

New Khmer Cinema: Generative Nostalgia and Community Encounters in the Phnom
Penh Film Scene

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A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

University of Washington

2023

Committee:

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

International Studies: Southeast Asia

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Abstract

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The Cambodian film scene is undergoing a renaissance in the 21st century. This thesis examines the current trends of Cambodian independent cinema, with particular emphasis on community building and film discourse. As younger generations of artists take over, they offer new stories—drawn from their own experiences—which rethink the Cambodian present’s relationship with its past and imagine possibilities for the future. Drawing from ethnographic research, informal conversations, participation in film discussions, film festival programming, and film text analysis, I map an emerging ecosystem of Cambodian cinema that generates community at critical hubs for encounter

between artists, audiences, and academics. This thesis is situated in time and place through several Phnom Penh film events and film spaces in the summer of 2022, including a book launch, film festival, cinema community center, and film club. These sites all constitute essential venues for film viewing and discussion, and reveal different practices of relating to cinema within a vibrant and growing film community. Drawing from my observations, I propose a framework of “generative nostalgia” through which to understand the current engagements with 1960s cinema and popular culture in the Cambodian arts today—a past that still lives in the present. Generative nostalgia represents a nostalgic practice grounded in the material conditions of the now, pragmatically pulling past cultural productions and aesthetics into present as a means to bridge the ruptured cultural continuity caused by the Cambodian genocide. It is a nostalgia that looks back only so it can look forward, trading sentimentality for determined practicality. Through close examination of Cambodian independent cinema and the concept of generative nostalgia, this thesis showcases the resiliency, expression, and innovation of Cambodia’s film community.

Acknowledgements

This is a long list, but it must start with my thesis advisor, Jenna Grant, whose generosity and thoughtful mentorship has guided me through this entire program—from Seattle to Phnom Penh to Seattle again. Her important work and exceptional care for Cambodia continues to inspire.

Next, I must thank my professors, all of whom have shaped my thinking and intellectual growth in their own ways. They are Nazry Bahrawi (who I also thank for sitting on this committee!), Celia Lowe, Christoph Giebel, Vince Rafael, Priti Ramamurthy, and Yomi Braester.

My Khmer teacher, Yin Luoth, deserves special mention. His enthusiasm for Khmer language and literature, and his immense care for his students are truly inspiring.

While on the subject of Khmer class, I thank the beginning and intermediate Khmer classes for their unbelievable patience with an inexperienced teacher and for their enthusiasm for Khmer cinema and music. They showed me exactly why this work matters.

Of course, my cohort—my comrades in writing—deserve a huge shoutout! Jafar Daniel, Ben Rost, and Teshan Laucirica were a fantastic crew to work with and to relax with. Teshan, whose encyclopedic knowledge of Seattle made moving here far less daunting and a whole lot more fun. Ben, who braved the challenges (and joys!) of Nou Hach and fieldwork with me through Seattle, Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, and Battambang. And without the long hours “posting up”—and the never-ending search for the best writing spots on campus—with Jafar, this thesis could not have been written.

My greater UW community contributed so much, intellectually and otherwise. Thank you to Thyda Ros, Chiara Benitez, Adrian Alarilla, Sambath Eat, and Elias Greendorfer

In Cambodia, there are too many to count. I thank the Anti-Archive team for their incredible generosity with their time, their ideas, and their work. Davy Chou, Kavich Neang, Danech San, Kanitha Tith, and Daniel Mattes all shared so much and shaped this thesis in innumerable ways. I am also grateful for Ly Sokvichea, Sansitny Ruth, Dara Kong, Vitou Mut, Sopheap Pich, and Sam I-shan.

For friendship, advice, and critical support from afar, Allan Zheng and Ali Ibrahim are unmatched.

Finally, my family—Mom, Dad, Serena, and many more—who were with me every step of the way, from California, Cambodia, and Illinois.

Table of Contents

Prologue: The Everything Will Be OK Incident	1
Introduction: The Khmer Renaissance	3
Chapter Outline	7
Chapter 1: Excavating National Cinema	10
Contextualizing Cambodia's Cinema Present	10
Against Nostalgia	18
Generative Nostalgia in Practice	25
Interlude: Golden Slumbers	28
Chapter 2: Faded Reels	30
The Book in Context	30
The Academic: LinDa Saphan's Desired Public	32
The Filmmaker: Davy Chou's Aspirational Audience	36
Interlude: New Land Broken Road	39
Chapter 3: Cambodia International Film Festival	41
CIFF in Context	41
The Festival as Practice	43
Institutional Framing	48
At the Grassroots	53
Takeaways from CIFF	66
Interlude: Sunrise in My Mind	67
Chapter 4: Informal Spaces	69
Cine Sharing at Cine Hub	69
Anti-Archive, Dambaul, and Building an Arts Community	80
Emerging Community, Emerging Industry	86
Conclusion: Toward a Cinematic Future	88
Bibliography	91

Prologue: The Everything Will Be OK Incident

On a warm July night, the Institut français du Cambodge is buzzing with activity as a crowd gathers in its courtyard, filling the air with animated chatter and a sense of anticipation. Tonight is the second-to-last night of the Cambodia International Film Festival, and an eclectic mix of artists, students, movie fans, Cambodians, foreigners are here to see Rithy Panh's latest, the Silver Bear winning *Everything Will Be OK* (2022). As showtime approaches, the guests file into the Institute's theater, leaving no seat empty—an audience convened for the shared experience of cinema. And for Phnom Penh cinema fans, Rithy Panh is an event.

The film is a harrowing experience, a dystopian meditation on violence, atrocity, and the steady creep of totalitarianism. Its form is familiar, borrowing the clay figure diorama aesthetic that *The Missing Picture* made famous and dealing in the archival footage experimentation Panh is known for. In it, he imagines a totalitarian future during which animals have taken control, enslaving their human former slavers in kind. Panh is relentless, confronting the audience with a medley of audiovisual horror—graphic images of animal slaughter, of 20th century war crimes, underscored with an oppressive cacophony of animal shrieks. What results is a 90 minute collage of extreme violence, a poetic indictment of totalizing mass surveillance and late capitalism. And the audience loves it.

As the credits roll and the lights come on, the festival director—a Frenchman named Cédric Eloy—walks out onto the stage. He has a surprise for us, he says, and

Rithy Panh enters the room to the shock and applause of the audience. The surprise Q&A flows like a typical post-screening discussion, as many take the chance to ask the legendary director questions about the film—the usual how’s and why’s. Then one question changes the whole atmosphere of the room. An Australian curator wants to know about the film’s narration. “Why wasn’t the narration in Khmer? I don’t understand why you did the film in French,” she says harshly, “The French were your oppressors!” The theater is silent. Panh replies, a little less calmly than usual, “Because I am French! Yes, I am Khmer, but I am also French. The Khmer Rouge were my oppressors and they spoke Khmer!” The crowd applauds.

Word of the incident spreads quickly and sparks discussion in the Phnom Penh artist community. How could this foreigner suggest that Rithy Panh, international champion of Cambodian cinema, is not sufficiently Khmer? And not only that, but to have the audacity to publicly argue with him, to try to enforce her perspective over his?

The *Everything Will Be OK* incident recalls memories of colonialism—a white foreigner attempts to speak for and over a Khmer artist. But, also, what makes a Khmer identity? What makes a Khmer film? For a developing film industry, maybe even a developing national cinema, these questions are profoundly relevant.

Introduction: The Khmer Renaissance

The Cambodian arts scene is experiencing a renaissance in the 21st century. As the horrors of the 20th century fade into historical memory, younger generations of artists are raising their voices, asserting their roles in writing the story of Cambodia. Phnom Penh, the country's capital and largest city, is an essential character in this story, emerging as a dynamic site through which many of these artists explore their material realities as the reconstruction generation. This community is small but tight-knit and growing—led by an artistic vanguard that, in roughly the past decade, has built a strong community foundation and raised the international profile of Cambodian modern art with their success.¹

Among the artistic disciplines, Khmer independent cinema has become especially prominent, from the pioneering documentary work of Rithy Panh to the arthouse dramas of Davy Chou, Kavich Neang, and many others. In particular, the phenomenal international successes of Neang's *White Building* (2021) and Chou's *Diamond Island* (2016) and *Return to Seoul* (2022), commanding attention at the heights of global cinema—at Cannes, Venice, in publications like *The New York Times*—have put beautiful, thoughtful, and innovative Cambodian films in front of audiences around the world.

Today, in 2023, the Cambodian film industry appears to be in a transitional moment. Through the work of major film institutions like the Bophana Audiovisual

¹ Grant 2022, 162

Resource Center, the Cambodia Film Commission (CFC), and the Cambodia International Film Festival (CIFF), as well as the more grassroots efforts of filmmakers and scholars in the community, a cinematic ecosystem has begun to emerge. Spaces for distribution and discussion are increasing, and so are audiences for independent film. It is at these various hubs that community forms, that education and collaboration become accessible to even more aspiring artists.

With this thesis, I examine the current trends of the Cambodian film industry, focusing particularly on the practices and aspirations of filmmakers and audiences as they build cinema community together. To do this, I draw mostly from research conducted in Cambodia during the summer of 2022, where I attended film screenings and events at CIFF, visited film distribution spaces, participated in events at cinema community centers, and spent time with filmmakers and artists in various informal settings. I center my analysis around a few primary sites: the 11th CIFF; the launch of LinDa Saphan's book *Faded Reels*; the film community center Cine Hub; and the office of Anti-Archive, the prominent indie production company and film collective. These sites provide a cross-section of film discourse from institutions, artists, academics, and film students. My analysis is based on ethnographic observation, informal conversations, participation in film discussions, film festival programming, and film text analysis.

This thesis has two main threads— I first take up the question of nostalgia in Cambodian modern arts to argue for a pragmatic framework which understands nostalgia as a generative tool for community building, forward-looking rather than

sentimental in its orientation toward the past. I build mostly from the work of Cambodian diaspora scholars Khatharya Um and Y-Dang Troeung, who both address nostalgia in their respective studies of diasporic formation and refugee epistemology. Though their analyses examine nostalgia as it manifests in the Cambodian diaspora, their insights also offer possibilities for understanding nostalgia in the local arts scene, in part due to the prominence of diasporic artists and scholars in the contemporary vanguard. I draw on Nazry Bahrawi's engagements with the restorative/reflective nostalgia frameworks of Svetlana Boym in his analysis of Malay nostalgia in Singapore. Based on my observation of Khmer contemporary arts, I propose a form of "generative nostalgia" that neither seeks to reproduce the past nor reveal contradictions in the present—rather, it appropriates the aesthetics of the past as a foundation for the present, to build possibilities for the future. The important distinction is that generative nostalgia is almost *unnostalgic* in its engagement with the past. If "nostalgia" typically calls to mind wistful sentimentality, idealism, or reactionary impulses, this is certainly not that. I argue that, for the Cambodian cinema community, nostalgic impulse is rooted in a clear understanding of the material conditions of present-day Cambodia and its film industry. Through pragmatic engagements with 60s cinema and pop culture, the foundations for new community and new expression can be built.

The second focus of this thesis is to conduct a study of community formations in Khmer cinema through spaces of encounter, such as a film festival and a film club. I draw primarily from Jasmine Nadua Trice's brilliant study of alternative cinema distribution

and audiences in Manila, which provides important insights into the aspirational nature of alt film audiences and the role of urban space in film distribution and viewing. I aim to demonstrate how cinema community emerges through encounters at film events and how these events function as hubs within a broader cinema ecosystem. Though I draw on comparisons with Trice’s study of Manila, a city with a larger and more developed film culture, I must stress that Phnom Penh is not lesser—its artists are building something new, different, and Cambodian. Phnom Penh is also connected to other film communities in the region, as its filmmakers work alongside counterparts in other Southeast Asian countries, sharing ideas and knowledge, and engaging in co-production.²

I need also acknowledge the limitations of my project and of knowledge production. I approach this topic from a position in the Cambodian diaspora—my critical stance following what Jasmine Trice calls “passionate observation,” the entanglement of academic distance and personal investment.³ This balance is a challenging one, and certainly informs my project in countless ways. One of these is through the events I chose to attend during my summer of research—my analyses are built from these decisions. Despite these limitations, I hope to capture the spirit of Cambodian cinema and its many artists, to bring more of the community into the academic conversation, and to open up new possibilities for future scholarship.

² Trice 2021b

³ Trice 2021a, 30-31

Chapter Outline

This thesis is composed of four chapters, beginning with an overview of Cambodian cinema history before moving through examinations of nostalgia and discussions of Phnom Penh film events held during the summer of 2022. After Chapter 1's focus on history and nostalgia, each following chapter revolves around specific film distribution sites and the encounters that took place in them.

