdom. This chapter will discuss all three films as part of a visual economy that was dominated by images and symbols of an emergent nation and ideas about membership in that nation. Beyond revealing how the nation is constructed and represented on screen, this chapter interrogates how images of the splendor of traditional Cambodia, circulating in tandem with symbols of progress and development, were mapped onto individuals through mechanisms of gender as both a way of disciplining and controlling participation in the nation.

Projecting Modern Cambodia: The Moral Dilemma of Dangerously Sexy Women

Norodom Sihanouk's films *Apsara* and *La Joie de Vivre* (*The Joy of Living*) could be considered the bookends to the late King's Golden Era feature film production. The films were produced at the beginning of his film career (*Aspara*) and within the last two years of his role as leader of Cambodia (*La Joie de Vivre*). The films also depict a transformation in the writer-director's form, content, and style. While both embrace the popularity of romantic melodrama, *Apsara* maintains a tense mood punctuated by comedic relief brought about by well-known comics versus *La Joie de Vivre*, which the film reviewer Tvear calls a “pure comedy” (1969, *Réalités Cambodgiennes*). *La Joie de Vivre* truly does strike a zany and absurdist tone for the entirety of the film, including lengthy dance and kissing sequences. When the film was screened for a full-house of over five-hundred people at Chaktomuk Theater in Phnom Penh during the Memory! International Heritage Film Festival, the crowd broke into uproarious applause and laughter at the spectacle of a 1960s Khmer rock-n-roll dance party. *Apsara* was also screened at the festival and had as large an audience, also a full-house, yet the spectators responses were

more withdrawn, in keeping with the more serious subject matter of the film, imminent war encroaching upon national boundaries. Both films try to “interrogate modernity,” as Cambodian director Rithy Panh described in his formal introduction to the films at the opening of the Memory! International Film Heritage Festival. Charting this interrogation on screen is challenging not only because the films look very different, but also because the project of modernizing Cambodia is often coded and inscribed in romances and representations of gender. To look at this phenomenon in more depth I provide a synopsis of each film and then an analysis of relevant details and themes pertaining to the nation, modernity, and gender.

Apsara (1966) Synopsis:

The film *Apsara* revolves around the aging General Rithi, played by real-life former General Nhiek Tioulong, and the developments of his love life. Set in the contemporary period and following a linear narrative structure, the film opens with the introduction of Rattana, played by the popular actress Saksi Sbond, who is the General's previously widowed mistress. At first, the couple seem comfortable in their relationship as they are surrounded by wealth, cars, luxurious apartments, and staff to wait on them. However, the situation quickly deteriorates when General Rithi attends a performance of the Royal Cambodian Ballet. Watching a performance of the apsara dance, the legendary celestial female being, featuring the character of Kantha, played by the real life Princess Bopha Devi, he immediately falls for the graceful and beautiful performer. What the General does not know is that Kantha is already in love with another man, but the relationship has not progressed to marriage. Phaly, played by Sisowath Chivanmonirak, is a pilot in the Cambodian air force and Kantha's love interest whom she has known since childhood. When her mother and a family friend conspire to get Kantha married off to the

wealthy General Rithi after he expresses interest in her, the two couples are set on a course for unhappiness. Just as the tensions rise in the romantic relationships, war threatens the borders of Cambodia and both the General and Phaly are called to attend to military duties to protect the nation. Both Kantha and Rattana are left to ponder their fates as the men risk their personal safety, while both women come to their own conclusions about which men they would prefer to have in their lives. Kantha's appeals to the General to release her from their as-yet unconsummated marriage are successful and she is allowed to rush to Phaly's side when he returns to Phnom Penh in need of serious medical attention. Rattana is reunited with the General as soon as he lets go of the dream of being married to a young, beautiful virgin. The film closes with the General promising Rattana that he will fulfill her desire and finally make her his wife as the couple kiss exuberantly in the last frame.

La Joie de Vivre (1969) Synopsis:

La Joie de Vivre is widely understood to be a critique of the lavish lifestyle of the Phnom Penh elite during the 1960s, including illicit activities like gambling, drug use, orgies, and violent stand-offs.⁸⁶ From the opening sequence of cartoon representations of the characters backed by a peppy, orchestrated score that is reminiscent of Hollywood in the 1950s, the film presents this critique in the form of a comedy of errors, a linear narrative that plays out as a cautionary tale. The ensemble cast includes a long list of King Sihanouk's personal acquaintances and many of the most famous comedians of the era along with a daring and outrageous performance from Saksi Sbhong and a small part for the popular heartthrob, Kong Sam Oeun.

⁸⁶ For comments on the reception of the film, I read reviews in the Memory! International Film Heritage Festival's official catalogue (2013), Eliza Romey, "King, Politician, Artist" (1998); Tilman Baumgärtel, "Films on and by Royal Majesty, King Norodom Sihanouk, on the Occasion of His 87th Birthday," *Southeast Asian Film Studies Institute* (blog), <http://southeastasiancinema.wordpress.com/2009/11/01/films-on-and-by-his-royal-majesty-king-norodom-sihanouk-on-account-of-his-87th-birthday>; and comments credited to Tvear and Jean Barre in the magazine *Réalités Cambodgiennes* (1969).

The events of the film unravel after the Captain of the police force, Siporak, played by Or Pho, raids the gambling hall run by Prince Chantavong, played by Sisowath Kantanavong, with the help of the bungling inspector Sam Baun, played by the comedian Yin Boeun, normally referred to by his screen name, Trente-Deux. Once the ringleader, Prince Chantavong, is arrested, his wife Sulpra, played by Saksi Sbong, becomes the focus of the film as she begins and ends a series of sexual trysts with first, her husband's nephew Sariphou, played by a young and dashing Kong Sam Oeun, and then a hotel tycoon named Okhnia Sneha Sambat, played by Nhek Tioulong.

When Chantavong exploits his connections with a high court judge to get out of jail, he immediately goes to search for his wife, knowing full-well the extent of her sexual escapades. While using the threat of violence makes for some entertaining scenes of cat and mouse, it doesn't get Chantavong and his cronies any closer to his wife and her hotel-tycoon lover. The film reaches a climax when Chantavong crashes an upscale party attended by all of his wife's former lovers and sets off a gun-battle in the club while the crowd flees for safety. No one is wounded, but the police captain, Siporak, intervenes to end the madness. Chantavong merely asks that his wife return to his side and Sulpra quickly breaks the news to Okhnia Sneha Sambat that she has decided to be with her original husband again. The dance party resumes as the film comes to a close, with the festivities hardly interrupted by the shenanigans of the Phnom Penh elite.

Projecting the Modern in Apsara and La Joie de Vivre

Apsara (1966) is as much a romance between Sihanouk and the idea of the modern nation-state of Cambodia as it is a romance between the two couples who appear together in just

enough scenes to thread together the central love story. Prior to more recent attention on the late King's status as an auteur, Western reviews of Sihanouk's films were written mostly by Western scholars who describe Sihanouk's desire to produce films as a hobby that appeared "self-indulgent," "amateurish," and "extravagant" (Chandler 1992, 152; Osborne 1994, 179).

Aesthetics and biases aside, Sihanouk produced his films within a specific sociopolitical and cultural context that provided an arena for the projection of Sihanouk's vision of the postcolonial nation. Beginning with the landscape of *Apsara*, we can see that the camera's gaze focuses time and time again on a number of visual elements that symbolize the modern, independent nation. The first frame of the film has special significance as the camera focuses on the National Independence Monument, a towering stone structure decorated by Angkorean-style carvings. Next, the camera pans across the surrounding boulevards and public parks of central Phnom Penh as glittering European cars drive from off-screen to on and off again. In the first filmic moment, the image of the monument that marks independence from French colonial rule recalls the history of colonialism and the struggle for liberation. To resolve these histories, Phnom Penh's beautified, urban pastoral is penetrated by the filmic eye and the city space is unveiled as a land of boundless open streets, opportunity, peace, and prosperity.

When the countryside is pictured on screen, wide-framed shots capture the idyllic and serene mood of slow-moving rivers, while more tightly framed shots of the lead actors are used to produce a sense of the impressive grandeur of Cambodia's natural scenery. The camera is also used to visually map the physical borders of Cambodia's expansive countryside in another scene in which General Rithi is taken by helicopter to a military base near the Thai border where he gives a lengthy speech about the glory of Cambodia and the fight to keep Cambodian lands from

falling into the hands of Thai or American forces.⁸⁷ The helicopter shot situates the audience in the cock-pit, overlooking green mountains that rise and fall beneath the clouds, backed by a Wagner-esque score that sustains the power of the scene. This gaze highlights a three-fold technology of vision, or three different types of looking, that, when working together, actively construct the parameters of the modern nation. This short scene establishes the camera's ability to visually create physical borders, using a technology of mapping to help the audience imaginatively participate in the nation so they may identify as national citizens as well as cultivate a sense of pride in the physical entity of Cambodia.⁸⁸ On another level, the gaze of the camera is used in this scene and others like an invitation, stimulating the desire to explore both the lush countryside and the seemingly empty urban streets of Cambodia.⁸⁹ Lastly, the use of a helicopter to film a scene acts as a symbol of the scientific progress that defines one facet of the experience of modernity that is captured by being a spectator of the film.

Perhaps Sihanouk found that using real military technologies for film projects did not inspire in his audience the full spectrum of national participation, and he went on to film a cautionary moral tale that leans heavily on both the visual aesthetics of wealth and luxury as well as the exploitative sexual humor of bad people doing bad things. In *La Joie de Vivre*, the modern nation is once again visualized in a series of urban and idyllic countryside settings. However, *La*

87 According to Milton Osborne, the helicopters used in this scene were desperately needed by wounded soldiers in combat on the border of Thailand who were forced to wait for their evacuation until filming was complete; Osborne, *Before Kampuchea: Prelude to Tragedy*, (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1979) 48.

88 In his groundbreaking work on Siamese nationalism and the construction of the nation-state of Thailand, Thongchai Winichakul argues that the science of mapping was used to create the idea of a “geo-body” of the nation, and when combined with the work of historiography to tell the story of a long-existent national culture, these two became “powerful technologies of nationhood” as they operated to identify the “We-self as opposed to otherness;” Winichakul, *Siam Mapped*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994) 164.

89 As was mentioned in the previous chapter, tourism as an industry and a past-time was a major component of both visual and print media in magazines and newspapers circulating from the late 1950s and onward in Cambodia, with most publications produced in Phnom Penh.