In Chapter 1, I trace the history of Cambodian cinema from the colonial period through today, and examine Norodom Sihanouk's important role in developing early film culture. From there, I address the consequences of genocide for Cambodian culture and cinema, and how this circumstance gave rise to the nostalgic tendencies found in present-day arts and arts scholarship. I then develop the idea of generative nostalgia in the Cambodian film scene, a framework that foregrounds material conditions—of artists, of Phnom Penh, of the film industry—and highlights the pragmatic perspectives of filmmakers and scholars seeking to build an engaged, resilient cinema community.

Chapter 2 focuses on the launch of Cambodian film scholar LinDa Saphan's 2022 book *Faded Reels: The Art of Four Cambodian Filmmakers, 1960-1975*. Her book is a landmark in Cambodian film studies, significant for its critical analysis of early Khmer cinema—a first at this scale—and for its publication (in English and Khmer) in Cambodia, an unfortunately rare occurrence in Cambodian cultural studies. It launched in July 2022 with a major event, accompanied by a program of related film screenings. In this chapter, I discuss the launch event and circumstances of the book's publication,

Saphan's vision for the book and for a Cambodian art public, and how Davy Chou, director of *Golden Slumbers* (2011), envisions new audiences for Khmer cinema.

In Chapter 3, I consider practices at the Cambodia International Film Festival, focusing on the 2022 edition. First, I outline CIFF's history and purpose then consider the festival as an industry and community building site and practice. I examine the festival's use of urban space, considering how particular audiences may be constructed through the organization of screening venues, then move into a discussion of the festival's mode of production—the stakeholders in its growing audiences. I look at several specific institutions and their framing of the festival's role through public statements, suggesting what type of film audiences they aim to produce. Then, I turn to audience and filmmaker practices, analyzing a cross-section of discussions taking place at several festival events.

With Chapter 4, I move to informal, more grassroots spaces for film community. I discuss Cine Hub, a new venue for film screenings, networking, and education, focused on building an engaged film community and encouraging young filmmakers. I offer analysis of several events held at Cine Hub last summer, taking a closer look at discussions between presenters and their audiences, and how they contribute to an atmosphere of collaboration and shared learning. Then, I discuss Anti-Archive's community building practice through an analysis of their film club.

Through these discussions, I aim to present a broad view of present Cambodian independent cinema, to introduce a wider range of community voices and discourses than currently represented in most scholarship. At the same time, I attempt to bring

specificity to my analysis by grounding it in encounters—between filmmakers, audiences, academics, institutions—which are a window into practices and desires of individuals in the community. I hope this thesis can be a record of 2022’s summer of cinema and of the dedication and care of the many artists named in its pages.

Chapter 1: Excavating National Cinema

Cela peut paraître absurde de faire des films dans un pays où il n'y a même plus de cinéma, ni de salle de théâtre. La violence économique est là, les rêves sont brisés. Alors pourquoi faire des films? Pour retrouver mon pays bien sûr.

Rithy Panh⁴

Contextualizing Cambodia's Cinema Present

A Brief History of Cambodian Cinema

To understand Cambodia's cinema present, it is necessary to first understand its cinema past. The history of Cambodian cinema in many ways mirrors the modern history of Cambodia itself. Cinema's presence in Cambodia traces back to medium's early days, with the establishment of the country's first movie theater by French colonizers in 1909.⁵ Cinema quickly became popular with Phnom Penh locals, though the first Cambodian-produced films would not appear until the 1940s.⁶ There was, however, an established tradition of French colonial ethnographic film, and Cambodia was no exception. A generally state-sponsored industry, early French Indochinese documentary cinema exploited local peoples and cultures to construct a prosperous image of the colony, both to glorify the colonial state and to promote tourism.⁷

⁴ Panh 2001, 393. "It may seem absurd to make films in a country where there is no longer a cinema or a theater. There is economic violence here, dreams are shattered. So why make films? To find my country of course." (my translation)

⁵ Muan and Ly 2001, 94

⁶ Ly and Muan 2001, 143

⁷ Muan and Ly 2001, 96

The turn to Cambodian-produced films occurred throughout the 1940s and 50s, before taking off in the 1960s. Then-King Norodom Sihanouk was an early adopter of cinema and is often considered the first Cambodian filmmaker. Following independence in 1953, Sihanouk would establish himself as a major patron of the arts, including cinema. Cambodian cinema went commercial in the 1960s, during now-chief of state Sihanouk's Sangkum government. Sihanouk was himself a prolific filmmaker during this period, and the decade saw the rise of a local Khmer film industry through the efforts of such figures as Yvon Hem, Ly Bun Yim, and Van Chann. This period of flourishing postcolonial arts would later become known as the "golden age"⁸ of Cambodian cinema and music, although it must be noted that filmmaking was at this time mostly a "bourgeois, elite affair"⁹—made and consumed by an urban elite class. Sihanouk's films were overtly political, created to celebrate his post-independence nation-building.¹⁰ With his dual purpose of glorifying the new, independent nation and asserting Khmer culture's role in giving it strength, Sihanouk's project can be considered the first Khmer national cinema—and the growing film industry was a critical part of it.

Cambodian cinema, like the country, took a tragic turn in the 1970s. Under Khmer Rouge rule, cinema suffered the same fate as other forms of popular culture—neglected, destroyed, its artists killed. Most of the films produced during the "golden age" of Khmer

⁸ There is broad cultural consensus on this point, but for specific examples in art and scholarship, see Davy Chou's film *Golden Slumbers* (2011), John Pirozzi's film *Don't Think I've Forgotten* (2014), LinDa Saphan's book *Faded Reels* (2022).

⁹ Saphan 2022, 246

¹⁰ Saphan 2022, 245-6

cinema were lost during this period. Some reels were destroyed by the regime, others neglected and irreparably deteriorated by the tropical heat. Film production did continue under the Democratic Kampuchea (DK) state, though under very different circumstances. The new government similarly sought to use propagandistic film in service of a nation-building project, though these productions were documentaries showcasing laboring workers, in contrast with Sihanouk's bourgeois dramas. These films saw periodic screenings at work group meetings, meant to glorify the new state and instill its revolutionary work ethic.¹¹ After DK's defeat in 1979, movie theaters were reopened under the Vietnamese-controlled People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) and again showed foreign films, this time from throughout the socialist world.

Soon after, local movie production resumed and Khmer films again became popular during the 1980s. Under the PRK regime, however, films were strictly monitored for political censorship and mainstream romance movies became the dominant genre. With the advent of television and home video during the 1990s, TV dramas, both local and foreign, grew in popularity while the new ease of movie piracy threatened to bring down the film industry.¹² The local cinema of the 90s and 2000s became characterized by the influx of low-budget romance and horror films, as well as declining audiences. Foreign films, particularly from Thailand, Hong Kong, and the United States began to replace local productions on cinema screens.

¹¹ Muan and Ly 2001, 103

¹² Pin 2002

Also in the 1980s, a young refugee named Rithy Panh enrolled at the renowned Paris film school L'Institut des Hautes Études Cinématographiques (IDHEC). Just a few decades later, he would become a central figure in the renaissance of Cambodian cinema. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, Panh established himself as a respected filmmaker, pioneering a genre of lyrical documentary film exploring Khmer Rouge history and memory. He quickly garnered significant acclaim, winning awards at major film festivals throughout Europe, Asia, and North America and raising the international profile of Cambodian cinema in the process.¹³ In 2006, he co-founded the Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center with Ieu Pannakar, one of the first Cambodian filmmakers during the 1950s. Through concerted efforts at repatriation and collection, Bophana became both a comprehensive archive of the country's audiovisual heritage and a center for film education and training. Encompassing his own filmmaking and the work of the Bophana Center, Panh's cinema project embodies both an introspection toward Cambodia's past and a speculative desire for its future. With his own films, he works as an archaeologist of memory, uncovering images of the past to understand and bear witness to history. Through his work with the Bophana Center and beyond, he is a mentor and a teacher who has inspired a new generation of Cambodian filmmakers, including Davy Chou and Kavich Neang of Anti-Archive.

Today, Cambodian cinema is in a state of renaissance with many independent filmmakers gaining international attention for their work. As younger generations take

¹³ Some major achievements include *Rice People* (1994) competing for the Palme d'Or, *S-21* (2003) winning the François Chalais Prize at Cannes, and *The Missing Picture* (2013) winning Cannes's Un Certain Regard competition and receiving a nomination for an Academy Award.

up the medium, a new alternative cinema has emerged—a cinema which explores the conditions of youth in modern Cambodia, depicting the realities of life under neoliberal capitalism and the developing city. There is the aforementioned Anti-Archive, where Davy Chou, Kavich Neang, and Danech San are producing acclaimed features and short films. Other filmmakers like Polen Ly, Chanrado Sok, and Kongkea Vann have recently directed award-winning short films. Independent studios like Kongchak Pictures are both collaborating with art filmmakers and pushing new ideas for mainstream film. The efforts of institutions like the Bophana Center and Cambodia Film Commission are beginning to pay off, and Cambodian film festivals like the Cambodia International Film Festival and Chaktomuk Short Film Festival provide avenues for local filmmakers to showcase their work.

Sihanouk's Political Cinema and the Beginnings of Cinematic Nostalgia

In today's cinema landscape, the films and culture of the 1960s and 70s—Sihanouk's Sangkum era—are becoming increasingly relevant. Through dedicated archival and restoration efforts, early films are becoming more available and have begun to take a larger role in Cambodian cinema discourse. With major events like CIFF and the publication of LinDa Saphan's *Faded Reels*, Sangkum era cinema was screened widely during the summer of 2022, bringing these films to eager festival audiences and no doubt renewing interest in these films for many.

As nostalgia toward the films and film culture of the Sangkum era remain significant in today's developing cinema culture, it is important to closely examine the

origins of said culture. The “golden era” of Khmer cinema was largely driven by Sihanouk’s patronage—part of a campaign to assert the newly-independent Cambodia as a modern culture. While other artists’ work was their own, they contributed to the Khmer modernist milieu Sihanouk cultivated, which the Sangkum era is ultimately remembered for in today’s nostalgic tendency. Many of the era’s films used nostalgic forms of their own—best exhibited through the popularity of folktale adaptations like Ly Bun Yim’s *Sopasith* (1965) or Yvon Hem’s *Sovannahong* (1967) which found popular audiences by adapting stories beloved by the majority of the population. These and other films used tales from Cambodia’s mythical past—the stories many grew up with—to appeal to mainstream audiences and to bring in the revenue needed to sustain the industry. Nostalgia runs even deeper in Khmer cinema, however, forming a pillar of Sihanouk’s modernity project and serving as the basis for his first feature film.

During the postcolonial period, Sihanouk sought to legitimize the newly-independent Cambodian state by constructing a Cambodian cultural consciousness independent of western power—to create a new, uniquely Khmer modernity. He quickly realized the potential of film for his political project and used the medium in his bid to increase his own stature as nation/state-builder and to institutionalize the new national culture. To do this, LinDa Saphan argues, Sihanouk aimed to “showcase Cambodia as a modern culture through architecture, cinema, and music.”¹⁴ Under his patronage, Cambodia experienced an arts boom throughout the 1950s and 60s, characterized by the

¹⁴ Saphan 2013, 4

synthesis of traditional Khmer forms and western influences—for example, New Khmer Architecture, folktale film adaptations, and Khmer rock and roll. Sihanouk was himself a prolific director and musical composer, embodying this ethos in his own artistic works which he used to introduce, exemplify, and codify his aspirational concept of Khmer modernity.

Urbanity sat at the center of Sihanouk’s project—in both senses, urban and urbane. Phnom Penh was to be his crowning achievement, a modern city with a modern culture that would proclaim Cambodia’s success not only to the outside world, but to the Cambodians inside. The city and its culture would be the basis for Cambodia’s own national identity.¹⁵ This identity blended tradition and contemporary, defining Cambodia as a modern culture with a long and rich history. In Sihanouk’s modernity, Angkorian past and postcolonial present converge.

Sihanouk’s 1966 film *Apsara* captures the essence of his cultural political project. The film, which stars both members of his family and of his government, presents the romance between a traditional dancer and a military pilot, a love story set in Sihanouk’s imaginary Phnom Penh—a “city transformed into a beautiful, modern space filled with selfless individuals.”¹⁶ *Apsara* embodies the nostalgic orientation toward the Angkorian traditional arts through the character of the dancer, blending it with the modernity of advanced military and urban development in an allegorical romance. Siti Keo argues that *Apsara* was successful in constructing an image of Phnom Penh that embodied

¹⁵ Keo 2019, 67-70

¹⁶ Keo 2019, 70

Sihanouk's modernity and that the film was heavily publicized by the state in a "coordinated effort to shape public opinion."¹⁷ Milton Osborne draws similar conclusions, noting that Sihanouk's imaginary Phnom Penh, filtered through a rosy bourgeois lens that excluded depictions of working class realities, was circulated "in the service of national solidarity."¹⁸

In addition to the political power of film, Sihanouk also recognized the potential of the film festival and organized Cambodia's first, the Phnom Penh International Film Festival. Held twice in 1968 and 1969, the festival was predominantly a showcase of Sihanouk's work—though his films screened in ostensible competition with other works, he would invariably win the awards. Osborne observes that this festival was where "the pretence that Sihanouk was a world-class filmmaker became insitutionalised."¹⁹ Artistic merits of Sihanouk's cinema aside, the prince's film festival reveals his understanding of its institutional power. Marijke de Valck conceptualizes the film festival as a tool of cultural legitimization—cultural institutions which identify and evaluate film as high art, awarding prestige and publicity to films based on their artistic value.²⁰ In this way, Sihanouk's propagandistic films could effectively be laundered through the festival structure and emerge as exemplary models of Khmer art. Adding to his film festival's legitimizing power, it was also an international affair, hosting competitions of films from

¹⁷ Keo 2019, 70-1

¹⁸ Osborne 1994, 179

¹⁹ Osborne 1994, 183

²⁰ De Valck 2016, 104-5

many countries,²¹ assigning even greater value to his wins and elevating the profile of Cambodian film.

Just as Sihanouk's use of nostalgic appeal deflects from the material realities faced by most Cambodians in his present, nostalgic returns to the artistic culture of the 60s risk distorting history if not viewed through a critical lens. Cambodia's early film culture built on nostalgic tendencies from the start, serving the bourgeois interests of Sihanouk's nation-building and of building a profitable film industry,²² and reinforcing the existing class structure. To look back nostalgically on this period, in a time when independent cinema is flourishing, uplifting youth voices, and focusing on art over profit, presents problems for the development of a historically-conscious cinema culture. In the next section, however, I argue that the new generation of artists may use nostalgia as a tool through which to build the platform for expressing their own voices and those of marginalized communities.

Against Nostalgia

From Genocidal Rupture to Nostalgic Publics

Cambodian popular culture carries a strong undercurrent of nostalgia, made especially visible by the country's modern history. Throughout the 20th century, Cambodians experienced tragedy after tragedy, from French colonial rule to civil war to

²¹ A diverse lineup including Mongolia, North Korea, North Vietnam, Israel, the United Arab Republic, the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, India, Pakistan, East and West Germany (Smith 1968).

²² Saphan 2022, 246-7

the utter devastation of genocide. A society destroyed, most of its artists and intellectuals—along with a quarter of the total population—killed, the country faced a long, arduous, and ongoing reconstruction. The Khmer Rouge regime’s systematic dismemberment of society and cultural heritage caused what Khatharya Um calls “a material and metaphysical rupture,” describing a sense of irreplaceable cultural loss and a fragmentation of national culture.²³ Their aim to destroy what they saw as urban bourgeois decadence meant to wipe away centuries of tradition and to build society entirely anew. What the Khmer Rouge could not do, however, was erase people’s memories of pre-genocide culture even as they destroyed much of its material existence. Um argues, though, that the genocidal rupture caused a societal trauma and a “loss of ontological security”—the loss of culturally mediated understandings, worldviews, and socialities.²⁴ The ontological and epistemic loss broke the continuity of culture which, combined with the impossibility of reconstitution as it once was, left survivors with fragmented cultural memories and identities.

The time before *samai a-Pot*,²⁵ before the genocide, then easily occupies a privileged place in collective memory. It was the time of postcolonial independence and, under Sihanouk’s rule, a period of nation-building and cultural nationalism. Although popular culture of the time was mostly bourgeois—and cinema was largely inaccessible to many—Sangkum-era music remains a major presence in Cambodian cultural

²³ Um 2015, 181

²⁴ Um 2015, 183

²⁵ The Khmer phrase សម័យអាពត៌ translates to “Pol Pot time” and is often used by survivors to refer to the Khmer Rouge years, 1975-1979.

consciousness. The voices of popular singers like Sinn Sisamouth and Ros Sereysothea are ubiquitous throughout Cambodia and its diaspora, now folded into the fabric of society. In this context, the pervasive nostalgia recalls a lost future and suggests a desire to reclaim pride in lost history, heritage, and identity.²⁶ While those who lived through the genocide may look back at the before-time as a better time, before the pain of loss, younger generations grow up hearing their stories, hearing their music, and engaging with memory in their own way.

With the Cambodian arts renaissance, there has been significant, active revival of 60s pop music led by popular documentaries like John Pirozzi's *Don't Think I've Forgotten: Cambodia's Lost Rock and Roll* (2014) and musical acts like The Cambodian Space Project and Dengue Fever. As Y-Dang Troeung describes, this revival is characterized by an appeal to "coolness" embodied by a past Phnom Penh "influenced by a zeitgeist of free love, progressive thinking, and creative autonomy."²⁷ *Don't Think I've Forgotten*, in particular, demonstrates this impulse—Pirozzi expressed a desire to call new attention to that era, calling 60s music "the one thing that has allowed the Cambodian people to access a time when their life wasn't about war and genocide" to which executive producer and director of DC-Cam Youk Chhang adds, "It restores the missing part of us, the identity of who we are."²⁸ This form of nostalgia neither

²⁶ Um 2015, 234-5

²⁷ Troeung 2022, 38

²⁸ Sisario 2015; Quoted in Troeung 2022, 38

accurately depicts Cambodian history nor the current movements in the Phnom Penh arts scene, though it has undoubtedly inspired many artists and scholars.

The nostalgic sentiments embodied by *Don't Think I've Forgotten* and the new “coolness” of 60s culture manifest differently in the diaspora, where the rupture of genocide is differently experienced—often without the same opportunities for cultural healing and rebuilding that take place in Cambodia. In the separation from new developments in Cambodian culture, the cultural memories of the first refugee generation become a primary engagement with the homeland. For the diaspora, Khatharya Um writes, nostalgia is “resistance against the erasure of time and distance, a nationalist act, a weapon of the dispossessed.”²⁹ While nostalgia manifests differently in diasporic and local Cambodian communities, Um’s concept of nostalgia as a weapon or—as I reframe it—a *tool* through which cultural erasures can be addressed is a useful lens to consider its purpose in Khmer independent cinema. It is, however, important to note that artists and scholars from the diaspora are prominent in both Cambodia studies and local Cambodian arts, so diasporic narratives do affect local Cambodian publics. If, then, we can avoid the tendency of nostalgia to slide into distortions of history, to bring about conservatism, nostalgia’s power can be appropriated in the efforts to build and uplift new generations from the shadows of the past.

²⁹ Um 2015, 240

Generative Nostalgia

To expand on this idea, I propose a different reading of nostalgia within Khmer alternative cinema that may better describe its use in film and in community building practices. Even today, in the midst of an artistic renaissance, the material and cultural conditions in which Cambodian artists and scholars must operate pose significant challenges for independent cinema.

Writing from the circumstance of Filipino alternative cinema, Jasmine Nadua Trice identifies an indie film scene which seeks community through the “embrace [of] an alternative temporality that combines *an orientation toward a shared, localized past* with a cosmopolitan connection to other parallel enclaves abroad, which cultivate their own alternative temporalities.”³⁰ The Khmer indie film community may be understood as one of Filipino film’s “parallel enclaves,” one that shares work and ideas with their regional counterparts. But for a film community building from the conditions of Cambodia’s present, with little established cinema tradition to work with, the need for a “shared, localized past” to build from is a particular challenge. With the abrupt end of early Khmer cinema, the loss of most of its creatives and creations, and the resulting decades of neglect, the current movement is essentially a separate cinema film culture entirely. In its present state, Khmer indie cinema is not yet able to consistently output the feature-length films necessary to reach wide enough audiences and be viewed as a developed scene.

³⁰ Trice 2021a, 116 (emphasis mine)

This reality raises issues for localized community building as without feature-length films, multiplex screens are inaccessible outside the film festival context. Establishing links to Cambodia's cinematic past thus provides that shared past from which to build new community, opening fruitful avenues for growth. In addition, the current world of Southeast Asian independent cinema necessitates finding funding from abroad. With Cambodia's early-stage indie film industry, there are relatively less filmmakers able to compete for funding. Without a strong local community, the collaboration and sharing of ideas necessary to develop more filmmakers becomes much more difficult. Here, nostalgia may actually provide a solution.

As Walter Benjamin writes, history is not simply a time past, but in fact a time which coexists with the present. For Benjamin, there is a dialectical evocation of the history that pulls the past into the now, to build the future.³¹ For Khmer indie cinema, references to the past cinema culture can be understood as essentially this—pulling the remnants of Cambodia's once vibrant film community out of the historical rupture as a tool for building a community today and generating future possibility. Y-Dang Troeung, drawing on and quoting Derrida, finds in Rithy Panh's *The Missing Picture* an attempt to “ontologize remains, to make them present.”³² Panh's work, a major influence on subsequent Khmer film, investigates the specter of genocide which still haunts Cambodia's present, but in a way that is ultimately forward-looking in its focus on understanding and healing. Troeung's evocation, part of a work which calls for a move

³¹ Benjamin 1968, 261

³² Troeung 2022, 119-20

beyond the trauma framework of the postmemory turn in Cambodia studies, applies outside the confines of Panh’s film—by calling into being the past film culture, perhaps that can help build film culture in the present.

Here, I find Thy Phu’s insights on photography in the Vietnamese socialist magazine *Vietnam Pictorial* also useful. Drawing from Svetlana Boym, who writes that “fantasies of the past determined by needs of the present have a direct impact on realities of the future,” Phu argues that the magazine uses agrarian scenes to build a “foundation for socialist futurity.”³³ The generative use of nostalgia that I observe in the Khmer film community echoes this idea—by appropriating the positive aspects of past film culture, using them to inspire interest in cinema in the present, it may be possible to lay the foundation for robust film community in the future. Also thinking with Boym, Nazry Bahrawi suggests the possibility of drawing from her theories new ideas outside established Western frameworks. In his study of Singapore Malay literature, he identifies elements of Boym’s restorative/reflective nostalgia dynamic but with distinctly different motives.³⁴ He offers instead a reading of nostalgia in the works of young Singaporean artists as a destabilizing force that can cut through and deconstruct accepted narratives—a sentiment echoed in the work and desires of new generation Cambodian artists who subvert Western historical narratives and tell their own stories.

³³ Phu 2021, 64

³⁴ Nazry 2019, 516

Generative Nostalgia in Practice

To avoid an endorsement of sentimental nostalgia, I will end with some specific examples of how a generative nostalgic perspective has helped build today's film community. For example, though Davy Chou's first feature film, the documentary *Golden Slumbers* (2011), deals heavily in nostalgia, it is ultimately an exploratory work that represents a young diasporic filmmaker's discovery of family history. It represents new discovery of cultural heritage, filtered through his interest in cinema, as he seeks to understand the histories of his family and his art form during a period of personal cultural exploration. This film would kickstart Chou's career, gaining enthusiastic international attention for its "rediscovery" of a "lost cinema"—it played perfectly into the interests of the international cinema community. From that point, he would become a key figure in the new Khmer cinema movement.

Now take Anti-Archive's name and artistic ethos:

“I suppose the name was challenging our relationship to such a heavy past,’ [Davy] Chou muses. ‘Since every film is an archive, it meant trying to keep that past alive but from a new perspective.’ ‘I think the name was meant as a provocation, just to say that young people want to escape the old reality,’ says Daniel Mattes [...]. Kavich [Neang] adds, ‘It’s not like we want to deny history, just that we want to speak for ourselves.’”³⁵

These statements speak to a shared present, built on a shared past, already influencing the work of new generation filmmakers—the experiences of growing up in post-reconstruction Cambodia or in its diaspora, of being young and Cambodian, imagining a

³⁵ Krich 2022

future out of history's shadow. This is evident throughout Anti-Archive's filmography, where they tell modern stories of young people navigating present-day Phnom Penh, dealing with modern problems like alienation and displacement—real issues faced by youth today under crushing neoliberal capitalism and rapid urban development. Though nostalgic aesthetics appear in the form of 60s music, I argue that this presence is without nostalgic feeling. Rather, 60s music is simply part of the cultural fabric, existing in the background of youth struggles to claim their voices in today's society.

I offer two more examples, that will each be discussed in further detail in Chapters 2 and 4. The first is LinDa Saphan's book *Faded Reels*, which is incredibly nostalgic in its content. However, the book has pragmatic purpose—besides being a contribution to the scholarship of 60s cinema, the book also seeks to spark interest in film studies and film criticism. By offering these films and filmmakers as examples and perhaps even role models, Saphan hopes to inspire young people to take up these necessary positions in a critical cinema culture.