Joie de Vivre does not utilize as many slow panning shots to capture the very modernity of space and time, nor does the technological might of the military play a role in the film. Instead, mise-en-scène becomes a way to identify the various stereotypes represented on screen. The bungling inspector is introduced in a humorous bedroom scene while the captain is seen calling from the well-organized police station. Sulpra, the vivacious leading lady, is filmed on a bed in various states of undress throughout the film. Okhnia Sneha Sambat leads a lengthy sequence that takes place at one of his water-front resorts in the countryside, while Prince Chantavong is placed in a range of settings like his gambling house, a jail cell, a fancy car, and the iconic dance hall at the end of the film. In this sense, the nation is embodied in people who are identified through the mise-en-scène choices, where the costume design and outward showing of wealth say almost as much about each character as the dialogue and story do. Whether it is the fact that nearly everyone in the film is well-dressed for every occasion, from an outing at the beach to a night on the town, or that most of the leads in the film have unlimited mobility and access to cars and boats, this depiction of the modern nation possesses an air of exclusivity. As in *Apsara*, modernity appears to be equated with access to the benefits of prosperity and technological progress, which clearly not every citizen of Cambodia experienced. Yet, unlike *Apsara* there is a larger cast of characters in *La Joie de Vivre* that includes more middle-class civil servants and peripheral characters who provide slapstick comedy and a potential alternative to the moral corruption of the elite.

Needless to say, the realism of these films manifests the tensions of inclusion and exclusion to the benefits of progress in the post-independence period. The style of these films deviates from that of other locally produced popular films at the time. Dialogue is minimal and

utilizes more French vocabulary. While transitional scenes that project car travel, exteriors of new buildings, and wide boulevards perhaps worked as a technique to increase the desire for realism in film. Realism was not a common concern for other directors of Cambodian popular films at the time (Sornnimul et. al. 2010). Thus, Sihanouk's films would have stood out not only because of the large budget for costumes, sets, and locations or because the head-of-state had penned the screenplay, but also in terms of storytelling, both visual and narrative. Sihanouk has been quoted as saying that he was always interested in Hollywood Westerns and the great screen beauties of mid-twentieth century Western cinema (1981, 337). His particularly cosmopolitan ideas influenced the way he imagined the cinema's ability to capture a version of modernity that he saw as uniquely Khmer. This alternative or rival modernity hinged upon a projection of successful development that hadn't stripped Cambodia of its Cambodian-ness, so that traditional Khmer-ness was also present in the films as an essential and not antithetical part of the nation-state. Julio Jeldres also observes this play between tradition and modernity in the King's films as he describes the following:

His films were fables or moral tales and they worked in the sense that while being cinematographic productions which provide entertainment they also include a social message inducing the Cambodian audience to behave, to love and be proud of their homeland; and to think of the ancient traditions, the sovereignty and the territorial integrity of their homeland. (2013, 53).

The contrast between tradition and modernity was mapped as well onto gendered bodies through strict portrayals of feminine purity or a lack of it and masculine militancy or emasculation at the hands of dangerous female sexuality.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ When prominent scholar on gender studies, Judith Butler, talks about the “gendering” of bodies, she is describing a process that codifies biological gender differences as natural and original, male and female, in order to police and discipline sexuality and reproduction more easily, which often helps to institutionalize heterosexual and patriarchal structures in society; (2006, 173).

The Apsara and the Tramp: Securing Domesticity in Apsara and La Joie de Vivre

In both *Apsara* and *La Joie de Vivre*, the leading men are obsessed with securing the domestic realm, their love lives. The leading women, on the other hand, are either objects of worship or corruption within the domestic realm. Yet, while masculinity is negotiated through the use of wealth, social influence, and sometimes violence, femininity is negotiated through the portrayal of traditional values such as purity and piety as well as national culture. In *Apsara*, masculine, military force secures the perpetuation of both traditional, feminine domesticity, symbolized by Kantha, the royal court dancer, and the fledgling nation. The film offers a resolution to the puzzle of the modern nation in the fact that Kantha and Phaly, being young and in love, can inherit the project of postcolonial nationalism in time to shape it as a combination of the protection of traditional values, not represented by General Rithi and Rattana's sexual relationship, and aggressive patriotism. In *La Joie de Vivre*, it is apparent after the first few scenes of the film that there is no chance for redemption in the world of the Phnom Penh elite who choose drugs, sex, and rock 'n roll as their preferred mode of modernity. The kiss-and-make-up resolution of the film received a big laugh and a round of applause from the contemporary audience in Phnom Penh, as I and many others I spoke to at the screening in June of 2013 imagine it would have in 1969 as well. Ultimately, the film presents a cautionary tale of progress and modernity where the dangers to national security proliferate in corruption, sexual scandals, and the loss of traditional values.⁹¹ Both films seem to want to answer the question, can you

91 "Tradition" and "traditional" are loaded concepts that are frequently challenged as fictional constructions that have not remained uncontested or unchanged throughout pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial eras; Tony Day, "Introduction," in Tony Day and Maya H. T. Liem ed., *Cultures at War: The Cold War and Cultural Expression in Southeast Asia*, Studies on Southeast Asia, (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2010). For example, traditional concepts of gender in Cambodia have actually been formed and challenged over time by different influences such as the arrival of Brahmanism and Theravada Buddhism (respectively); the political-spiritual claims of competing empires and dynasties, such as within and between Angkor, Sukhothai, Champa, and Ayuthaya; and gender ideas presented in popular stories like the *Reamker* (the Cambodian version of the *Ramayana*) as well as local animistic beliefs in spirits such as *neak ta* and *tevada*. These subjects have been

become a modern woman without being corrupted by new found sexual and social freedoms?

And can you become a modern man without being corrupted by modern women?

The construction of the modern Khmer every-man in *Apsara* centers on the characters of Phaly and General Rithi rather than on the peripheral characters like General Rithi's chauffeur and security guard, both played by well-known comedians. The two men are characterized by their access to military technologies, such as jeeps, jet planes, and helicopters, which take them wherever they need to be within the country. Phaly is, in fact, introduced in the film during an eight-minute scene with no cuts where jets perform tricks in the sky before landing on an air strip already crowded with multiple fleets of air-force vehicles.⁹² He is portrayed as a dutiful, patriotic, brave citizen who is happy to serve in the army, even if it means dying instead of being with the woman he professes to love. Neither Phaly's nor General Rithi's sexual activity is ever questioned, even though General Rithi seemingly desires to flit from one sexual relationship with Rattana to another with the virgin. The virility of these men seems to be based in their fulfillment of duties as proper citizens within the nation-state.⁹³ General Rithi's central concerns in the narrative are marriage and military agendas, while Phaly's concerns are his ability to care for

explored in different scholarly works on Cambodia such as: Gregor Muller, *Colonial Cambodia's 'Bad Frenchmen'* (2006); David Chandler et. al. ed., *At the Edge of the Forest* (2008); Judy Ledgerwood, "Changing Khmer Conceptions of Gender" (Phd. diss., 1990); Trudy Jacobsen, *Lost Goddesses* (2008), and Aihwa Ong, *Buddha is Hiding* (2003).

92 The type of jets used in this scene seem to be USSR bomb-carriers made around 1950, which possibly were used to carry firearms provided by the United States; Albert Grandolini et. al., "Cambodia, 1954-1999; Part 1" (January 25, 2004), ACIG.org, last updated September 21, 2013, http://www.acig.org/artman/publish/article_410.shtml.

93 The depictions in *Apsara* of virility bound by military technology are eerily similar to what Kristen Whissel describes as a phenomenon in early American cinema where "the discipline of military life was promoted as a corrective for the modern ills that plagued the male body and the national body;" Whissel, "The Gender of Empire: American Modernity, Masculinity, and Edison's War Actualities," in Jennifer M. Bean and Diane Negra ed., *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002) 142.

Kantha and his duty to the nation.⁹⁴ For a brief moment, Phaly chooses the nation, but he ultimately is rewarded with the woman of his dreams when he is brought back from the battlefield. Both men are imbued with the agency to police and protect the nation-state's internal and external borders in the realms of domesticity and the politics of nation-state power.

The leading men in *La Joie de Vivre*, on the other hand, appear to relinquish their duty to promote the welfare of the nation in favor of a life of luxury, illicit activities, and sexual relations with their young girlfriends, even when it means three of the leading men share the same girlfriend for some of the film. One scene that depicts this obsession with sexual energy takes place in the sitting room of the gambling house where the camera pans past one couple after another, each one kissing deeply and passionately. During the contemporary screening, people sitting in proximity to me were visibly squirming and giggling uncomfortably. Yet, it is likely that the tactic of forcibly making the audience uncomfortable only served to heighten the absurdity of this type of moral degradation that could affect this section of the elite, revealing a loss of dignity and a lack of control. Furthermore, with the bulk of the action concerned about how each man interacts with Sulpra, female sexuality is positioned as the culprit at the center of the narrative. The male characters then become emasculated figures of national leadership whereby, like Okhnia Sneha Sambat, the hotel tycoon, no amount of wealth or social standing can preserve masculinity if you have succumbed to the temptations of a corrupted modernity symbolized in the sexually free woman. In his last scene, Okhnia Sneha Sambat is abandoned by Sulpra while he is standing in front of a red curtain that looks as if it is about to close on him; the camera lingers on him just long enough to portray his awkward display of dismay as he shakes

⁹⁴ In another of the late King's films, *Shadow of Angkor* (1967), Julio Jeldres describes a similar message being presented to the audience of "how a small country needs to be internally united but ready to defend its independence and sovereignty, when confronted by a more powerful country" (2013, 53).

his head, when the scene quickly cuts to Prince Chantavong welcoming Sulpra back into his arms.

While the kind of modernity that the male characters in these two films embody is characterized by militaristic or violent aggression, wealth, modern outfits, cars, and seemingly unlimited access to women, for the characters of Rattana, Kantha, and Sulpra in *Apsara* and *La Joie de Vivre*, respectively, the image and idea of modernity is embodied in the way that these characters are disciplined by their sexuality and expression of femininity. The modern Khmer every-woman is thus positioned in society according to the way that men desire her and how she negotiates that desire; whether she embraces it, like the characters of Rattana and Sulpra, both played by Saksi Sbond, or whether she chooses to negotiate her new-found freedom as a means of promoting the nation through cultural activities, like Kantha and her career as a traditional dancer. In this way, femininity is transformed into a performance of the nation, either its success and stability grounded in tradition or its downfall at the hands of dangerous female sexuality.

In *Apsara*, the tension of the modern nation state is mapped onto Kantha's physical body and into her character. Kantha is not introduced before she appears out of the blackness, on a stage as the *apsara*, celestial female being, in full costume, including glittering head piece and form-fitted traditional clothing. The dance sequence is fifteen minutes long, the lengthiest scene in the film. Therefore, the camera has time to linger in close-ups of various parts of Kantha's body and face as she executes the dance with an incredible amount of technical accuracy.⁹⁵ According to scholars Penny Edwards and Hideo Sasagawa, Cambodian dance has long been a nexus of cultural pride as well as the site of construction of a feminized traditional Khmer culture

⁹⁵ This scene utilizes dancers from the Royal Cambodian Ballet, including Princess Bopha Devi who dances her true-to-life role as the lead dancer.