Finally, Cine Hub is perhaps the clearest example of the form of nostalgia which Jasmine Trice identifies in alternative cinema community building. She observes that, in Manila, “sites of alternative film culture allude to collective, public memory” by “evoking urban and cinema history.”³⁶ Cine Hub is a new community space on the rooftop of the CFC office, near the Bophana Center—on Street 200, the site of a similar hub for cinema community in the 1960s, a fact not at all missed by the venue's founder. In fact, he draws

³⁶ Trice 2021a, 120

inspiration from the filmmakers of the time, and hopes to use Cine Hub to inspire new generations of artists.

Interlude: *Golden Slumbers*



Scenes from Uong Citta's 1972 film ពេលដែលត្រូវយំ [*Time to Cry*] projected on the Hemakcheat Cinema wall (Chou 2011).

“Seahorse Rising”

“The movie everyone was waiting for...in 1975...*The Seahorse*. [...] But *The Seahorse* never came out.” The elderly director Ly Bun Yim stands in an unfinished room, framed by a large window overlooking the city sunset. As the sun sets and the red sky fades slowly into dusk, the director describes in vivid detail scenes from his unreleased—and now lost—film សេះសមុទ្រ [*The Seahorse*]. Ly is at once captivating and captivated as he loses himself in a wistful play-by-play of his lost film’s best scenes until, silhouetted against the darkened sky, he pauses to say, “If I go on, you’re going to want to see the film, and I can’t show it to you.” He does go on though, for a few moments, to relay the film’s ending—the hero saves his father and everything is right again.

Now night, the scene changes to the derelict Hemakcheat Cinema—a theater in ruins, the old haunt of Sangkum cinema. As a dark soundtrack of moody, otherworldly synths swells to the surface, the camera focuses on the theater’s dingy brick wall. The wall becomes a screen, a silent collage of ghostly images from old films projected on its uneven surface. Images are presented out of context, out of order as they blend one into another—transitions between different films are hard to discern. As for the images themselves, they are broken apart, fragmented by the rough masonry. While this spectral composite plays, the camera cuts momentarily to close ups of youths staring up at the strange display, their expressions inscrutable yet clearly transfixed. Finally, the brick cinema breaks the silence. Kong Som Eun’s and Vichara Dany’s fractured faces appear on the screen—“Come on, I’ll take you home,” he says, and the two climb astride his bicycle. They ride off together, Kong Som Eun whistling merrily, and the camera cuts back to their youthful spectators. They stare. Then, a cut to black and the credits roll, starting with the names of artists lost to the genocide.

This haunting sequence conjures a medley of feelings—nostalgia, loss, longing, wonder. The theater in ruins is a stand-in for a *cinema in ruins*, a physical reminder of a lost film culture, of lost movies and faded memory. Few of these films remain and the survivors are damaged, neglected to rot in the tropical heat. The spectral images of old cinema—out of place, out of time—briefly coexist with the present, at once layered over it and fragmented by it.

Chapter 2: Faded Reels

Supposing that Ly Bun Yim is the greatest Cambodian director.

Supposing that *The Sea Horse* is his best film.

Furthermore, knowing that *The Sea Horse* had been shot and edited but not yet shown when the Khmer Rouge seized power and that it is now lost.

It follows that the best film of the golden age of Cambodian cinema has never been and will never be seen.

Davy Chou³⁷

The Book in Context

LinDa Saphan's *Faded Reels: The Art of Four Cambodian Filmmakers, 1960-1975* is a significant book. It is the first work of critical film analysis to focus on early Cambodian cinema. In fact, it is the first book to consider these films seriously as rich cinematic texts and as filmic works worthy of technical analysis, to focus on the films themselves as the object of study. It is the first book to attempt a comprehensive archive of early Khmer cinema and the first to examine their directors as artists, to reconstruct a lineage of Cambodian film auteurship.

Faded Reels centers around the works of four significant filmmakers in the early movement: Ly Bun Yim, Tea Lim Koun, Yvon Hem, and Uong Citta. Saphan profiles each director, detailing each of their careers in the film industry and reflecting on their individual legacies. Using textual and technical analysis of their films, she places these directors into a Cambodian cinema canon, reviving their reputations as cinematic

³⁷ Chou 2013, 27

innovators and important figures in the national culture. Saphan’s book weaves historical research and film analysis together into a cohesive narrative of early Cambodian cinema as a dynamic period of artistic and technical innovation, with lasting impacts on Cambodian visual culture.

The book was published by the Royal University of Phnom Penh’s Department of Media and Communication (DMC) in July 2022 and was ceremoniously released with an elaborate two-day launch event. The book launch, styled after a red-carpet movie premiere, took place at the Prime Cineplex Samai Square, a luxury cinema in the north Phnom Penh neighborhood Tuol Kouk and was accompanied by film screenings—two films discussed in the book and three relevant modern films.³⁸ The book launch itself included a brief talk by the author, a film industry panel discussion,³⁹ official speeches, and a lot of ceremony.

Faded Reels as a title evokes a sense of early Khmer cinema’s material presence and cultural presence—on one hand, the remaining films are physically deteriorated, with faded images and missing parts. On the other, with the generation that experienced them growing older, the films begin to fade from collective memory and cultural relevance as so many are lost and the ones that remain are not widely available.

Saphan’s book is a stand against their fading memory as she attempts to resurrect their

³⁸ ចិត្តម្លាយ (1963) - Yvon Hem; ថ្ងៃរីមាសបង (1969) - Uong Citta; *Don’t Think I’ve Forgotten: Cambodia’s Lost Rock and Roll* (2014) - John Pirozzi; *Golden Slumbers* (2011) - Davy Chou; *The Last Reel* (2014) - Kulikar Sotho

³⁹ Titled ឧស្សាហកម្មភាពយន្តកម្ពុជា៖ បញ្ហាប្រឈម និងឱកាស [Cambodian Film Industry: Challenges and Opportunities] (my translation)

milieu of creativity and assert their place in both Cambodian history and global cinema history. She is forward-looking, however, and invokes nostalgia—in the “cool” sense described by Troeung— as a device to support her ultimate goal to inspire local interest in film studies and criticism.

This chapter investigates the *Faded Reels* book launch through two lenses: the academic and artistic community aspirations of LinDa Saphan, and the desired film public of Davy Chou. First, I examine Saphan’s academic and film work, its connections to her publication of *Faded Reels*, her practices at the book launch, and her goals for film community. Then, I discuss one of the films screened at the event, Davy Chou’s *Golden Slumbers* (2011), and analyze the post-screening Q&A session’s implications to understand the director’s desired film audiences.

The Academic: LinDa Saphan's Desired Public

“This book is for the youth,” LinDa Saphan says, standing in front of the book launch audience. A clear statement of her book’s desired audience, it also suggests the type of cinema public she aims to create. Although Cambodia’s cinema community is vibrant and engaged, with a promising future, Saphan identifies the absence of a strong culture for film criticism and film studies—two essential components of a robust film culture—as an opportunity for her to share her knowledge. As an educator, she says, she hopes the book will spark youth interest in cinema as an area of study, analysis, and criticism.

Faded Reels is part of a career dedicated to Cambodian pop culture and society, as most of Saphan's previous academic and film work examines the role of popular art in Cambodian culture and society, with particular focus on artistic production from the Sangkum era. Hers is an established voice in the field as a prominent scholar and filmmaker within Cambodian cultural studies. Saphan's previous writing appears primarily in academic journals, targeted to academic audiences, but she is also popularly known for the previously mentioned documentary *Don't Think I've Forgotten* (2014), which she researched and produced. With that film, she works to excavate and repackage the Sangkum-era music culture for contemporary audiences, emphasizing the creativity and determination of the postcolonial generation's artists making music in the prelude to civil war. Stylishly produced, the film deals heavily in nostalgia, cultivating an image of hip modernity in an effort to make 60s pop "cool" again.⁴⁰ And it worked—the film reached young Cambodians in both Cambodia and the diaspora.⁴¹

Faded Reels moves Saphan's discussion from Sangkum music to Sangkum cinema, combining the academic and popular audiences into one ambitious, wide-ranging target audience. Applying a similar nostalgic practice, she recuperates 60s directors and their films, reviving their status as innovators and their films as technical achievements in Khmer cinema. Saphan seeks to address the lack of local involvement in film analysis and criticism, noting that most writing on Cambodian cinema comes from outside the country, very little of it written in Khmer. Cambodia's infrastructure for film education is

⁴⁰ Again, echoing Troeung (2022, 38)

⁴¹ According to John Pirozzi in Sisario 2015

limited, with no formal film schools or film studies programs.⁴² Therefore, Saphan's decision to publish the book in Cambodia with the DMC—and to publish a high-quality Khmer translation—is a move to increase educational access.

As a DMC event, the launch was well-attended by DMC students, bring together an ideal audience for *Faded Reels* and its author. In her 10-minute talk, Saphan discussed the processes of writing and translating, expressing her desire for students to get involved in film research and criticism. Outside her presentation, she also engaged with the young audience, signing books for an excitable crowd of students. In addition to the launch event, Saphan used the publication of *Faded Reels* as an opportunity to further education and engagement with aspiring filmmakers and film students by offering lectures and classes during her stay in Cambodia. For example, she gave a guest lecture on critical analysis and documentary film at the DMC and a masterclass on film analysis at Cine Hub, the latter of which will be discussed in Chapter 4.

Saphan's vision

Through her work, Saphan envisions a Cambodian cinema public of local students, scholars, critics, and filmmakers critically engaging with cinema through both artistic and academic lenses. With *Faded Reels*, she offers an archive of films and a set of role models—the filmmakers discussed in the book and, in a way, herself as a Cambodian film scholar. On her website, Saphan outlines a mission statement:

⁴² The DMC does offer courses in media studies and their support of Saphan and *Faded Reels* suggests the possibility of adding film studies, though I do not know for sure.

Through my artwork I want to connect with the broad community of professional artists and art students in Cambodia, in the Cambodian diaspora, and in other countries and explore with them what it means to be a Cambodian artist in the modern postwar era.⁴³

Her proposed exploration of “what it means to be a Cambodian artist” is extended, and anchored to historical moment, by her assertion that “Cambodians’ sense of identity was lost in the 1970s as ‘Khmerness’ was associated with the Khmer Rouge genocide.” As for method, Saphan highlights the necessity of free expression and a strong community of artists, for Cambodian artists to “[take] their place in their own right in the global contemporary art community.”

Saphan’s decision to publish *Faded Reels* in Cambodia is an important landmark in a country where publishing has historically been difficult. The demolition of education and literature—and the conditions of poverty—brought on by the Khmer Rouge years made books a luxury few could afford. As Cambodian writer and publisher Phina So notes, however, people did want to read and so created a market for hand-copied books.⁴⁴ The culture of book copying meant publishing never became a profitable business. Combined with the reality of Cambodian cultural studies mostly taking place outside the country, there is a shortage of Khmer-language academic publications. The publication of *Faded Reels* in both English and Khmer represents a possibility for future scholars to also publish in Cambodia and thus expand educational access.

⁴³ Saphan’s personal website, <https://saphan.info/projects/mission/>

⁴⁴ So 2021

Arts scholarship is a critical element of the global art world, as academic interest in art underscores its cultural significance. Saphan’s practice embodies both sides of this system, as both artist and academic she imagines a robust local arts community for Cambodia. *Faded Reels* and its accompanying activities present models for local film education and scholarship, seeking to foster youth interest in film studies and develop an academic cinema public. Also notable is her re-centering of the old cinema, attempting to build the foundations of a new cinema culture through the excavation of a past one. Her orientation toward nostalgia is one that imagines new futures—at the *Faded Reels* book launch she asserts, “The future can only move forward if we take ownership of the past.”

The Filmmaker: Davy Chou's Aspirational Audience

One of the companion films screened for the book launch was Davy Chou’s 2011 documentary *Golden Slumbers*, in which Chou explores cinema memory and the materiality of film, weaving together archival research and interviews in an attempt to resurrect memories of the cinematic past. Also a deeply personal journey into the world of his film producer grandfather Van Chann—one of many artists lost to the genocide—*Golden Slumbers* combines the nostalgic reminiscences of 1960s directors, actors, and cinema fans with Chou’s cinephilic film language to reconstruct the atmosphere of the 60s Phnom Penh film scene.

At the book launch, *Golden Slumbers* played to a large crowd, with Chou in attendance. During the Q&A session, however, the audience was quiet—after a brief pause, one person simply asked, “When will *Return to Seoul* come out?” sparking a

murmur of agreement from the crowd. “Soon, later this year,” he said. This was clearly not what Chou had hoped for and, evidently sensing the audience’s confusion with his film, Chou instead posed a question for himself: Why film a documentary in this artistic style?