(Edwards 2007, Sasagawa 2005). The gendered performance of traditional dance became a performance of nationhood that played a key role in the development of postcolonial Cambodian nationalism, especially due to the juxtaposition of royal court dance traditions with the symbolic potency of the history of the Angkorean empire (Edwards 2007, 21).



Kantha (Princess Bopha Devi) in the apsara dance, Apsara (1966)

Since the time of French colonialism, the image of the apsara, female celestial dancer, has been used as a symbol of the continuity of traditional Khmer culture across time and space.⁹⁶ So

⁹⁶ George Groslier, a high-ranking French colonial official, promoted a view of classical dance as “the only authentic Cambodian culture” while also asserting that French colonial diplomats therefore needed to use “close scientific study” of dance to “appreciate Khmer culture in ways that contemporary Cambodians could not;” (Deyasi 2007, 252). Also, female dancers’ bodies (as it was only allowed to be a female tradition at that time) became “flesh and blood apsaras” who were “repeatedly deployed to represent Cambodia at colonial exhibitions” in 1906, 1922, and 1931; Penny Edwards, “Womanizing Indochina: Fiction, Nation, and Cohabitation in Colonial Cambodia, 1890-1930,” in Julia Clancy-Smith and Frances Gouda ed., *Domesticating the Empire: Race, Gender, and Family Life in French and Dutch Colonialism*, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998) 116. These observations support the claim that gendered and racial hierarchies were a “core feature of colonial society” in the sense that they informed the transformation of local economic traditions, religious organization, education, and other political and cultural arenas (Connell 2002, 78).

it is no surprise that Kantha is the character who is portrayed as successfully negotiating the development of the nation-state by maintaining tradition, purity, and filial piety while still experiencing some of the benefits of modernity. Kantha switches between a long, lustrous wig of hair used for the *apsara* dance and a modern bob. She also has an opportunity to frolic with Phaly in a river while they playfully exchange kisses without compromising her purity, as is later confirmed when she refuses to sleep in the same bed as General Rithi after their wedding ceremony because she doesn't want to compromise herself with someone she doesn't love. Later, she is shown blissfully enjoying the Cambodian countryside as she drives a car to visit Phaly far from her new home with the General. Kantha is seemingly rewarded in the story for her steadfast support of her mother's wishes that she marry the general, and it is only Rithi's compassion that frees her from an unhappy marriage.

Kantha provides a fascinating portrayal of the tension that liberated women could potentially cause in a society in transition. While Kantha might be part of what Kate Frieson refers to as a small population of elite Khmer women who, when provided with opportunities for education and social freedoms within the late colonial and post-colonial structure, could challenge traditional concepts of femininity and female sexuality, she is also caught up in the development of nationalism in Cambodia that subsumed the idea of the “liberated woman” within a “masculinized vision of the newly independent motherland” (2000, 7). In this way, whether the nation is embodied in Kantha's modern adaptations of Khmer traditions or whether it is portrayed as endangered by the sexual freedom of Rattana and Sulpra, femininity is still subject to the structure of patriarchy in order to serve a view of the nation as masculine in its forms of technological development and feminine in its adherence to tradition.⁹⁷ Nira Yuval-

97 Khmer society has experienced different forms of patriarchy in different periods of history, going as far back as

Davis and Floya Anthias describe the important ways that women "have been implicated" in the nation, "as biological reproducers of the members of national collectives; as reproducers of the boundaries of national groups (through restrictions on sexual or marital relations); as active transmitters and producers of the national culture; as symbolic signifiers of national difference; as active participants in national struggles" (quoted in McClintock 1997, 90). Similarly, Kate Frieson observed that Cambodian society did put a "premium on racial/cultural survival" that tended to inscribe the body and identity of "woman" with the "onerous burden . . . [of being the] nation's reproducers, ideological protectors and cultural guardians' ... regardless of which administration has been in power" (quoted in Shapiro-Phim 2008, 62). The characters of Rattana and Kantha as well as Sulpra embody these implications on screen.

Rattana and Sulpra are, respectively, very powerful and very different characters on screen compared to Kantha. Saksi Sbond clearly shines in her talent for portraying women who are completely unconcerned with the way that society views their sexuality, greed, promiscuity, and social isolation. From the slightest facial expressions that the actress uses to express irritation to the cold stare she can deliver when she crashes a party, I was genuinely surprised at how the contemporary audiences at the June 2013 screenings of *Apsara* and *La Joie de Vivre* expressed their overwhelming enjoyment of her performances in the two films. Part of the liveliness that she brings to the screen comes from the tension that her characters create. Rattana and Sulpra are similar in that neither embody national culture and tradition like Kantha. Both women are not developed as characters, as the audience learns nothing of their larger family life or interests beyond parties and sex. Also, both characters are fitted with costumes that

the classical period, but, as Trudy Jacobsen explores in her book on autonomous queenship in Cambodia, dominant patriarchal structures, such as the *chhap srei* or codes of conduct for women created by King Ang Duong in the mid-nineteenth century, have never existed without challenge; (*Lost Goddesses*, 2008).

continuously highlight Saksi Sbond's curvaceous physique, which is then amplified by the camera's lustful gaze in many close and profile shots of her buttocks, hips, and breasts. The representation of hyper-sexuality is a large part of why these female characters are so powerful, yet hyper-sexuality also reveals the limits of how women can be represented on screen (Shimizu 2007, 5). With Sulpra as the center of the narrative in *La Joie de Vivre*, the portrayal of a sexually powerful woman with men wrapped in her clutches feels at once daring and conservative because it alludes to sexuality as a possible means of empowerment but then endorses a critique of that same sexual virility and the society that has already been corrupted by it.



Rattana (Saksi Sbond), slightly irritated with General Rithi, *Apsara* (1966)

It might seem that the representations of gender and modernity that I trace in *Apsara* and *La Joie de Vivre*, are obviously nationalistic purely by virtue of their creator, King Norodom Sihanouk. However, while these films seem to resolve the tensions between Khmer traditions and the process of modernization, the alternative modernity enacted on screen is actually unstable and highly contested, which is why the portrayal of domestic romance and the policing

of sexuality, femininity, and masculinity becomes a viable way to articulate the “nation” in an attempt to absorb critique and maintain social cohesion in the process of securing dominance.

On a broader level, national cultural production like cinema can be understood as a key part of the visual economy, producing meaningful images and symbols that helped to circulate gendered commentary on the nation and on modernity. That is why I find it useful to compare these two films made by the head-of-state to a highly popular film in the genre of legendary folklore, *Puthisen Neang Kongrey* (dir. by Ly Bun Yim, 1967). What does the nation look like in a film that tells a story from that site of national culture, a legendary folk tale that includes elements of magic, animism, Buddhism, elaborately designed period costumes, princes, and ogres? When the camera is not allowed to envision the architecture or wide streets full of European cars, is the nation still present? My argument is that not only do films like *Puthisen Neang Kongrey* take advantage of the experience of the spectacle of film to comment on modernity, but the national imaginary can also be explored through gender relations, and so we can see that while *Puthisen Neang Kongrey* projects a separate and unique facet of post-colonial nationalism in Cambodia, the way that the film polices sexuality acts similarly to secure the future of the modern nation, especially in terms of positioning masculinity and femininity as tense categories in need of discipline.

Policing Sexuality in the Popular: *Puthisen Neang Kongrey* (1967)

Synopsis:

Various versions of the story of the twelve orphaned sisters and their tragic fate have been told and re-told across Southeast Asia for centuries. The Khmer version of the tale is linked to the creation myth of a mountain in Kampong Chhnang province called Phnom Kongrey, named

after the young ogress who marries the character of Puthisen and, when he betrays her, dies of heartbreak. Filmmaker Ly Bun Yim tells this epic story of heroism, love, revenge, horror, fantasy, and tragedy in a fast-paced, linear narrative over two hours in length. The film opens with twelve orphaned sisters whose parents could not take care of them as they are then taken in by the powerful ogress, Santhomea, played by Saksi Sbong. She conceals her true, hideous form underneath the exterior of a beautiful woman. One day, the women are invited to the royal palace where they agree to become the wives of King Rothasith, played by a regal Nop Nem. Their happiness is ruined, however, when Santhomea appears to seduce the King, and uses magic to convince him to order that the eyes of the twelve women be gouged out. Only the youngest, Neang Pov, played by Kim Nova, is allowed to keep one eye.

Exiled to a cave, the women are forced to eat their newborn children for sustenance, until Neang Pov's child is hidden away and allowed to survive to become the title character, Puthisen, played in adulthood by Kong Sam Oeun. Puthisen swears to revenge his aunts and his mother, but Santhomea conspires to send him to the Kingdom of the Giants where her daughter, the young and beautiful ogress Neang Kongrey, played by Vichara Dany, reigns. When a hermit in the forest secretly switches a scroll that would seal Puthisen's fate upon arrival to Kongrey's palace, the two end up married instead, which causes Neang Kongrey much happiness because she has already fallen in love with Puthisen. Yet, the two lovers' fates are tragically entwined, as Puthisen must deceive Kongrey in order to steal back his aunt's eyes from Santhomea's treasure trove and return to Rothasith's palace to save his family. When Kongrey tries to follow Puthisen, the young man uses magic stolen from Santhomea's hoard to open a fissure in the earth to stop Kongrey. While Puthisen defeats Santhomea and restores his aunts and mother to their proper

place in the palace, Kongrey mourns her lost love and dies of heartache.



Original film poster for *Puthisen Neang Kongrey*, courtesy of director Ly Bun Yim (photographed by author)

Making films is Ly Bun Yim's life's work, his passion, and his playground. More than four decades after creating *Puthisen Neang Kongrey*, Ly Bun Yim can recall every detail that he wanted to include in the film when he made it in 1967, from the way that a certain ornamental head-piece needed to be constructed from simple mechanical parts so that it could spin gracefully on top of an actors head during filming to the color and texture of a bikini top that, while Mr. Ly acknowledges was anachronistic, was a popular way to promote the sexy leading lady. The director executed complete creative control over his films. Unlike other filmmakers who collaborated with cinematographers, sound technicians, set and costume designers, script writers, and producers, Mr. Ly nearly did it all. When I interviewed him and asked why he thought his films were popular at the time, he simply expressed that he had complete confidence in his

imagination. He stated:

Khmer folk tales and stories are full of magic and fantasy, things that you can only do in the movies if you can make the special effects. The more people remembered the stories during the Sihanouk era, when they read them in school books or watched a play, the more they wanted to see the stories in the movie theater. I knew that if I made the traditional stories with real effects and realistic sets to portray the things from my imagination, that people would love to watch it. And they would go to see the movie. They would pay to go see the movie many times.⁹⁸

Tilman Baumgärtel, a scholar of Southeast Asian cinemas, writes that Ly Bun Yim's imagination created a “filmic universe” unlike any other seen in the world, and that viewing *Puthisen Neang Kongrey* will leave any audience member “bewildered.”⁹⁹ As entrancing as Ly Bun Yim's popular films are, the mythical and magical qualities do not eclipse the nature of film as a medium for timely social commentary, which makes it all the more important to read this film as a social document that interacts with the contexts of the Sihanouk period, nation-building and negotiating “modernity.” There have always been social messages in myths. As David Stmeister writes, “Myths...are perhaps the very antithesis of crude political propaganda” where “meaningful propositions that have been cleverly scattered and hidden in the dynamic interplay of character, event and time” are “embedded in a narrative structure.” (2009, 401). Viridi describes this in Indian national cinema as, “form and style in the films are streamlined to meet the narrative demand of the fictional nation, which requires nonparticularized references to time and place” (2003, 32). The mythical characters of Kongrey and Puthisen are thus outside of time in a fictionalized version of the nation of Cambodia as they play out roles that are directly linked to the welfare of that nation with Puthisen being the ultimate hero. The tensions between

⁹⁸ Ly Bun Yim, filmmaker, in discussion with the author, June 2013.

⁹⁹ From Baumgärtel, “Ly Bun Yim: Puthisen Neang Kongrey (12 Sisters, Cambodia 1968),” (March 6, 2012) *Southeast Asian Film Studies Institute* blog, southeastasiancinema.wordpress.com/2012/03/06/ly-bun-yim-puthisen-neang-kongrey-12-sisters-cambodia-1968.

traditional and contemporary aspects of these roles within the national imaginary are once again depicted on the female body. Kongrey wears the jewelery and skirt of Khmer tradition, but she also wears a bikini top and a mechanical, spinning headpiece that is only possible on screen because of technological advancements in filmmaking. Sexualizing Kongrey in a contemporary fashion allows the audience to feel connected to the actress as a rising star of cinema and likely lead to ticket sales at the box-office. Thus, Kongrey as a codified myth and Vichara Dany as a sexy, modern Khmer woman are overlaid in the visual economy of the film and its reception, heightening the difference that their competing images cast against each other.

Ultimately, Kongrey's contentious position within the film's visual landscape of ancient splendor and contemporary cinematic wonder is resolved through the depiction of her dutiful loyalty to her husband, even after he betrays and abandons her. In a scene that Baumgärtel refers to as “drunken saturnalia,” Puthisen forces Kongrey to drink cup after cup of alcohol while the camera takes multiple opportunities to invade Kongrey's vulnerability by focusing in close-ups of her face as she becomes progressively more uncomfortable and sad with each swallow. This act of violence against Kongrey is followed by Puthisen's betrayal and Kongrey's death, as she realizes that she sacrificed all loyalty to her mother, Santhomea, for a man who doesn't want her. It is difficult to imagine a more clear and thorough resolution for this character than to have her last scene be a heartbreaking song of suicidal sadness, culminating in Kongrey falling to her death. In this way, Kongrey is able to maintain the purity of her love and her body only by dying, almost seeming to spite the maladjustments of the modern filmic gaze that traps her in a hypersexualized role—she literally casts herself from the screen. Kongrey evokes sympathy from the audience because she is a tragic victim who is ultimately absolved of any previous

attachments to her malevolent mother. She symbolizes a contested femininity that is ultimately charged with upholding the moral order of society, even when it means letting the wrongdoer off the hook.

Puthisen resembles many other exceptional heroes in Khmer folktales, and thus represents not so much the possible decline of masculinity, as much as the King might, as he represents the masculine force that can navigate society's complexities in order to restore a moral and righteous kingdom. Similar to Vichara Dany, Kong Sam Oeun's image as a desirable and virile male film star provokes the excitement of men in the audience while women are drawn to his good looks and emotional acuity. In this way, the narrative focuses on Puthisen as embodying the traits that an upstanding modern man should have, such as cunning, willpower, stamina, and determination. Puthisen is a self-made man, and the first half of the film depicts this through episodic sequences of his success at cock fighting and his ability to solve intellectual puzzles. Unlike his father, King Rothasith, who is emasculated by Santhomea's overwhelming and sexually charged power, Puthisen is both sexually potent and morally pure and his betrayal of Kongrey is of little consequence in comparison with his quest to save his family and defeat Santhomea.

Puthisen represents a rigid masculinity that is endangered by the type of power represented by Santhomea as a *yeak*, a magical being that is translated as ogre or giant. Once again, the casting choice of a well-known star, Saksi Sbond, as the human form of Santhomea immediately juxtaposes the traditional characteristics of the ogre-villain—magical abilities, thirst for power, and wicked tendencies—onto the hypersexualized body of the actress. Part of the viewing of the film, for the audience, is understanding the typecasting of actors in roles that are

analogous to roles in society, including Saksi Sbond in this case, who was frequently been cast and visualized as sexually promiscuous and the epitome of a modern, independent woman.

Santhomea's role then, as an autonomous ruler,¹⁰⁰ free with her use of her sexuality to manipulate men and women, and possessing economic comfort and social stability while raising a daughter, is then not far from the idea of an autonomous woman in contemporary society. Thus, Santhomea's threat to the kingdom is not just due to her evil, conniving ways, but also due to what she represents, which is uncontrollable, powerful femininity and sexuality, similar to the threat posed by women in the previous films. Santhomea can also change her shape, and when she takes on her true form; she is hairier, larger, and distinctly un-feminine in comparison with the actress Saksi Sbond who plays the human-looking Santhomea. This adds another layer to Santhomea as a dangerous figure to social cohesion based on rigid gender roles and the masculine as dominant, because her performance of gender cannot be secured. She possesses the power of androgyny through which one moment she could be feminine and one moment she could be masculine.

100 An interesting parallel can be drawn between Santhomea as a female ogre who autonomously rules her kingdom and Queen Ang Mei of Cambodia. Trudy Jacobsen has argued in her book *Lost Goddesses* (2008) that it is possible that King Ang Duong, who ruled during the mid-nineteenth century, was threatened by the previous appointment of autonomous Queen Ang Mei in 1835, and thus Ang Duong and his advisors may have felt encouraged to produce misogynistic texts in relation to the autonomous queen, who ruled during a period of Vietnamese aggression and conquest in Cambodia, in order to discredit her legitimacy; (See the chapter entitled "Hostages, Heroines and Hostilities").



Santhomea without her disguise, peeking at Puthisen in the palace, *Puthisen Neang Kongrey* (1967)

The film sets up Puthisen and Santhomea as mortal enemies and thus provides a script by which female sexuality and agency are policed and disciplined by righteous masculinity. Even the twelve sisters are not immune to the rigid structure that regulates their sexuality. Before the women are exiled, there is a scene in which they joke together about how much they enjoy life in the King's harem because they all receive the King's attention, implied as a commentary on the healthy sexual appetites of the twelve beautiful girls. Yet, it is as if twelve women with sexual appetites are themselves an abomination because they receive the harshest punishment in the film as they are blinded, imprisoned, and turned into cannibals, feeding on their children. The fixed nature of morality in this folktale, influenced by Buddhist ideas of karma and reincarnation—Puthisen represents one of the incarnations of the Buddha—makes the unfortunate fate of some characters unavoidable. Therefore, rigid gender conformity is a natural resolution within the moral universe of the story. Juxtaposing *Puthisen Neang Kongrey* to Sihanouk's two films and placing it in context with the ideas and images circulating in popular culture during the Sihanouk period provides a commentary on gender roles and sexuality that directly relates to ideas about the nation and how it and its citizens should act.

Conclusion

Masculinity and femininity do not have to be set apart as natural opposites. In fact, there is a wide and flexible range on which gender identities, masculinities, femininities, and androgyny have been and continue to be expressed in various regions within Southeast Asia, as already mentioned in the “Gender” section of Chapter 2. In the films analyzed in this chapter, fluidity between genders can point to the tension in the project of the national imaginary and ultimately fluidity is discarded in favor of more rigid categories that can be inscribed as allegories of a stable, successful nation. If the three films mentioned thus far all circulated in the visual economy at the same time, which we know that they did, then the images of hyper-sexualized women and masculine heroes were interacting with images of the modern nation to reinforce a version of modernity that is organized along strict gender lines. Scholar Anne McClintock has argued that discourses about the nation and nation-making are, at the very beginning, discourses that champion regimes of knowledge that work by defining and disciplining gender, race, and class as categories for inclusion or exclusion from the project of the nation (1997, 90). In other words, it is no accident that messages about the nation are accompanied by or injected into representations of disciplined gender roles, because in order to secure the kind of economic and social stability and growth that was discussed in Chapter 3 on the historical context of the period, the citizens of the nation must buy-in to that specific version of modernity, whether consciously or unconsciously.

While film offered a way to circulate a strictly disciplined vision of modernity, the social investment in national culture that began to grow during this period was not easily contained within rigid conceptions. With more people becoming involved in cultural production, no one

person could control who draws on what aspects of this large and dynamic category of “culture” and what other stories may arise to challenge the dominant narrative of modernity. Of course, there was a censorship board in Cambodia, inherited through the colonial board of film censorship, and director Ly You Sreang remembers how he had to send his scripts to the censors before filming could begin on any features.¹⁰¹ However, with the head-of-state himself serving up a lesson to the “prudish censors,” in the words of the 1960s film critic for *Réalités Cambodgiennes* (February 14, 1969), Tvear, and publicly screening films with overt sexuality and violence, Ly You Sreang believes that most directors, including himself, knew that, “If the King could do it, then I could do it.” Even though Sihanouk could invoke national cultural production as a viable way to encourage a particular kind of participation in the nation, he could not control either how his films were interpreted or how other filmmakers would invoke the category of national culture to produce their own, rival ideas about modernity. Once the box of national culture was opened into an arena of popular culture, a new space was created where ideas about how the nation should look, how people should express Khmer-ness, and what modernity could mean for Cambodia—all of these could be contested. In the next chapter, I will look at two films from the popular heritage cinema of Cambodia that do just that.

¹⁰¹ Ly You Sreang, filmmaker, in discussion with the author, June 2013.

Chapter 5 Cracking the Code: Transgressive Storytelling in Popular Cambodian Cinema

In the previous chapter, I analyzed three films that depict the idea of the modern nation-state mapped out through gender roles and representations of femininity, masculinity, and sexuality. The resolution of the tensions between traditional and modern Khmer-ness in the Sihanouk era seems to have been enacted through rigid gender narratives in the previous three films, but the following two films up for analysis project a very different approach to navigating the development of the modern Cambodian nation-state: *Sovannahong* (1967) directed by Yvon Hem and *Muoy Meun Alay (Ten Thousand Regrets)* (1970) directed by Ung Khan Thuok. By taking advantage of the burgeoning national popular culture movement in Cambodia in the 1960s and early '70s, some filmmakers drew on already existing ideas of fluid gender roles and androgyny to create popular cinema that transgressed strict portrayals of gender. I argue that this form of storytelling, which took cues from both Khmer folktales and progressive views on gender roles in the modern era, allowed the audience to participate in constructing a rival version of the modern nation, one with distinctly more flexible requirements for inclusion and exclusion.