He focused his discussion on the film’s epilogue—“Seahorse Rising,” the scenes presented earlier in close reading. Avant-garde, mysterious, and unsettling all at once, the scene is somewhat of a departure from the rest of the film, ending it without the sense of closure the audience may have expected. Contrasting with the informative style of most Cambodia/n documentaries, Chou explains that his goal with the film lies in affect—he aims instead to elicit feeling by immersing his audience in the images, the sounds, the words of those who were there. *Golden Slumbers* is a memory project which seeks to (re)capture the feeling of being a part of the fledgling 60s cinema culture, both as filmmaker and filmgoer. Chou’s project is, in fact, twofold—to resurface these memories of the older generation and to repackage them for the new generation, to instill in them a sense of shared cultural memory.

The Q&A becomes something of an impromptu class on film language as Chou briefly deconstructs the mechanics of his final scene, explaining the how’s and why’s of his affective practice. In brief, he experiments with spectrality and temporality in his layering of 60s cinema over the present-day ruins of the former movie house. Anchoring the scene in present time with the youthful spectators, Chou summons the ghosts of cinema’s past, restoring them to contemporaneity with the present. His work sharply

contrasts with the documentaries screened at the previous month's CIFF, which generally used the more common educational or journalistic approach to educate audiences about their topics—Indigenous life, environmental conservation, LGBTQ+ experience, Khmer Rouge archives, etc—and whose tone was generally reciprocated by curious Q&A audiences.

Chou's style would appear to clash with the expectations of general Cambodian audiences, so his project may be considered through Jasmine Trice's "aspirational approach" concept of alternative cinema audiences, speaking to the uncertainty of distribution and differing aesthetic preferences of artistic and general audiences.⁴⁵ Chou's desire to educate and promote interest in art film is certainly aspirational at this stage. Just as the infrastructure for film education in Cambodia is minimal, the opportunities for locally funding art cinema are near nonexistent.⁴⁶ Despite these challenges, Chou remains active in the community—mentoring, teaching, sharing—working to uplift Cambodian filmmakers and ensure an inclusive, yet rigorously engaged, cinema community.

⁴⁵ Trice 2021a, 3

⁴⁶ Danech San, personal communication, July 2022

Interlude: *New Land Broken Road*



Piseth, Nick, and Thy blend retro aesthetic with modern dance (Neang 2018).

Nostalgic Aesthetic without Nostalgic Feeling

On a quiet Phnom Penh rooftop, overlooking the river, Nick switches on the speaker and the retro sounds of Pen Ran’s 1971 classic “Roam Min Ch’aet Te”⁴⁷ begin to fill the air. As the tempo picks up, the young trio starts dancing—though their moves are emphatically not those of Pen Ran’s time. The young men dance in contemporary hip hop style, bringing their own energy and voice to the familiar sounds of “golden age” music.

They embody a nostalgic aesthetic without nostalgic feeling—though they are deeply connected to this dancer of the past, she is as current as they are. She and her contemporaries are a living part of Cambodia’s cultural fabric, always there in the

⁴⁷ រាំមិនផ្អែតទេ, a song about Pen Ran’s love of dancing.

background, but Piseth, Nick, and Thy do not long for a return to her time. The three young men laugh and smile as they dance, as they repurpose the music of the past as their own expression of the now.

Chapter 3: Cambodia International Film Festival

CIFF in Context

The Cambodia International Film Festival (CIFF) is Cambodia's paramount film event, an annual film festival jointly organized by the Cambodia Film Commission and the Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center since 2010. At the festival's founding, CIFF director Cédric Eloy and Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts (MCFA) Secretary of State Som Sokun stated the festival's primary goals as inspiring local filmmakers and rekindling public interest in going to the movies.⁴⁸ To this end, the programmers focused on bringing a diverse selection of world cinema to Cambodian audiences, screening 120 films from 30 countries. At first, the local programming was limited, as they had difficulties capturing the interest of Cambodian directors. To address this problem, the organizers chose to showcase award-winning Southeast Asian films as examples of what could be achieved with limited budgets, hoping to demonstrate the value of film festival distribution. Over the next decade, CIFF would grow to the major event it is today and become a popular venue for local alternative cinema.

This chapter focuses on the 11th edition of CIFF, held from June 28 – July 3, 2022, at which I attended many screenings and events. CIFF's decade of development was readily apparent with a 2022 program of mostly Cambodian films, many from local filmmakers in addition to the Western diaspora. Even more promising is the prevalence of films by new and often young directors—documentaries, shorts, and features. The

⁴⁸ Vachon 2010

centrality of new local talent and youth voices at CIFF suggests a bright future for the Cambodian film industry.

In 2022, CIFF is starting to look similar to other regional Asian film festivals like Singapore, Busan, and Hong Kong—festivals which outwardly function as global cinema events but which maintain a focus on showcasing their respective national cinemas. To be clear, CIFF is far more limited in its influence outside Cambodia and the country's film industry is still at an early stage of development, but the festival's programming does indicate a push for a similar model. Like most, if not all, global film festivals, CIFF is situated at the confluence of art, politics, and economics—with the underlying goal of elevating local cinema through the cultural power of the film festival structure. Although the majority of films screened at CIFF and others in the region are not commercially oriented, ties to the commercial film industry are close. There is a fundamental tension between the artistic community of cinema and the conditions of film distribution as festivals must rely on a matrix of institutional, government, and corporate funding—all institutions with competing motives for building the film industry.

This chapter examines CIFF as a discursive space and producer of cinema publics, focusing on the festival as film community and industry building practice. As discussed in Chapter 1, Sihanouk established his own film festival as a legitimizing practice in the early days of Khmer cinema. In this chapter, I begin with a discussion of the festival's internal practice, examining the publics CIFF creates through its physical presence, use of urban space, and mode of production. I then move to an examination of institutional

discourses as they establish different understandings of what CIFF should be and accomplish. Finally, I explore specific discursive practices of audience and filmmakers at CIFF, focusing particularly on important encounters between those groups. The overarching question for CIFF and the developing industry is this: what is at stake in building a new industry for “Cambodian cinema?”

The Festival as Practice

CIFF in Urban Space

In her study of alternative cinema distribution in Manila, Jasmine Nadua Trice writes extensively on urban space and the spatial practice of film exhibition venues. She examines the relationship between spatialities of the urban cityscape and those of film exhibition, observing that cinema spaces often reproduce the socioeconomic divisions of the city at the same time as they offer spaces apart from the urban reality into which to escape, relax, and debate those conditions.⁴⁹ Cindy Hing-Yuk Wong observes that film festivals have a power to transform public space into cinema space by “take[ing] over public venues and spill[ing] over into lobbies, streets, and coffeehouses” as audiences take conversations from the festival into the outside world.⁵⁰ Both scholars follow the premise that film distribution and exhibition constitute unique public spheres, where diverse communities may come together to share cinematic experiences and engage in critical discourses. It matters, then, *what* these spaces look like and how the festival’s

⁴⁹ Trice 2021a, 114

⁵⁰ Wong 2011, 163

physical presence is constructed, as these spatial practices can have a direct impact on the audiences gathered.

As one of CIFF's main goals has been “to bring the Cambodian public back to theaters,”⁵¹ its desired audience can be understood to include nearly everyone. However, festival and alternative cinema spaces can often be relatively exclusive, catering to middle class tastes and aesthetic sensibilities.⁵² CIFF certainly appears to follow this trend in their choice of venues, ranging from the high-class Chaktomuk Theater to the extravagant Rosewood Hotel to mall multiplexes to the French Institute and Bophana Center. Many of their venues are spaces frequented by the middle and upper classes, notably also familiar and comfortable for foreign visitors. However, CIFF does make an effort to democratize access to these spaces—tickets to each event are available for free, on a first-come first-serve basis. While this does increase access, the first-come first-serve nature of the ticketing complicates it. CIFF suggested arriving a full hour before scheduled start times in order to secure a ticket, increasing the time commitment needed to see a film and thus favoring festival-goers with more leisure time. In my own experience, the necessity of arriving a full hour in advance was also uneven as most screenings had plenty of empty seats. There were exceptions though, especially the sold-out flagship—or most desirable—screenings of films like *White Building* and *Everything Will Be OK*. For these, showing up early was a necessity, as lines grew quickly, though this also meant that the venues' waiting areas became social spaces for waiting guests. Other

⁵¹ Vachon 2010

⁵² Trice 2021a, 5

examples of inconsistent ticketing were lecture-based events, where arrival times could be far looser. For instance, I arrived at the Bophana Center for an Oxfam event⁵³ 45 minutes early only to be met with confusion—why was I there so early?—and for the rest of the guests to *begin* arriving at the posted time. A similar situation occurred when I arrived the suggested hour early to the Chaktomuk Theater for the festival’s first event⁵⁴ and was also greeted by a confused volunteer who told me to come back later. The inconsistency and uncertainty with when to arrive makes it even more challenging for festival-goers with limited time to plan for events.

Jasmine Trice also addresses the idea of “themed space”—in her discussion, Manila mall multiplexes. Her argument hinges on the way semiotic interpretations of the mall environment affect how the space, and the activities that take place in it, are perceived. “Applying genre to everyday life in a way that presumes a knowing viewership,” these spaces divide public life along class lines.⁵⁵ Thinking with this concept in the CIFF case, it is interesting to consider the multiplicity of the festival’s venue choices and what those spaces might say about who belongs in them. As previously mentioned, CIFF’s venues represent a fairly diverse range of the city environment, though it skews toward middle- to upper-class spaces. Most of its venues are in the urban core of the city center and are high-end commercial and cultural spaces. There was at least an effort to spread the venues out along the city’s north-south axis so film

⁵³ Discussed in further detail later in this chapter.

⁵⁴ Also discussed later in this chapter.

⁵⁵ Trice 2021a, 68

screenings were held as far north as the Sen Sok Aeon mall, located roughly 10 km from the city center. The question then is whether the programming choices for each venue reflect particular desired audiences for them. For example, what does it mean when the roundtable discussion “Women in Cinema” takes place in a conference room on the 35th floor of the 5-star Rosewood Hotel—the highest view in the city—or the screening of Rithy Panh’s latest film is held at the French Institute? In my observation, Rosewood events tended toward more elite, and usually older, audiences of artists, film industry professionals, and foreigners. On the other hand, events held at multiplex cinemas attracted a younger and seemingly more general public.

CIFF’s venue organization practices offer insights into the festival’s ability to shape its own publics. Whether or not these are calculated decisions meant to generate specific audiences, the choice of venues reflects CIFF’s desire to be *the* Cambodian film event by mirroring the red-carpet glamor of A-list festivals and pomp of traditional Cambodian ceremony. These practices do matter and affect the ways audiences feel about and engage with its spaces and its films. As CIFF builds itself into a cultural institution, one that reflects a desire for a robust Khmer cinema, the politics of access and who gets to engage with its discourse become increasingly important.

Festival Mode of Production

If film festivals are to be understood as institutions seeking to cultivate certain publics, it is necessary to consider the financial backers—and thus, power structures—through which the festival becomes possible. As Cindy Hing-Yuk Wong argues, film

festivals are comprised of “contradictory impulses.” Theoretically, film festivals are constructed as democratic spaces, allowing for discursive environments in which “marginal, sensitive, and difficult subject matters” may be represented and contested. However, festivals are venues for art cinema, constituting a form of high culture, and therefore often exclusive.⁵⁶ Festivals have programmers, so the suggestion of democratic space must be considered alongside an understanding that these spaces are chosen by the festival. The festival decides whose voices will be displayed but is also reliant on government and corporate sponsorship to do so. It is therefore necessary to consider how a festival’s financial support might influence its practices—to put it another way, what value do these institutions see in funding a film festival?

Marijke de Valck, drawing from Pierre Bourdieu’s discussion of cultural capital, suggests that “festivals produce the consumers capable of consuming these cultural goods [art films].”⁵⁷ While she refers to art cinema’s specialized aesthetics, arguing that film festivals essentially train audiences to appreciate them, this idea may be extended to describe CIFF’s project of developing local film audiences to build local film industry. At present, Cambodian cinema screens are occupied mostly by international blockbusters and local horror films. As CIFF attempts to grow the local film industry, it therefore must also work to build ready audiences for a renewed local cinema.

CIFF’s mode of production is relevant for understanding the festival, as it is both interested in the economic growth of the film industry and with creating space for artists

⁵⁶ Wong 2011, 164

⁵⁷ de Valck 2016, 112

and social discourse. While the festival is independently run, it is still tied up in a dense matrix of government, non-government institutions, and corporate institutions. These include government institutions like the Cambodian Ministry of Culture and the Australian Embassy, foreign cultural/political institutions like the French Institute and Heinrich Böll Foundation, and major Cambodian corporations like Hanuman Beverages and Hanuman Real Estate. CIFF is itself organized by two non-government institutions, the CFC and Bophana Center, each with their own missions and practices. Once again, if we consider festivals as producers of their own consumers, then the festival's mode of production is important to consider. If each festival stakeholder is understood as staking a claim in this audience production, then what audiences do they want and for what purpose? In the next section, I will examine some of CIFF's sponsoring institutions, the desired audiences they signal, and what desires they may hope to transfer to these audiences.