Transgressing and Transforming the Hero Narrative in *Sovannahong*

Synopsis

The popular folktale *Sovannahong* tells the story of Princess Keth Soriyong, daughter of the powerful King of the Giants, and her love for Prince Sovannahong, the son of the King and Queen of an ancient kingdom in what can be assumed is now present-day Cambodia. Director Yvon Hem, who passed away in August 2012, turned the structure of a boy-meets-girl romantic melodrama on its head for his version of *Sovannahong* (1967) in which Princess Keth Soriyong, played by Som Van Soudany, journeys from her father's kingdom—the Giant King, played by

veteran actor Or Dom—in hopes of meeting the love of her life and becomes caught up in an epic adventure for the cause of true love. The film uses the quintessential heavily decorated set pieces to represent palaces and throne-rooms as well as elaborate, well-made costumes to portray traditional characters from ancient folk tales. The costumes are especially important as the different types of fabrics and style connote an androgynous prince, a giant or an ogre, the magical or the human realm. Except for a myriad of sound effects used to amplify drama or quickly switch the mood of a scene, the music in the film, mostly created by traditional Khmer instruments and often accompanied by song performances, reinforces the idea that this story takes place in an ancient time period.

At the beginning of the film, the god Indra hears Keth Soriyong's secret prayers to find true love and sends an image of the princess hidden inside a wreath of flowers to Prince Sovannahong, played by Kong Sam Oeun. While Indra has plans for the lovers to be united, Keth Soriyong's over-protective servants conspire to set a trap for Prince Sovannahong to kill him. With their fates pulled in opposite directions, Keth Soriyong considers suicide while she reels from despair, but Indra gives the young princess the power to transform herself into an androgynous human prince and tells her she must journey to find her true love and prove to him that they are meant to be together. Along the way, Keth Soriyong defeats a pair of bungling ogres and orders one of them to dress up as a woman and become her servant—the well-known comedian Mandoline portrays this character as a commonly seen Cambodian version of a man in drag as a clown. When Keth Soriyong reaches Sovannahong's parents' palace, she is faced with more challenges as people question her gender, her motives, and her background. Keth Soriyong returns to her father's kingdom so that she can trick Sovannahong into realizing how much she

really means to him. The lovers reconcile, but they must face one last opponent, the King of the Giants. In a moment of near defeat, Indra intercedes on the lovers' behalf and encourages the King of the Giants to thenceforth leave his kingdom in care of Keth Soriyong and Sovannahong.

Yvon Hem first began working on films in 1962 on a project directed by the French filmmaker Marcel Camus called *L'Oiseau de Paradis (Bird of Paradise)*, which starred Yvon Hem's sister, first-time actress Nary Hem. Following the film, Yvon and Nary Hem opened a film production studio and began to shoot films, first directed by the leading-lady and later by her brother. Yvon Hem would go on to become one of the pre-eminent directors and cinematographers of the Golden Era of Cambodian cinema with huge box-office hits like *Sovannahong* and *Abul Kasem* (1969), both based on Cambodian folklore. Yvon Hem has been quoted as saying that his storytelling on screen was influenced by both Indian films that circulated in Cambodia in the 1950s and 1960s as well as live opera, *lakhaoun bassac*, which had been popular in Cambodia long before the local film industry blossomed.¹⁰² However, we unfortunately no longer have the opportunity to ask Yvon Hem what made him interested in making films like *Sovannahong* that featured a strong female lead with a full range of emotional development and who is not defined by her sexual purity or otherwise. It is interesting that Yvon Hem's first experiences with being a cinematographer were on productions led by his older sister who made films that focused on the stories of different types of women in various socio-cultural situations, like *Kramom Khmer Leou (Young Woman of the Upland Khmer, 1968)* that depicted a young tribal woman encountering the thrills of modern society in Phnom Penh after her rich

¹⁰² Before his death in 2012, Yvon Hem had given many interviews to people interested in the history of cinema in Cambodia and his own film career. Extensive interviews can be found in Daravuth and Muan, *Cultures of Independence* (2001); and the documentary *Le Sommeil D'Or - Golden Slumbers*, directed by Davy Chou (2011).

uncle adopts her and takes her from her forest home.¹⁰³ Whether from working with his sister or from investing in talented young actresses like Som Van Soudany, Yvon Hem's rendition of *Sovannahong* presents a very different gendered narrative than the three films previously discussed. The film not only flips the narrative point of view to the female character, but there is also a prevalent commentary on the power of androgyny and transgendered characters—a power that does not lead to the potential downfall of a kingdom but, instead, leads to the protagonists achieving a kingdom all of their own.

The idea that a cinematic version of the story of Prince Sovannahong could be told from the point of view of someone other than the title character feels transgressive from the beginning. In the first few frames of the film, when Princess Keth Soriyong asks her father for permission to sojourn in the human kingdom, the viewer is introduced to a break from the well-worn conventions of folk lore centered on male heroes. Of course, like the female protagonist in Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*, Keth Soriyong's desire for new experiences could still lead to either tragedy or, at least, disempowerment. Yet, as adventurous and forthcoming as the princess is, her expression of sexual and romantic desire is not framed as impure, hypersexual, or dangerous to the society at large. Keth Soriyong does not suffer a tragic fate. In fact, when she prays on the riverbank to find love and describes herself as a “flower already bloom,” Indra grants her wish and spends the rest of the movie protecting and guiding the princess, including giving her the power to become an androgynous, seemingly de-sexualized hero so that she can travel by herself with more ease. Considering that Keth Soriyong spends half of the film dressed in the traditional pants and vest of a male hero with her hair tied up and very little make-up, there

¹⁰³ The synopsis and review, penned by Tvear, of this film can be found in the March 8, 1968 issue of *Réalités Cambodgiennes*.

are few times in the film when Som Van Soudany's body is framed as a sexual object either by the camera or by mise-en-scène elements, like costume, in the same way that Saksi Sbond's body is dissected by the camera to heighten her characters' seductive and desirable physical qualities.

For example, in one of the rarely sexualized scenes in *Sovannahong* that follows Keth Soriyong's decision to begin a sexual relationship with the prince, the camera pans out from a close-up shot of Keth Soriyong's buttocks to reveal a group of servants dressing the princess. However, while this moment has the potential to reduce the film's hero to an object of sexual desire, in this instance, a close-up of the buttocks is used as a plot device. Through a specific cultural reference, the buttocks shot reveals to her female servants that she has slept with the prince and is no longer a virgin. It is this exact moment that leads the oldest female servant to decide that Keth Soriyong's relationship with Sovannahong is too scandalous and thus the prince must be dispatched. In so doing, the cruel and conniving female servant actually goes against the plans laid out by the kind god Indra and becomes the catalyst that causes a complicated chain of events to unfold in which Soriyong must save the day and be the hero of her own story.

With Keth Soriyong as the central character of the film, she also exhibits a surprisingly large emotional range for a character out of a folk tale. From longing, despair, and anger to pride, mirth, joy, and love, the narrative structure of the film balances plot development with character development to depict both her emotional and heroic journey. It is also important to point out that the protagonist's reactions are not bound by her gender identity. For example, as a princess in her long-flowing dress, Keth Soriyong can be both haughty and politely modest, angrily deceitful and sorrowfully regretful.

As the androgynous prince, Keth Soriyong is forced to hide her true identity for a number

of reasons mentioned in the film—from the fact that men do not invite as many risks while traveling alone in the forest to the unfortunate confusion of who should really be held responsible for Sovannahong's injury at Keth Soriyong's palace—the prince convinces himself that Soriyong was planning to kill him the whole time. Even though the King and Queen, Sovannahong's parents, directly question Keth Soriyong about her gender with quips like, “Are you a girl or a boy?”, and Sovannahong himself subjects the androgynous boy-prince to mystifying trials that are meant to reveal his or her gender, Keth Soriyong escapes discovery. In the meantime, she does not become a hyper-masculine character to try and dissuade the questions, nor does she forsake emotions of righteous anger and indignation that brings on tears when Sovannahong openly gropes one of his female servants in front of her. Instead, Keth Soriyong wipes away her tears and lectures the prince on his untoward behavior towards his female servants and shows him, by example, how he should be respectful and gentle to the women in his service. This scene closes with Keth Soriyong stroking and hugging one of the women in a very tender, almost sexual way, provoking a further contemplation of how gender and sexuality can shift and adapt without undermining the moral standing of the character.



Keth Soriyong (Som Van Soudany) disguised as a prince, *Sovannahong* (1967)

In fact, throughout the film, the two characters who engage in gender-bending tactics, like costume changes, fluid sexuality, and flexible performances of masculinity and femininity, are portrayed as the most moral and heroic characters in the film—Keth Soriyong as the hero, and the ogre she trains as her right-hand man/woman. Mandoline's performance as Keth Soriyong's servant and sidekick is both hilariously over-the-top and mystifyingly transgendered. There are many moments where the ogre, dressed in an overly large bikini top tied from simple fabric and a skirt, acts as the buffoonish comedic relief to Keth Soriyong's serious, androgynous boy-prince, complete with overtly sexual hip-swinging and coquettish eyelash batting. The performance of a trans-gendered character seems to serve only as a joke for the audience. However, as the plot thickens, the ogre takes on a more serious role and tone for scenes in which he/she uses magic to protect and save Keth Soriyong from danger. In this complex portrayal, Mandoline's performance is not solely that of a comedic-ham but also of a loyal friend who

transforms from masculine, hairy ogre to slightly less hairy, hyper-feminine ogre and then to an in-between, dramatic performance in drag. The overall construction of characters who do not neatly fit the categories of male and female, masculine and feminine, draws on androgyny as a receptacle for power, a power that is dangerous because it does challenge other characters, like Sovannahong, to adapt in order to find a happy ending.



Keth Soriyong's *yeak* (giant/ogre) sidekicks (Mandoline, left), *Sovannahong* (1967)

Along with the King of the Giants, who has very few scenes at the beginning and end of the film, Prince Sovannahong is one of two important male characters in the film. With Keth Soriyong proving herself to be a better, stronger, and more righteous prince than Sovannahong in his own kingdom, it is difficult to find a rigid structure of masculinity that dominates the film, either visually or textually. Kong Sam Oeun's performance as the spoiled, rich prince Sovannahong is highly theatrical, almost on par with the exaggerated performance of the film's clown, Keth Soriyong's ogre servant. He swings wildly from being obsessively in-love with Keth

Soriyong to despising her and plotting to kill her in revenge for his own near-death experience.