Institutional Framing

For this section, I will look at how some of the main institutions behind CIFF talk about the festival on social media, on websites, and in press releases—in essence, their marketing materials. What do they consider important? Because these are all public statements, they also suggest what these institutions want *audiences* to find important. For the purposes of this analysis, I examine the following institutions: the Cambodian Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts (MCFA), the Bophana Center, and the Australian Embassy.

Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts

The MCFA, while not direct participants in organizing CIFF, oversee and approve the festival. As a government ministry, they represent the Cambodian government's goals for supporting the festival and the film industry as a whole. The Minister of Culture and Fine Arts, Phoeurng Sackona, is highly visible as an official dignitary at the invitation-only opening ceremony and also writes the introduction of the festival program. As I did not have access to the opening ceremony, this section focuses on the program statement. In it, Phoeurng outlines the ministry's main goals for supporting CIFF—focusing on two key areas: economy and education. She writes that “the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts considers the film industry as an essential part of its strategy of cultural and economic development” and describes CIFF as “an event which promotes the country as an attractive film destination, as well as it promotes Cambodian films.” Phoeurng highlights the “growing interest in cinema from the Cambodian audience” and especially its potential to strengthen the country's film industry. She also calls CIFF “an essential bridge to the world and a platform for education through films” and notes its strict adherence to international IP law, which she considers to be “the fundamental driving force of innovation, nurturing the sustainability of the creative industries.”

The minister's statement emphasizes economic growth, using the language of business to describe CIFF's possibilities. Though Phoeurng mentions innovation and cultural development, she refers to cinema as “creative industry,” employing an economic framing that keeps the focus on economic growth. CIFF is shown to be a key event in the

government's strategy for developing Cambodia's economy and culture. Also relevant is the desire to connect Cambodian cinema with international cinema, expressed through the mention of becoming an "attractive film destination" and being a "bridge to the world." This signals recognition of the international film festival structures and the need to present Cambodian cinema in a way that is competitive within those institutional frameworks. In fact, some Cambodian production companies are already working toward this—for example, Kongchak Pictures has built a robust sound production studio that attracts international productions. Also, the CFC, an independent agency endorsed by the MCFA and a co-organizer of the festival, is primarily concerned with growing the film industry and providing on-location services to attract foreign productions is a pillar of their practice. Their purpose is explicitly to promote Cambodia as a film destination, both to productions and to audiences. The MCFA's mention of educating through film calls to mind two audiences: Cambodian youth and students, who made up a majority of the actually existing festival audience, and foreign international audiences who are currently more of an aspirational audience, but are likely to drive industry growth. The invocation of foreign audiences with education does, unfortunately, reflect the common expectation for developing cinemas to produce art that satisfies Western curiosities.⁵⁸ With the prevalence of young artists working in themes of urban development and life in Phnom Penh, it will be interesting to see how these tendencies will interact as the industry grows.

⁵⁸ Trice 2021a; Lê 2021

Australian Embassy

The case of the Australian Embassy is particularly fascinating, as they joined CIFF as a major partner in 2022, sponsoring a large selection of Australian films. Their support is part of the 70th anniversary commemoration of Australia-Cambodia diplomatic relations and, in a press release, the embassy states that they sponsored CIFF “to help connect cultures, find common ground and build a shared sense of community” because “cultural and artistic exchanges are a way to celebrate the strong people-to-people links between Australia and Cambodia.”⁵⁹ In that press release and in several Facebook posts, the embassy particularly highlights documentary films which address current topics like Mekong conservation, gender inequality, and Indigenous community—and draw a link between Indigenous Australians and Indigenous Cambodians.

The Australian Embassy’s messaging unsurprisingly focuses on diplomacy but, in service of that goal, however, they do highlight the importance of education and cultural exchange to promote understanding within national and international communities. It would appear that the embassy is interested in documentary film as an agent for social change, as they actually emphasize those films—most of which are not Australian—over the many Australian drama films screened, like *Mad Max 2* (1981). Contrary to how the Cambodian government stresses economic growth, the Australian government makes no mention of economy, focusing entirely on cultural exchange, social issues, and

⁵⁹ <https://cambodia.embassy.gov.au/files/penh/20220627-Media-Release-Cambodia-International-Film-Festival-English.pdf>

conservation. Of course, the Australian government’s motives for promoting diplomacy must also be examined, though that investigation is beyond the scope of this project.

Bophana Center

The Bophana Center is a main organizer of the festival and plays an important role in advertising the festival, which they do mostly through their Facebook page. As a large contributor of programming through their youth documentary filmmaking programs, Bophana also emphasizes their educational projects and their students’ work in this marketing—currently, these projects have focused on Indigenous communities, stories, and voices and on conservation awareness. At CIFF 2022, a significant portion of the documentary programming focused on Indigenous populations in Cambodia and abroad, and Bophana’s social media highlighted both their mission to nurture Indigenous youth filmmakers and to educate other Cambodians about their communities. In a Facebook post, the Center writes that “the Bophana Center values and respects the culture and traditions of Indigenous communities by training Indigenous youth, especially women, in the skill of documentary filmmaking and multimedia production as well as encouraging them to produce videos with Indigenous languages” and emphasizes the opportunities they create for Indigenous students to “express their voice through the screening of films made under their participation.”⁶⁰

For Bophana, it appears education is their main goal for CIFF—both in social issues and in filmmaking practice. In their day-to-day practices, they maintain many

⁶⁰ Accessed June 23, 2023. <https://www.facebook.com/bophanacenter.cambodia/posts/pfbid0psBjicBdJLSeMhLN6YhjVATe7BLJ7nQgdr3x6jDGcebJw2Uzvapx5KABRRfdA7Eul>.

filmmaking programs specifically to teach young people video production skills and foster filmmaking talent. Their focus on documentaries underscores the educational motivations as not only do youth learn filmmaking skills but they are also encouraged to create works for the purpose of educating others. CIFF was then a major site for exhibiting their students' work and sharing it with a wider audience. In addition to Indigenous peoples, the documentary programming explored topics relating to environmental education—with a programming block title “Beautiful Planet”—including issues of climate change, habitat loss, and the Mekong. Bophana’s emphasis is on youth and education, like the MCEFA, but with a clear orientation toward the value of education itself, in addition to a desire to train the next generation of filmmakers.

At the Grassroots

Desiring Audiences

Jasmine Nadua Trice observes that “perhaps no aspect of film culture is more common than an internationally lauded art cinema’s absent national audience.”⁶¹ This certainly rings true in the Cambodian context, where art cinema remains an exceptionally niche interest. Rithy Panh, for example, is a highly respected filmmaker in the global cinema world, who has won numerous accolades at the world’s most prestigious film festivals, served on juries at Cannes, mentored young filmmakers around the world—and yet, his films do not draw large audiences in Cambodia. As a non-diasporic example, Kavich Neang’s *White Building* (2021), was released in Cambodia to

⁶¹ Trice 2021a, 3

underwhelming box office performance, even when factoring reduced cinema capacity during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶² However, with Cambodian independent cinema in the early stages of development, still producing mostly short films, the film community has a unique opportunity to build audiences alongside the industry itself.

In the case of absent local audiences in Southeast Asian alternative cinemas, it is common for local audiences to feel that internationally successful films are not representative of their respective national cultures—for example, works by directors like Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Lav Diaz routinely fail to capture local audiences even as they win widespread acclaim on the global festival circuit. The gap between international acclaim and local acclaim can be explained in a few ways. For one, Apichatpong’s films, though heavily influenced by Thai culture, are expressed through a western-influenced cinematic language. As an Art Institute of Chicago graduate, Apichatpong’s style is informed by directors such as Jean-Luc Godard and Francis Ford Coppola, meaning his films are especially legible to the western-dominated global festival audience.⁶³ Internationally, he is particularly lauded for his stories, for his unique engagements with Thai culture and Thai identity, and yet, at home, his work has faced opposition and censorship in the name of Thai nationalism.⁶⁴ Nationalist discourses around authenticity and culture can have a gatekeeping effect on an artists’ abilities to both innovate and to reach local audiences. In Cambodia, however, much of the

⁶² Daniel Mattes, personal communication, July 2022

⁶³ De Valck 2016, 110-2

⁶⁴ Fuhrmann 2016, 38-41; 150-2

independent film activity is centered in local communities of younger artists, many of whom focus on telling specifically Cambodian stories of Cambodian youth. While it is early to tell for sure, perhaps the locally-oriented nature of Cambodian indie filmmaking will help build local audiences as the industry develops.

In contrast with the entertainment-focused commercial film industry, independent art cinema focuses on aesthetics, themes, and artistry, nearly always at the expense of commercial viability. They may deal in challenging social critique or radical narrative structures or experimental visuals, but even simpler, they tend not to have the commercial budgets for marketing. As Marijke de Valck suggests, art filmmakers must work to create audiences for their work, and film festivals are the primary site for producing alternative cinema audiences. Therefore, CIFF is an ideal space for Cambodian filmmakers to showcase their work and to build local audiences for their films.

However, attracting audiences for independent film is still a significant challenge for Cambodian artists. As the main venue for viewing them is an annual film festival, there is a strong need to establish regularity in distribution, a need taken up by the recently-opened venue Cine Hub which will be discussed in Chapter 4. As discussed previously in this chapter, Trice's concept of "themed spaces" is still a hurdle for filmmakers as CIFF carries elements of exclusivity despite efforts to make it accessible to all. Opportunities for distribution and building audiences are promising, however. The next section will illustrate some of the concerns and interests of audiences and

filmmakers at CIFF which will offer insights into possibilities for the future of the film community.

Filmmaker-audience praxis

A unique element of the film festival within the cinema world is its specific construction as a space for filmmakers and audiences to interact and engage in cinematic discussion. From the industry side, film festivals are a venue for filmmakers to showcase their work and to network with others in the industry. For audiences, film festivals present opportunities to both view unique, innovative films and to engage directly with filmmakers, usually in the form of post-screening Q&A sessions. Through their encouragement of audience participation, film festivals create a discursive space that brings together artist and audience in a way unique to the festival experience.

As CIFF envisions itself as Cambodian film industry nexus, and heavily targets youth audiences, the discourses generated through its audience participation are important for understanding the current trend of the industry. CIFF is variously presented as industry networking event, educational and cultural program, and showcase for Cambodian cinema—so how do filmmaker and audience practices reflect those groups' engagement with these festival ideals?

Audiences

The festival opened at the Chaktomuk Theater with the documentary short program “Voices of Indigenous People.” Part of a Bophana Center education and outreach project, the films screened were student productions made by Khmer and Indigenous

youth. The large audience consisted of mostly young people, many in school uniforms, and a large group from the Indigenous Tampuan community represented in the films. During the Q&A segment, filmmakers were joined on stage by their film subjects, and questions were directed to both. Audience questions indicated a strong curiosity in Indigenous life, particularly the material challenges communities faced and how people were overcoming them—challenges like women’s and children’s health disparities, poverty, and lack of access to social services. The consensus from both filmmakers and audience was on the educational power of film as it brought stories of Cambodia’s Indigenous minorities to the mostly Khmer Phnom Penh audience. As for the documentary subjects, they expressed happiness at seeing their community represented in film and gratitude for the platform to discuss challenges for ethnic minorities in Cambodia. One audience member asked about NGOs active in the Indigenous community—the answer was not specific but described women’s health and childhood development agencies working in the community. Another audience member asked why the Tampuan language films were presented with English subtitles rather than Khmer, to which the filmmaker responded that they made both versions but chose to screen the English version to accommodate foreigners. Notably, however, there were few foreigners in the audience—at most 2 or 3. Broadly, the Q&A session represented a Khmer audience’s interest in learning about Indigenous life, particularly the similarities and differences between Khmer and Indigenous experiences, suggesting a genuine desire for common understanding.

In another setting, the Bophana Center, CIFF held an Oxfam presentation and short film screenings discussing the impact of COVID-19 on informal economy workers. The films showcased diverse worker experiences, including migrant laborers in Thailand, a woman tuk-tuk driver, KTV hostesses, and domestic workers, many of whom were in attendance. This audience, unlike other events I attended, was entirely Cambodian and although an English interpreter was live translating the event, the audio headsets went completely untouched. As a mixed-race Cambodian American, who happened to be furiously scribbling away in a notebook the entire time, I stood out quite conspicuously—and certainly did not escape the interpreter’s notice. After the screenings, he approached me to ask why I hadn’t used his headset, jokingly saying he was disappointed no one had listened to him. In our conversation, he told me he was a freelance interpreter and was volunteering his time to help out Bophana director Sopheap Chea.