In both situations, his exuberance is tamed by the princess.

When he first meets Keth Soriyong, after having taken the magical, flying golden goose to her kingdom in the sky, he attempts a romantic gesture of waking up the woman of his dreams. Instantly, Keth Soriyong admonishes him and nearly throws him out all-together, but after he apologizes and sings to her of his undying love, the princess allows him to stay the night. When he is in Keth Soriyong's good graces, Sovannahong is tender, quiet, and protective of the princess. In one scene, Keth Soriyong wakes from a nightmare in tears and Sovannahong tries to soothe her by telling her she should not regret giving her virginity to him, because he will always be loyal to her. While this moment is filmed in portrait of the two characters sitting up in bed, hair tousled, reclining amidst piles of luxurious fabrics, it is a remarkably honest emotional portrayal of the close bond between the two lovers, one of the few that the audience receives until the couple is reunited near the end of the film. Even though Keth Soriyong immediately corrects Sovannahong, telling him she merely had a nightmare, the sincerity of the moment suggests that Sovannahong takes Keth Soriyong's love very seriously and is not as happy or fulfilled without it. In the climactic scene where Sovannahong's rage spurs him to attempt murder only to realize that he has been duped by Keth Soriyong so she can teach him a lesson, Kong Sam Oeun produces a wonderful dramatic performance during a monologue in which Sovannahong contemplates life, love, wrongdoing, and spirituality, eventually deciding that his only choice is to join a monastery in hopes of redeeming even a small part of his sins against Keth Soriyong.



Prince Sovannahong (Kong Sam Oeun) and Princess Keth Soriyong (Som Van Soudany) in Keth Soriyong's bedroom, *Sovannahong* (1967)

This scene portrays a male protagonist different from the films in the previous chapter, as Sovannahong does the opposite of saving anyone from danger. He makes one wrong, harmful choice after another, seemingly because his pride was wounded by a woman he loved. Yet, at the end of the film, he is able to reflect on his own personal journey and once again ask Keth Soriyong to accept him as her husband and true love. Sovannahong does exhibit aspects of hyper-masculinity through his princely costumes, his violent behavior spurred on by rejection, and his lustful actions towards his female servants. Yet, by the resolution of the film, the Prince is allowed to inhabit a different space of masculinity that is neither an antithesis to femininity nor does it seek to control female sexuality or police fluid gender categories. Instead, Sovannahong redeems himself by apologizing for his bad behavior and then pairs up with Keth Soriyong as an equal to become the caretaker of her father's kingdom.

Both *Puthisen Neang Kongrey* and *Sovannahong* represent important texts from the folk lore traditions of not only Cambodia, but the region of Southeast Asia. Both stories are influenced by Brahmanical and Buddhist ideas about the supernatural, karma, morality, and destiny, and both resonate with cinema audiences in Cambodia translated to film. Both Ly Bun Yim and Yvon Hem have attested to the popularity of these stories as part of a canon of Khmer folk lore, and both directors have acknowledged in interviews that they knew that producing films based on folk lore would draw in the crowds.¹⁰⁴ Yet, as the mode of modernity in the developing nation-state was still under construction, these films represent very different ways to imagine what Khmer folk lore had to say about representations of gender roles and sexuality. Since Khmer folk lore was part of the “Khmer tradition” being codified as essential to the development of modern Cambodia, films that challenged the cohesiveness of the folk lore tradition could also challenge the idea of modernity. With these larger themes and images of gender and sexuality circulating in both contemporary films and films based on folk lore, it is important that a film that presents androgyny and unbound ideas of femininity and masculinity was circulating in the visual economy at the same time and with a similar amount of popular support as films that reinforced strict patterns for genders along disciplined boundaries of masculinity and femininity. In the final film that I analyze, *Muoy Meun Alay* (English title: *Ten-Thousand Regrets*, 1970) directed by female filmmaker Ung Kan Tuok, hard-lines on gender are challenged not in a fictional, historical setting but in the same modern Cambodia that is portrayed in King Sihanouk's films. This further illustrates how popular film opened a space for contesting ideas about the nation-state and modernity.

¹⁰⁴ Ly Bun Yim expressed these ideas in an interview I conducted in June 2013. Yvon Hem commented on this phenomena of the popularity of folk lore in an extensive interview in Daravuth and Muan, *Cultures of Independence* (2001).

Narrating Femininity and Performing Masculinity in *Muoy Meun Alay* (*Ten-Thousand Regrets*, 1970)

Synopsis

According to local cinema historian Chhoum Virak, there may be no surviving copy of *Muoy Meun Alay* in its entire running time.¹⁰⁵ It is likely that the beginning and the end of the film have been lost to time and deterioration, but the remaining hour or so of footage from the middle of this contemporary romantic drama presents a heart-rending, morally complex story about love and redemption. The film picks up with the main protagonist, Navy, played by Tith Vichara Dany, dressed as a boy and trying to hide her identity so that she can work for a taxi owned by Kosal, played by Kong Sam Oeun. The style of clothing and simple living circumstance of Kosal reveals that he is by no means a rich man, and his demeanor is harsh as he criticizes Navy about the way “he” sits like a girl instead of a boy. Kosal guesses at Navy's identity and says that he will play a song on his guitar if she will go outside and dance and relax with him after work. Once Navy dances until her hair flies out from underneath her cap, Kosal confesses that he has grown to truly love Navy after working with her in an intimate setting and asks her why she ever dressed up like a man. In a flashback, we learn that Navy struggled to support herself after her family suffered from tragedy, and instead of becoming the wife of a rich man who was in love with her, Thearith, played by Lim Sophan, she decided to dress as a man and make her own way in the world.

Though Navy and Kosal have a happy life together residing in Kosal's small, wooden home, Kosal becomes troubled by his inability to provide a more comfortable life for Navy and

¹⁰⁵ Chhoum Virak, student and head of Preah Soriya at Royal University of Phnom Penh, in a discussion with the author, June 2013.

proclaims that before he can ask her to become his wife, he wants to join the military and try to become the kind of man he believes that she deserves. Navy supports him and continues to make a living as a taxi driver, where she accidentally picks up her old flame, Thearith, who doesn't recognize her in her male uniform. After Navy gets word of Kosal's supposed death at the war front, she becomes confused about her true feelings and returns to Thearith in the hopes that he loves her still and will help her start a new life. Thearith is overjoyed to regain the love of his life, but just as the couple is closing in on marriage, Kosal reappears in Navy's life, like a spectre of the past she tried to leave behind. Navy is torn by her feelings for her two lovers, but ultimately she attempts to reconcile with Kosal. Yet, Kosal is haunted by events that happened in war and once again abandons Navy to find redemption on his own. After Navy finds out that Thearith had hidden a horrible secret from her—he had abandoned his first wife to marry her—she resolves to make her own destiny, driving to the warfront all alone to save Kosal.

Today, not much is known about director Ung Kan Thuok, though three of her films are still accessible, even if they have not been maintained in high quality. All three of the films take place in the contemporary setting, and when I asked Dy Saveth, veteran screen legend, 1960s icon, and filmmaker, why she thought that Ung Kan Thuok made films set in the modern period instead of the more popular *reung boran* or legendary stories set in the ancient past, she replied:

Director Ung Kan Thuok was very interested in modern stories. She did not have an interest in telling stories from the past, but in capturing what people's lives were like in the present. She was a very good storyteller and people liked her films. Maybe she was not as popular as Ly Bun Yim, Yvon Hem, or Tea Lim Koun—who all made big budget ancient legend films, but people knew her name and went to see her films because they knew that she produced high quality work.¹⁰⁶

When I spoke with avid cinema fans, filmmakers, and students during June 2013, people

106 Dy Saveth, in a discussion with the author, June 2013.

generally agreed that the life and works of female directors of the Golden Era largely have been ignored. In the case of Ung Kan Thuok, perhaps it is due to the fact that her films are not as flashy; there are few to no special effects and the stories are not pulled directly from Khmer traditional folk lore taught in the canon of high school education. Like *Muoy Meun Alay*, her films employ realistic mise-en-scène elements, like costumes, that are appropriate to her characters' economic status, as well as decisions such as the use of natural lighting and sparse but detailed stages to portray the characters at home or at night clubs. In the case of *Mouy Meun Alay*, Ung Kan Thuok uses flashback to depict a large amount of key information, and the transitions between the past and present are not always clear, which further deconstructs and challenges linear storytelling as seen in other films of the period. *Mouy Meun Alay* also involves social commentary and a critique of war, domestic relationships, ethnic tensions between Khmer and Vietnamese, and traditional ideas about marriage and masculinity. She employs voice-over to give the protagonist of *Mouy Meun Alay*, Navy, the ability to narrate her own story, her worries, fears, and joys, while the male characters are left wounded by the pre-scripted ways they are meant to fulfill idealistic, masculine roles in society—Kosal as the war hero and Thearith as the husband-provider. While her socially realist films may not have been as successful at the box-office or as trail-blazing as the creation of a visual cinematic language for Khmer folk tales like *Ly Bun Yim*, contemporary stories were still attractive simply because of the socio-cultural environment of the time. As the actress Kim Nova expressed in an interview with the journalist Tvear, she wanted to portray modern women in contemporary films because, “I’m young, and I have a sense of the times.”¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, the contemporary story of *Mouy Meun Alay* presented

107 This interview can be found in its entirety in the Dec 6, 1968 issue of *Réalités Cambodgiennes*.

a challenge to the representation of modernity seen in the films analyzed in the previous chapter.

With that in mind, I asked Davy Chou why he thought female directors and their works have not received as much attention as the works of Ly Bun Yim, Tea Lim Koun, Yvon Hem, and Ly You Sreang. Davy told me that, most importantly, for a long time people did not believe they had any films left from the female directors such as Nary Hem and Ung Kan Thuok, and even though Dy Saveth can speak to her experience as a director, she is mainly known for her acting roles that led to her stardom.¹⁰⁸ When asked about the life of female filmmakers, Ly Bun Yim and Ly You Sreang had short answers for me. They both told me that there were not many women leading in the film industry, and that the women who were making films were generally not as popular.¹⁰⁹ Dy Saveth provided me with a different perspective on the issue, she explained:

In general, it was difficult to be a female film director, because few of us had the financial resources, time, and energy to make films. I made films with my husband at the time, who spoke very little Khmer because he was from Hong Kong. In that setting, I had more creative freedom, and my husband and I were partners, so we made some films in the modern setting and some fantasy and some action films. I really enjoyed being in the contemporary stories more, because I didn't have to wear the heavy costumes or use the type of language registered for the royal court. The contemporary films were very freeing for us, as actors and directors. We could really make a movie for the people about their daily lives, including the war, violence, heartbreak, etc.¹¹⁰

If part of the freedom of making a film was in the portrayal of daily life, then Ung Kan Thuok's use of voice-over narration for a strong female lead depicts a segment of life that has,

¹⁰⁸ Davy also expressed to me in a discussion in June 2013 that only after completing post-production on *Le Sommeil D'Or - Golden Slumbers*, had he discovered that Ung Kan Thuok currently resides in France.