Also present were a group of journalists and TV crews documenting the proceedings and interviewing participants. After the presentations and screenings, a Q&A session was held with a panel of three film subjects. The discussion focused on the unique precarity informal workers faced under the pandemic, and notably called attention to gender and class divisions of reproductive labor experienced by the domestic workers and tuk-tuk driver. For example, the tuk-tuk driver talks about her experiences as a woman in an overwhelmingly male-dominated occupation and how, as a single mother, she often had to bring her daughter along to work, causing her to lose business from customers who objected to riding with her child. This disadvantage, compounding

on the already scarce business from the pandemic, made daily life a struggle. She was sharply critical of patriarchal society, arguing that men have the luxury to be free from their families because women do not, and so she chooses to raise her daughter alone. Overall, the event created space for open discussion about the real, material struggles that Cambodia's many informal workers face, not just due to COVID-19, but structurally in society. Sokha Srey, the Oxfam representative, highlighted the power of the film medium as a tool for raising awareness and advocating for social programs by educating and generating discussion.

At the French Institute, first-time student filmmakers showcased short films they produced through the Cambodia-Japan Filmmaking Workshop, a joint venture by the Japan Foundation and the Sunflower Film Organization (SFO), a local non-profit working to increasing youth involvement in the film industry. At the workshop, students were tasked with adapting short stories written by peers into short films, learning film production from the earliest stages of scriptwriting to budgeting, shooting, and post-production. The event opened with short speeches by organization officials—the directors of the Japan Foundation Phnom Penh office, SFO, CFC. The first two emphasized the expressive quality of film while the CFC director spoke of the increasing foreign attention on Khmer film and the importance of collaboration. After the screenings, the workshop participants held a Q&A session with the audience where they discussed the challenges they faced, including the struggles of navigating teamwork, budgets, and time constraints. The audience was primarily made of school-age

Cambodian youth, including the films' crews and actors, though some white foreigners were present. However, the event was held exclusively in Khmer, apart from the Japan Foundation's director, who spoke in English. The audience was highly engaged and many spoke up to ask about the challenges of making films and to offer their own criticisms of the films. A notable source of criticism came from the short stories' authors, who were all in the audience. There was a dialogue between the writers and filmmakers, as they discussed the challenges of translating between the two mediums, arguing opposite sides of adaptational faithfulness. Filmmakers—who did not collaborate with the authors—emphasized that adapting another's work is difficult, particularly from a different medium, and that they need to be allowed creative liberty—while authors generally accepted the need for changes, some expressed disappointment in some of the changes, with one author even finding the adaptation of their story to be the complete opposite of their theme. Despite the disagreements, though, the discussion centered around collaboration, opening up discourse on teamwork and community building. The event ended with a group photo, with the audience called on stage to join the workshop team. The Cambodia-Japan Workshop showcase ultimately raised familiar themes in the festival discourse, including the power of film for expression and a strong youth interest in the filmmaking process. However, it also highlighted sites of conflict in the community, through the authors' pushback against the filmmakers' adaptational practices, one of the few examples of strong audience criticism—and in fact, confrontation—that I encountered at CIFF.

Filmmakers

Kavich Neang, co-founder of independent film collective Anti-Archive, is a rising star in Cambodian cinema, in recent years garnering significant international acclaim for his work in documentary and drama film. Best known for his 2019 documentary feature *Last Night I Saw You Smiling* and his 2021 drama *White Building*, Neang has spent most of his filmmaking career documenting life in the now-demolished White Building where he was also raised. His work explores themes of shifting urbanity and development in Phnom Penh, particularly as experienced by youth growing up with the rapidly changing modernity of urban Cambodia. For CIFF, *White Building* was a major attraction and a key example of Cambodian success on the international festival circuit—the film earned Neang award nominations at such festivals as Venice, London, Hong Kong, Singapore, Tokyo Filmex, and Chicago, and earned lead actor Piseth Chhun the prize for best actor in Venice’s Orizzonti competition. At its main CIFF screening, held at Legend Cinema Exchange Square, festival-goers had the chance to discuss the film with Neang during the director’s Q&A. In his responses, Neang highlighted the potential of cinema as an expressive medium and that his approach was to create a “reflection of reality” in his work. One audience member, a white American, asked Neang whether evictions like the one in his film are a common occurrence in Phnom Penh to which he replied that it does happen but that the events in *White Building* are based in his own experience. This type of question, though well-intentioned, reflects prevailing western attitudes that Cambodian films (and others from outside the imperial core) must educate, to depict

reality in a certain way, that artists must explain themselves.⁶⁵ For Neang, the focus of his film is expression and affect, seeking to capture the feeling of living through the eviction, through precarity—not necessarily to educate audiences about the facts of eviction. At CIFF, whose audiences are predominantly local, questions like this were uncommon, at least at events I attended. When asked about the challenges of filmmaking in Cambodia, Neang explained that there is a general lack of resources, including a shortage of qualified producers and absence of local funding. Because of this, independent filmmakers must rely on international funding which results in the need to “sell filmmakers” through their portfolios and personal stories. This need to “sell” directly reflects Anti-Archive’s practice, particularly with Danech San’s film work and their recent collaboration with Polen Ly, whose recent Anti-Archive produced documentary short *Further and Further Away* (2022) has received international recognition, raising his profile and advancing his career. Despite the challenges inherent to a filmmaking, however, Neang also expressed the fun side of his work, mentioning the sense of community that comes from working with friends and the opportunities to share festival experiences.

In a different setting, a conversation with Australian documentarian James Gerrand at the French Institute, Neang drew from his experiences filming *Last Night I Saw You Smiling*. The two filmmakers represented two very different periods and approaches to Cambodian documentary—Gerrand the 1970s and Neang the present day.

⁶⁵ Lê 2021, 107

The event took the form of a presentation by Gerrand and free-flowing conversation between him and Neang, where they discussed purpose, style, and practice. Though they come from different traditions of documentary filmmaking, the directors found common ground in their understanding of affective filmmaking and in the challenges of working around low budgets. During the Q&A portion of the event, Neang again emphasized the roles of expression and reality in his work, saying that he wishes to “make audiences feel as if they are in the film” and for his audiences “to feel with the characters” on screen. He explained that when he first heard that the White Building would be demolished, he rushed to borrow a camera and film what he could of his home. The triple limitations of equipment, crew, and time led to his film’s style. As a reaction to the chaos of people packing up their lives before the building’s impending destruction, Neang chose a slow style in which he sat down with neighbors and recorded their candid stories. Functioning as a precursor to *White Building*, *Last Night I Saw You Smiling* is a representation of reality through a lack of control, contrasting with *White Building*’s method of complete control.⁶⁶ When asked about the slow pacing of *White Building* (and its connection to the documentary), Neang expressed a desire to stay truthful to the reality of his community’s story and a focus on capturing memory, again pointing toward the expressive/affective power of his medium.

Allison Chhorn is a Cambodian-Australian multidisciplinary artist who held her first exhibition in Cambodia at CIFF as part of the festival’s partnership with the

⁶⁶ More on the lack of control in *Last Night I Saw You Smiling* in Chapter 4.

Australian Embassy. The “Focus on Allison Chhorn” was held at Java Creative Cafe⁶⁷ and included screenings of three of Chhorn’s experimental shorts followed by a reception and photo exhibition. Chhorn’s art deals with her experiences growing up in the Khmer diaspora, exploring themes of displacement, memory, and postmemory. Her exhibition was unique among CIFF events as it was one of only a few showcases of diasporic art with the artist in attendance. In Q&A, Chhorn described her creative aesthetic and influence from slow cinema as an invitation for contemplation and imagination, and her use of environmental sound as a method to draw viewers into the mood of the film. She emphasized her visual arts background—as a painter and a photographer—as influential to her experimental film practice. Her films dwell in the image, close-ups, textures, soundscapes, voices, exploring the loss, longing, memory of her diasporic experience. Her photographs, shot on black and white film, depict a family greenhouse in images evocative of the archival photos of journalists like Elizabeth Becker.⁶⁸ Across her oeuvre, Chhorn develops an archival memory situated in the liminal spaces of displacement and loss. Her exhibition was a valuable opportunity to share ideas and experiences between an artist of the diaspora and the local art community in Phnom Penh.

In a first for the Cambodian film industry, CIFF organized a panel discussion, “Women in Cinema,” focusing entirely on women in the film industry. Held in the 35th

⁶⁷ An art-focused cafe that regularly hosts art exhibitions and film screenings, located in the Toul Tompoung neighborhood of Phnom Penh.

⁶⁸ Elizabeth Becker was one of only a few journalists allowed into DK Cambodia and took many photographs during her 1978 visit. Many of these black-and-white photos depict the countryside with a strange, almost dreamlike quality due to the film she used and her unique composition. Although I do not know whether Chhorn has viewed these or other archival photos, the visual parallels are striking.

floor conference room at the Rosewood Hotel, the panel brought together a diverse group of women working in the Cambodian film industry, including filmmakers, makeup artists, and costume designers who ranged in experience from industry veterans to film students.⁶⁹ The panel was a venue for the participants to discuss the unique challenges and experiences of women in the industry. A major topic of discussion was the patriarchal nature of the film industry, including rampant sexual harassment and male solidarity, leading to an exclusionary industry culture. Another example of patriarchal pressure discussed was the pervasiveness of traditional social expectations, resulting in difficulties for women in leadership positions as male colleagues were often unwilling to “take orders” from women. The panel created space for candid discussion of the structural inequalities and hostilities women are facing as they build careers in the Cambodian film industry, yet panelists offered some glimmers of hope. Some described a sense of shifting social perceptions and increased openness to women working in film, leading to new opportunities.

A familiar topic which came up was the lack of funding for independent filmmaking, leading to issues with retention—often, filmmakers would secure funding to make one short film but could not continue their careers for lack of funding. Panelists also discussed mental health as anxieties over funding and oppressive work environments contributed to traumatic experiences. To address these issues, some panelists suggested that film workers need better representation within the industry. On

⁶⁹ Panelists included Danech San of Anti-Archive, documentarian Ngeum Phally, and Allison Chhorn.

audiences, Allison Chhorn noted that she was interested in the differences between Cambodian and Australian audience perspectives toward her work, as the two sides of her diaspora experience. Overall, the panel facilitated a rich discussion which exposed some of the systemic issues of the film industry and centered the marginalized voices of women in the male-dominated industry, revealing a level of candor rare in public discourse.

Takeaways from CIFF

From CIFF's audience and filmmaker discussions, a few common themes emerge. The most prominent is the concept of film as expression, a medium that allows for the sharing of stories and feelings. This emerges in both artistic and pragmatic sense—for example, Neang and Chhorn use film as an artistic medium to capture and explore memory, while Bophana's film students use documentary to call attention to social problems and advocate for change. Across nearly all audience-filmmaker discourses, there was an engagement with material conditions. Material conditions for informal workers, Indigenous communities, filmmakers, youth—these themes were constantly discussed throughout CIFF, in films and in discussion. It is evident that CIFF is both valuable and valued as a discursive space, bringing together a cinema community that engages with problems affecting everyday lives and the future of filmmaking. Despite the common discussion of struggle, however, CIFF discourses appear as generally hopeful, forward-looking, but candid conversations of today's realities.

Interlude: *Sunrise in My Mind*



From the doorway of the salon, Pich gazes out toward the busy street (San 2020).

Claiming Space, Claiming Agency

The young hair stylist leans against the doorframe, gazing longingly toward the outside world as the commotion of motorbikes—of bustling city life—sounds from just off-screen. Pich is tied to the salon, only allowed to dream beyond its walls. Customers come and go, yet she is always there.

In this Phnom Penh, urban space is partitioned—sociality is tied to labor, and her work in the salon is the source of her connections. While they work, Pich’s co-workers talk of marriage, of eating at restaurants, while she only listens. They tease her about a young delivery driver who comes by regularly for a shampooing, clearly just to see her—she denies any attraction. “It’ll never happen,” she says, though she smiles when she says it.

To labor under capitalism is to experience alienation. As life revolves around the need to work, to produce, the workplace becomes the primary agent of life—and its space severs the connection between Pich and the world by keeping her in it. Even Lay, the delivery driver, whose job takes him all over the city, feels alienated, evidenced as he sits alone during his break, apart from the other drivers.

This time, when Lay arrives for his regular hair-washing, Pich gives in to her desire and agrees to have dinner with him. Though they both take a chance together, to explore the possibilities of their feelings, the two remain in the salon's world—they eat silently, sitting at a table inside the salon.