Apparently, for years, the director believed all of her films had been destroyed and that there was no memory to salvage of her days as a filmmaker. At the time of writing this thesis, I am still unsure about whether Ung Kan Thuok has been interviewed by any film fans or researchers, but it would be a great and important addition to further research on Cambodia's heritage films.

¹⁰⁹ Ly You Sreang and Ly Bun Yim, filmmakers, in discussion with the author, June 2013.

¹¹⁰ Dy Saveth, filmmaker and actress, in discussion with the author, June 2013.

more often than not, been silenced.¹¹¹ While stories that focus on women are common and female protagonists are not entirely rare, the voicing of a character's inner thoughts and feelings is uniquely powerful to bring agency and complexity to the representation of a female character. For Navy, her inner dialogue is an important way in which she negotiates her economic situation, her love affairs, and her choices to either listen to her elders and marry the man who can take care of her or continue to tread the path of true, passionate love. She asks herself questions like, “What will I do with these two men in my life?” and “What is my chance at happiness without true love?” Navy's narrations point to moments of tension for her character's choices as a heterosexual woman, but the voice-over also exceeds the representation of gender roles. The voice-over separates her performance of masculine and feminine roles (read: her turn as a taxi-driver versus her domestic role at home with Thearith) from her character's inner struggles, disembodying these concerns from the visual and sexual representation of a woman who has to act like a man to survive. Yet, the voice-over also heightens these uneasy negotiations for the audience. When she puts on her male costume or takes it off, the viewer is not only able to visualize the rigid difference between masculine and feminine but is also invited into the dynamic space of gender negotiation.

While the supporting characters do not question the performance of masculinity that allows Navy some trappings of independence, it is unclear whether any of the characters, besides Kosal, even know about her other lifestyle as a taxi-driver. For example, in one scene Kosal teases Navy about sitting with her legs crossed like a girl when she should know how to sit like a

111 Gayatri Spivak has been one of the most important scholars in discussing the way that women are not only subjected to oppressions on the local level, but on the transnational and global level, women of color are often the “doubly oppressed” or the “subaltern” beings in a world that is dominated by either white, male, Western patriarchy or white, female, Western feminism. Her criticism is explored in depth in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

man and the two laugh tenderly together as if it is an inside-joke of their non-traditional relationship (living together and being unmarried). Yet, Navy only wears the pants out of economic necessity and she is usually depicted in more feminine outfits of skirts and floral-printed blouses, styled in the contemporary 1960s fashion. For the audience, the costume changes become a visual doorway that leads into the moral complexity of the of the film, building on difficult decisions that Navy is faced with, including her conflicting sexual desires and genuine yearning for economic and social stability. The use of voice-over narration and flashbacks reinforces the central drama of the film that pulls the viewer into the tumultuous world of Navy as the modern Khmer every-woman. In this version, maintaining ethical rightness and a sense of purpose is not equated with guarding purity or shepherding Khmer tradition, but instead, the every-woman is depicted as a fully realized human being with no easy answers on how to make it in the new nation.



Navy (played by Tith Vichara Dany) in Kosal's house, *Muoy Meun Alay* (1970)

In a moving, climactic scene in which Navy rejoins Kosal in his small, wooden shack of a house to make him one last meal to remind them both of the times before he went to war, she

silently decides to put poison in the food she cooks for Kosal. Whereas this moment could be depicted as vindictive and crazy for Navy's character, instead, the scene unfolds slowly, with no dialogue, and the camera cuts back and forth between the tortured faces of the two lovers—Navy's quiet, dignified despair and Kosal's haunted, post-traumatic gaze. Coupled with the lonely simplicity of the shack's décor—pots and pans hung on the walls, an unadorned set of chairs and a table—the scene builds on the realistic performances by Tith Vichara Dany and Kong Sam Oeun with a searingly delicate melody that underlines their transformative realization that despite their once powerful love, they may have gone too far to be redeemed as people. For Navy, this is her realization that she cannot save Kosal from the traumas of war and she might not be able to forgive herself for contemplating killing him in her despair. For Kosal, this is his realization of how deeply affected he was by the war and how, before he can be with Navy again, he must try to find closure in his life.



Kosal (Kong Sam Oeun) and Navy (Tith Vichara Dany) in *Muoy Meun Alay* (1970)

If Navy's narration of femininity and her experience of womanhood are ways in which the film contests ideas of patriarchal modernity and traditional femininity, the other explicit way that the trajectory of the nation state is challenged is in the film's critique of idealistic forms of masculinity that are troubled by issues of class. Kosal chooses to fight in the provinces because he believes he can quickly make enough money to give Navy the life she deserves. Kosal's imagined emasculation because of his economic status serves as a critique of the dominant view of masculinity whereby a man is only properly manly when he has enough money to support his wife. Thearith, on the other hand, is not very well-developed as a character, but he does symbolize the wealth and prestige that Kosal could never provide for Navy. Thearith's house contains multiple rooms full of beautifully carved wood, a dining table, and all the comforts of contemporary life while Kosal lives in a traditional one-room house in a more rural area outside of Phnom Penh. When Thearith is introduced in the film, he tries to explain to that no woman should have to live on her own and that he can take care of her, maybe one day even marrying her. When Navy eventually decides to give life with Thearith a chance, they are framed on-screen in one scene together in plush bathrobes standing on a balcony, which contrasts very clearly with her life with Kosal.

Yet, these two men are plagued by the same rigid disciplining of masculinity, one is too poor to take care of Navy and one has been too isolated from life's struggles to understand where Navy has been and what she has gone through, making him much less appealing to her. While Thearith espouses his terms of love in relation to economic comfort and stability, Kosal builds a partnership with Navy only to be tormented by his own belief that he is not man enough for her. Navy never has to make any demands on the men in her life for them to already have ideas about

what kind of men they are supposed to be. In the process, the film presents a critique about those very ideals that cause emotional turmoil in the lives of the characters.

In the context of the previous structures of gender and society circulated in films analyzed earlier, the intentional way that Navy challenges rigid ideas of femininity and Kosal and Thearith serve as critiques of how masculinity is supposed to be performed in society, *Muoy Meun Alay*, as a popular film, provides an alternative way of participating in the nation, in this case, the alternative is to be critical about what citizenship means in terms of class and gender.

In some ways, the representations of the modern nation in *Muoy Meun Alay*, both as symbolized in the gender commentary in the film as well as in the eye of the camera as it maps urban spaces and the war front, speak more directly to the images of modernity in King Sihanouk's films. It seems to stand that however the modern nation was going to be portrayed by the visual economy of the Golden Era, whether through allegorical folk tales mapping the tensions of female sexuality within Khmer tradition or through contemporary stories that deal with domestic tensions between femininity and masculinity, no dominant paradigm of the Cambodian nation could maintain hegemony without challenge.

Conclusion

By placing the previous five films discussed in Chapters 4 and 5 together in conversation with each other, I hope to have revealed some aspects of how a visual economy of the Golden Era has functioned, by privileging the circulation of images of the nation imbued in contrasting trends of portrayals of codified traditions and emerging modernities. While films can not be enclosed by a single set of interpretations, I have argued that Cambodia's heritage cinema was highly concerned with gender roles, tradition, modernity, and the state of the developing nation.

There is no universal formula for how and why people would have liked these different kinds of movies portraying strong female leads and strong male leads. However, in general, by tracing larger socio-cultural and political-economic patterns that produced certain fields of vision related to the nation, I conclude that popular cinema opened a space where the public could both visualize the nation through aggressive masculinity while embracing more independent female roles and more flexible fields of sexuality and gender.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the principles of visual economy—organization of production, circulation of goods, and mechanisms through which images accrue value within cultural, symbolic, or monetary arenas—can be at odds with each other and produce and reveal tensions that splinter the legitimacy of competing ideologies. In Cambodia of the 1960s and '70s, the dominant ideology governing the images of the modern nation-state seems to have been concerned with strict gender roles and protecting Khmer traditions while pursuing industrial development and economic wealth. Images that could capture, for example, either the visuality of the modern nation-state in newly-constructed, urban spaces or the codified visual elements of Khmer tradition were produced and consumed as a way of disciplining and controlling participation in the nation. Yet, by playing on the ways in which those images could become valuable—using things like special effects, new technologies, desirable film stars, popular music, re-tellings of popular folk tales, and more—popular films became sites of cultural production that revealed the tensions threaded through the project of the nation. In the process, the idea of the nation remained under construction, up for debate, and unsettled.

This concept of visual economy reveals how contentious the construction of the nation-state was and it recalls a conversation about how imagined communities function. At this

particular time of history, people in Cambodia were beginning to imagine themselves into the Khmer community that existed within the boundaries of the nation-state of Cambodia. At the same time, issues arose of what citizenship should look like, and who and what could be included and excluded from the nation according to what rules and norms. Many of these developments were structural in nature, regulated by laws and military forces, but people also had a powerful creative and ideological investment in the new community/nation of Cambodia. However, as this creative energy was consolidated into arenas of cultural production like popular cinema, the result was messy and full of gender commentary, ambiguity, and tension. These are nuances of the idea of the “imaginary” that should not be left out of a conversation on what role the imaginary plays in social cohesion and social disruption, especially in terms of dominant norms and how agency can arise.

As a scholar, a member of a community, and a film fan, agency is very attractive to me as a concept, because it is both political and imaginary. When we can imagine different possibilities, those possibilities become possible realities. This is incredibly important for the sake of interrupting dominant and oppressive discourses on race, gender, and class. In a time and context when political, social, and economic structures were subject to drastic and quick changes due to nation-building, international relationships, and the sped-up tempo of the global circulation of elements of pop culture—perhaps as reactions, reflections, and attempts to influence the contexts in which we live—both the blatant reinforcement of gender categories and the direct challenging of them were viable ways of negotiating modernity.

Chap 6 - Conclusion

This thesis has taken, at its heart, the task of bringing to life the rich experience of viewing Cambodian heritage films. As most readers might never have an opportunity to engage with films from Cambodia's Golden Era of cultural production, this project has endeavored to restore some access to a part of global film heritage that has existed for far too long in the shadows. Contemporary reflections on heritage cinema can challenge the way we see and experience our past and present histories and our past and present selves. At the outset of this project, I set out to deconstruct the oppressive euro-centric view of global film heritage, and, by locating and analyzing Cambodian cinema within its own unique local and global contexts, I displaced the power dynamics of Western cultural imperialism that have long relegated “foreign” cinemas to the footnotes of our histories. Even within the field of studies on Cambodia, much of the history of the production and consumption of pop-culture, such as the cinema and music industries, has yet to be interrogated in a critical and productive way. Through rigorous and thoughtful engagement with the historical contexts of Cambodian cinema and the films produced during the Sihanouk era, this project questions the cohesiveness and efficacy of studies on Cambodia that do not take the complex mechanisms of the visual economy into account.

While there are many avenues still to be cultivated for this kind of critical analysis, I honed in on the prominent themes of romance and contested gender roles that appear in Cambodian cinema from this era and, through close comparative analysis of five films, explored how tensions in the national imaginary during a period of fast-paced social and economic development were mapped onto fabled and contemporary romances. In this way, I showed how critical reflections on heritage cinema can reveal an access point to a more complex

understanding of post-colonial nationalism in Cambodia.

From the very beginning of this project, I was inspired by a fascinating moment in history, and I attempted to follow through with difficult questions meant to address the complex puzzle of that historical moment—not as a means to explain that moment, but as a way to chart the intricate weavings of society, economics, politics, and culture in daily life. In order to do this, I attempted to reduce the scope of my questions. First, I decided to trace and connect representations of gender and the nation across various films. Second, I implemented three key frames of analysis, pop-culture, gender, and the visual economy, that created boundaries for this project and also helped to reveal vital intersections between the national imaginary, the contested realm of gender stereotypes and disciplined sexualities, and the experience of modernity. To effectively engage with the complexities of visual pop-culture and structures of gender that informed the visual and narrative aspects of the national imaginary, I explored the historical contexts that shaped and organized the visual economy of the Sihanouk era, a time of both historical rupture and cultural continuity.

Chapters one, two, and three laid the foundation for a close examination of representations of gender, sexuality, and the nation in the five films featured in chapters four and five. By examining some of the ways in which each film constructs and contests masculinity, femininity, sexuality, and societal gender roles, I traced patterns of rigid stereotypes and disciplined sexualities in *Apsara* (1966), *La Joie de Vivre* (1969), and *Puthisen Neang Kongrey* (1967) that provided a visual and conceptual link between the desires of the national imaginary—to construct a stable, modern nation—and the audiences experience of the tensions imbricated in participating in the project of nationalism. I then considered how these “hard-line” patterns

were disputed and transformed by transgressive narratives such as *Sovannahong* (1967) and *Muoy Meun Alay* (1970), and how this arena of cultural contestation reveals a picture of a national imaginary that was under construction, grappling with and resolving tensions related to gender roles, sexuality, modernity and the nation in a piecemeal fashion. Along the way, I introduce some nascent aspects of the production and audience reception of these films both from a historical-archival and contemporary point of view, leaving a wide opening for more research on this aspect of Cambodia's film heritage. However, the voices of Khmer filmmakers, fans, and scholars scattered throughout all five chapters helps to bridge the memories and reflections in the present so that we can hopefully experience the ruptures of the past in a more cohesive and therapeutic way.

Open Ended Conclusions

The conclusion that I have come to in this thesis may not be radical or revolutionary, but it hopefully turns to a new blank page in an open-ended discussion of heritage cinema in Cambodia—that is, that popular cinema's expansion in Cambodia during the Sihanouk era cracked open a space where narrative, feature films could present images and stories that transgressed strict representations of gender and sexuality, representations that were, at the time, being used to mediate the imagined relationship between being Khmer and being modern. The challenge to gendered stories of the modern nation was also a challenge to the imagination of modernity and provided a different way to negotiate citizenship in the nation-state. However, as Arjun Appadurai reminds us, “work of the imagination...is neither purely emancipatory nor entirely disciplined but is a space of contestation in which individuals and groups seek to annex the [local and] global into their own practices of the modern” (2001, 4). In this way, the realm of

the imagination is always fluctuating between accepting the status-quo and refusing it, but both are viable forms of agency. To work with these concepts of agency in the context of Cambodia's heritage cinema is to illuminate how one dominant narration of gender stereotypes and one dominant view of the nation cannot have had a firm hold on the narration. Instead, because of the constant possibility of tension between conservative gender codes and more playful and transgressive codes, participation in the imagination of the nation becomes a fascinating, dynamic process that is inherently unstable and is constantly being re-articulated. For people, like me and my friends in the Cambodian community, as we try to make sense of what Khmer-ness looks like today or what my friends want it to look like, this conclusion hopefully holds the potential for empowerment. Whatever Khmer-ness looks like, whatever the participation in the community looks like, it doesn't have to be a strict, unchanging answer. It can be negotiated and critiqued, which has, for quite a while, been a valuable and accepted mode of negotiating modernity in Cambodia.

Cambodia's Heritage Films Today

While researching heritage films in Cambodia, setting up interviews, and volunteering for the film festival that brought over 500 people to screenings of Cambodian films that had not been seen in a proper movie theater for forty years, I had the opportunity to interact with many people who are involved in the contemporary film scene in Cambodia. Some, like Tilman Baumgärtel, have described Cambodia's current film industry as on the “brink of extinction” (2013, 101). In the early 1990s, the majority of Cambodian film production companies went out of business as their profit margins shrank most likely do to a few key factors such as the lack of effective copyright laws and lack of enforcement of existing copyright law for local producers, a flood of

pirated foreign and Cambodian films in local market places, and the growth of the television industry coupled with the rise of individual family television ownership.¹¹²

Historically, there are other obstacles to reenergizing the film industry as well. Cambodia has not yet been able to sustain proper film schools within public or private universities, which leads to a lack of skilled technicians and very little support for creative arts as a career path, and the issue with copyright law has continued to the present day and is discussed at length in local film, music, publishing, and media industries.¹¹³ I was not originally interested in the state of the contemporary film industry in Cambodia, as I was attempting to keep myself focused on the goals of my research project on heritage films. Yet, I was routinely asked why I was interested in Cambodia's heritage films when the present-day films were of such poor quality in comparison to foreign films and with the consideration that the Cambodian film industry was suffering from creative anemia? Thus, from the very start, my field research experiences revealed that Cambodia's cinema history is a contentious topic among professionals involved in the contemporary film industry and young people who are interested in participating in the industry. People seemed to feel the need to take a stance on heritage films while talking about the potential growth and trajectory of the contemporary industry.

The members of the cinema group Kon Khmer Kon Khmer, which organizes an annual film camp for youth to work in groups to produce short films, going on four years, felt that heritage films were a piece of history that should be preserved but that the films did not have a large part to play in contemporary society since technological developments had far surpassed

¹¹² Kirstin Wille discusses the phenomenon of the dramatic decrease in film production in Cambodia in section 1.7, "1990s Crash Down" of *Film Production in Cambodia* (2009, 38).

¹¹³ These comments came to me by way of personal interviews I conducted with filmmakers, students, and fans of cinema, many of whom have been cited previously.

what existed in the 1960s.¹¹⁴ On the other hand, members of the Preah Soriya student group expressed to me that they felt exactly the opposite was true—that Khmer youth should all have a chance to see parts of these films from the 1960s to help inspire them to create new stories that capture the essence of what it means to be Khmer to them today.¹¹⁵ When I brought up questions of the quality of storytelling in heritage films to Kon Khmer Kon Khmer and Sophorn Lim of the Bophana center, the response across the board was that heritage films may be able to present a unique opportunity for youth to learn about storytelling that created dynamic, entertaining movies, as compared to the general agreement that contemporary films have stagnant plot lines and slow pacing, but that the issue of technical quality would be a distraction, if not an obstacle to overcome.

Another important issue that resurfaced again and again was the lack of audience participation in contemporary cinema culture. Many people pointed out to me that unlike in the 1960s, Cambodians today are used to staying at home and watching TV, if they were going to watch anything at all. The young people I met who are involved in the film industry are slowly reaching out and fostering educational programs and screening events to try to develop a larger community of people who appreciate not just Cambodian cinema because it is Cambodian but because cinema is a transformative experience.

On both the filmmaking side and the audience side, the major issue seems to be a lack of educational opportunities, whether formal or informal, government or non-government settings. When I spoke with Ly Bun Yim, Ly You Sreang, Dy Saveth, Chhay Bora and Davy Chou, all

114 Sum Sithen and Picheat Rithea, producers and filmmakers as well as founding members of Kon Khmer Kon Khmer, in discussion with the author, June 2013.

115 Members of Preah Soriya film preservation, history, and education student group at the Royal University of Phnom Penh, in discussion with the author, June 2013.

successful filmmakers in their own right, each had a different idea about how much time it would take before Cambodia had the ability to sustain a film school with training in all aspects of cinema, technical and creative. Chhay Bora guessed it would be another ten years, but Davy Chou hopes for better developments in the next five years. Dy Saveth feels that the progress being made in the industry right now is a good cause for hope that even without a film school, Cambodia will continue to produce quality films more and more each year. Ly Bun Yim and Ly You Sreang both seemed disheartened by some past efforts to re-establish cinema training for Cambodian youth that proved unsustainable over a long period. The consensus was that, in the meantime, small bursts of energy from individuals or groups who can provide fresh perspectives or programs related to film and film education are highly valuable as a way to keep pumping the life-blood of creativity into spaces where people have an opportunity to access it.

I believe that film heritage has an important role to play in contemporary film education in Cambodia. Not only are heritage films fascinating and fun examples of cinema that can be analyzed and broken as teaching materials, but also talking about Cambodian filmmaking from the past as if it deserves the attention, which it does, might have the effect of instigating a different kind of confidence in young people interested in film and other creative expression. Perhaps the message is simple, that if those people in the 1960s could act on their desire to make films that captured the unique and dynamic characteristics of what it meant to be Cambodian in their imaginations, then it is up to the current generation to take the same leap of faith, trusting their imaginations to create new films with new stories that capture their experience of the present. Jerry, one of the female students members of Preah Soriya, explained to me how she sees film heritage as a part of arts education:

We, the Khmer youth, want to tell our stories. Of course we want to tell our stories. We just don't know the right way to tell them, or no one gives us an opportunity to practice and to learn. But the obstacle, of course, is that we have no film school. But the other obstacle is that we don't know that much about our own history. We don't know about old films and directors like Ly Bun Yim and Yvon Hem. Maybe our parents know, but they would not think to talk about it nowadays because it doesn't seem important or they think we would not be interested. That's why I joined this group. When I learned about this history, I got really inspired to do something so that I could tell people, my friends, and family, about this history we have. I think if more students knew about it, like we are trying to show them through showing the few films we have, then some people would be inspired like me. Slowly, we can grow more people like us, and together we can ask for a film school, we can ask for more opportunities to write our stories and make films.¹¹⁶

116 Jerry Oun, university student and member of Preah Soriya at the Royal University of Phnom Penh, in discussion with other students of Preah Soriya and the author, June 2013.

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