In a city where public space is limited, where development is always for profit, where life moves at a breakneck pace, their slow moment of quiet emotional exploration reads as an emancipatory claim of agency.

Chapter 4: Informal Spaces

A defining characteristic of Cambodia's contemporary cinema culture is its grassroots atmosphere of collaboration and shared learning. To address the absent formal film education infrastructure, Cambodian filmmakers have instead built community around their shared passion for cinema, developing informal networks for collaboration, education, and mentorship. Internationally successful diasporic artists and local film professionals alike have the common goal of sharing their experience and expertise with the new generation of aspiring filmmakers, offering a local alternative to the traditional institution of film schools.

Cinema education and discourse flourishes in the informal spaces of film clubs and film events, in addition to more high-profile, organized events such as Cambodia International Film Festival (CIFF). Most of the informal spaces for networking and education are led by enterprising film community members who share in envisioning a robust future for Cambodian cinema. Informal discourses are therefore an essential site for understanding the milieu of the Cambodian film industry and to imagine its possible futures.

Cine Sharing at Cine Hub

Building Cine Hub

Nestled amongst the bustle of central Phnom Penh, a quiet side street is quickly becoming the epicenter of Cambodian cinema. Just off one of Phnom Penh's busiest thoroughfares, Monivong Boulevard, Street 200 is home to three institutions at the heart

of Cambodian cinema: the Bophana Center, the Cambodian Film Commission (CFC), and the Cinema and Cultural Diffusion Department.⁷⁰ Hidden on the roof of the Film Commission, however, is perhaps the most dynamic and exciting space for the future of Cambodian film—Cine Hub.

Conceptualized by film producer Chandara So,⁷¹ Cine Hub is exactly what its name implies—an aspirational hub for Cambodian cinema, a space where filmmakers and aspiring filmmakers can share ideas and learn from one another. So envisioned the Cine Hub concept after participating in film workshops at the Busan Asian Film School and teamed up with cinematographer Kimlong Meng to develop the CFC’s rooftop into an inviting space for the film community. Spacious and open, Cine Hub is a comfortable space lined with lush green plants and equipped with a cafe and abundant seating—perfect for the many events hosted there. Since its inauguration in 2022, Cine Hub has played host to many film screenings, masterclasses, seminars, networking events, and parties.

Acknowledging Cine Hub’s close ties to CIFF, So expresses a desire to cultivate the festival atmosphere year round, signaling a desire to not only create a space for local cinema but also for film discourse.⁷² Cine Hub events are indeed a microcosm of CIFF—screenings of local films, filmmaker discussions, industry workshops, networking—in

⁷⁰ The Cinema and Cultural Diffusion Department is part of the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, responsible for film permitting. (Nou 2022)

⁷¹ So also works as a film commissioner with the CFC.

⁷² “The festival happens once and year. But I was [sic] to have the festive moods for all people related to the cinema all year round.” Quoted in Nou 2022.

essence, appropriating film festival ritual to foster year-round film community. Writing in the context of Filipino cinema, Jasmine Trice illustrates how the alt film space Mogwai Cinematheque set up its own festival mirroring the commercial Metro Manila Festival, borrowing both its timeline and its symbols—local films, local audiences, aims for national film culture—presenting local alternative cinema as a truer embodiment of these ideals.⁷³ To lay a foundation for its own film community, the alternative festival seeks to appropriate the commercial festival’s time and thus its audiences. Trice identifies regularity as a key strategy for building film community, needed to combat the inherent ephemerality of film screenings—and, consequently, film audiences. CIFF establishes an annual regularity, which Cine Hub takes further by offering similar events throughout the year. In this way, Cine Hub seeks to foster film community by providing a space for CIFF’s developing audiences to stay engaged year-round.

Another temporality utilized by So and Cine Hub is the familiar nostalgic orientation toward 1960s cinema culture. So looks back to the resourceful efforts of early Cambodian filmmakers as they built the first film industry, drawing inspiration from their work and the community they built—“We were once a nation of cinephiles,” he says.⁷⁴ Beyond building Cine Hub, So also hopes to secure an official designation for Street 200 as “Cinema Street,” a move which would institutionalize the neighborhood as the center of cinema culture. Street 200 itself holds a symbolic meaning, rooted in nostalgia, as it was once home to many film workers and to a cafe that served as a hub for the film

⁷³ Trice 2021a, 138-143

⁷⁴ Quoted in Zak 2022

community during the 1960s.⁷⁵ Like others in the contemporary arts community,⁷⁶ So's invocation of nostalgia is generative—forward looking in its attitude toward the past.

So far, So's Cine Hub ambitions appear to be working. During CIFF 2022, Cine Hub hosted film industry parties that brought together many from both the industry and wider arts community. After the festival, Cine Hub events, held weekly throughout the summer, were well-attended by both artists and university-aged youth. When guests like Kavich Neang and LinDa Saphan gave talks at Cine Hub, the ensuing discussions were lively with young people asking questions and other attending artists offering their own perspectives in dialogue.⁷⁷ A scroll through Cine Hub's Facebook pages suggests that this trend continues, evidenced by the group photos that have become tradition after every event. The following sections will take a closer look at several Cine Hub events during that summer.

Davy Chou - Masterclass Short film: Personal Filmmaking Journey⁷⁸

When Davy Chou spoke at Cine Hub, shortly after his return to Phnom Penh from a stay in France, the arts community turned it into a celebration. There was genuine cause to celebrate—only a few months prior, Chou's new film had earned him recognition at Cannes and a major deal with Sony Pictures. And only a few months later, his career breakthrough would begin to materialize.

⁷⁵ Zak 2022

⁷⁶ For example, Anti-Archive, Sa Sa Art Projects, Silapak Trotchaek Pneik.

⁷⁷ The following discussion of three such events is based on my own participation at Cine Hub during summer 2022.

⁷⁸ The titles in this section are the posted names of these Cine Hub events.

The talk, like most at Cine Hub, took the form of a dialogue between Chou and his interlocutor Taingvitou Mut, then-marketing and communications manager for CIFF. The topic was Chou's development as a filmmaker, starting from the very beginning, with particular emphasis on his earliest short films. Chou talked about his early influences as a young cinephile in France—Scorsese, Tarkovsky, Wong Kar-wai—influences that persist in his theoretical style. The event was billed as a masterclass on short film and Chou did screen his first ever short film, the aptly titled *Le Premier Film de Davy Chou* (2006), of which he broke down the techniques and influences he used. Overall, however, the scope of his talk was much larger as he shared his experiences throughout his career with the audience of both friends and eager students.

Le Premier Film de Davy Chou was an interesting film to share and provoked a spirited reaction from the audience. His decision to share his very first film, from well before he became the respected artist he is today, created a genuinely vulnerable moment with his audience—particularly apt as vulnerability was the subject of the short. The film depicts visceral close-ups of a young man with a face covered in severe cystic acne as he views himself in a bathroom mirror. This film would get quite disgusting, Chou warned, and the audience gasped, wincing as they watched the man pop pimple after pimple, all in extreme, revolting, close-up. Chou explained that, for his first film, he wanted to capture the feeling of releasing a first film—to express the vulnerability he felt putting himself out there as an artist for the first time. This moment he shared with the audience was valuable as, with Chou on the brink of international fame and already a

giant within the Khmer film community, the audience may find it difficult to imagine him as a young kid making his first film. For aspiring young filmmakers, worried about putting their art out into the world, it might be encouraging—and Cine Hub is a space uniquely positioned to create these experiences.

Chou's overall focus on short films was significant, particularly as Cine Hub's target audience includes students and aspiring filmmakers. Independent cinema in Cambodia is still in the early stages of development, so short films occupy an important space in the emerging film culture and industry. Evidenced by the CIFF program, much of the local indie production is still focused on short films, which are typically an intermediary step to build competitive portfolios for the international feature funding market. However, a significant hurdle is the currently low conversion rate from short to feature—many filmmakers produce one or two shorts only to leave the profession soon after. Therefore, the insights of filmmakers like Chou or Kavich Neang, who have successfully navigated the process, are highly valued.

As his interlocutor, Mut was given access to a deep catalog of Chou's files—access which he used to its fullest, surprising Chou with embarrassing early footage and asking him to talk about it. Moments like these kept a sense of playful banter between Chou, Mut, and friends in the audience, maintaining a light and celebratory atmosphere. Chou touched on wide ranging topics from his career in Cambodia, from teaching film workshops in 2009 to finding international success with *Golden Slumbers* (2011) to

working with first-time actors in his first feature *Diamond Island* (2016) to navigating the world of major distribution deals with *Return to Seoul* (2022).

The audience was eager to hear from him, to learn from his insights gathered over a decade working in the Cambodian film industry, to access this intimate portrait of one of Cambodia's most acclaimed artists, and to share in celebration of his latest success. Cine Hub is unique in its ability to provide a public space for these types of experiences—a young person interested in film need only check the Cine Hub Facebook page to join the community.

Kavich Neang - Ciné Sharing: From Documentary to Feature Film

When Kavich Neang spoke at Cine Hub, he similarly discussed his development as a filmmaker. However, his approach was quite different—Neang's talk focused more on the technical aspects of his work. Mut returned as the interlocutor, though this time the entire event was in Khmer. In recounting the trajectory of his career, Neang highlighted the role of documentary form. He got his start in filmmaking through documentary shorts and that influence continues to inform his narrative work, including his debut feature *White Building* (2021).

Like Chou, Neang screened his first film for the Cine Hub audience, a documentary short called *A Scale Boy* (2010). He then followed with a screening and discussion of his first narrative short, *Three Wheels* (2015). The former film follows a young boy who works along the Phnom Penh riverside, offering to weigh passersby in hopes of earning money for his school fees and rent. *Three Wheels* explores the concept

of forced marriage under the Khmer Rouge, painting a nuanced portrait of such a couple in present-day Phnom Penh. Juxtaposing these two films allowed Neang to illustrate the ways in which his experience with documentary directly informs his narrative practice—later culminating with the duo of *Last Night I Saw You Smiling* (2019) and *White Building*—and to express how narrative films can serve a documentary purpose. Rithy Panh’s influence is clear, particularly his practice of lending voice to historical silences. *Three Wheels* represents a younger generation seeking to understand the unspoken traumas of parents and grandparents—Neang utilizes the narrative form to portray the strained relationship of an older couple dealing with the specter of forced marriage haunting their decades-long life together. Using the language of film, Neang translates the psychological and emotional traumas of an older generation for his audiences.

With the success of *White Building*, and the spotlight it cast on the lived experiences of a real community, Neang’s preceding documentary gains newfound relevance. During his talk, Neang used *Last Night I Saw You Smiling* to discuss a challenge inherent to filming a documentary—directing real people, not actors. With the film, he captures the final days of the White Building, recording its physical environment and his neighbors as they pack up their lives in preparation for the building’s impending demolition. In one of the film’s most poignant scenes, Neang films a neighbor performing a song in the empty shell of her packed-up apartment—Ros Sereysothea’s “River of Lost Love,” an elegiac expression of heartache and loss. The somber tone of her performance is sharply contrasted with the playful attitude shared between both filmmaker and

subject. She ends her performance with a smile, a laugh, and professes her love for song and dance—though she is poor, she explains, these moments of joy keep her life happy. From behind his camera, Neang asks her if she knows how to choreograph her singing, playfully teasing her for another performance. She ultimately obliges, but the moment is cut short when, offscreen, another neighbor peers around the door to ask her what she plans to do about the coming move. The neighbor's sudden appearance cuts through Neang's control of the scene and the heavy reality of impending displacement takes hold once more—moving anxiety and financial uncertainty replace jokes and laughter.

Neang brought this scene to his Cine Hub audience as a powerful example of the challenge of documentary direction. Invoking that enduring question of cinema-verité posed by Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin more than 60 years prior, Neang explained his desire to record the reality of his subjects, to portray the truth of the White Building's demolition through the genuine performances of his neighbors. A director's job, he admitted, is to guide and control the scene but it was in fact this moment of losing control that gave the scene its power. The other neighbor's intrusion was entirely unexpected but, for Neang, the contrast between his control and loss of control is where the truth of his film emerges.

These documentary concepts sparked genuine interest among his audience, composed mainly of young filmmakers and students. This audience was smaller than Chou's, though attendees were similarly engaged—the tone was more in line with a traditional masterclass. Neang's use of Khmer over English also signaled the target

audience and purpose, facilitating deep engagement with his technical and conceptual instruction. However, like most Cine Hub events, the tone remained informal—“Ciné Sharing” is indeed an apt name. Like Chou, Neang came to share his experience and expertise with the film community, bridging the gap in formal education with informal Ciné Sharing and fostering a collaborative learning atmosphere.

LinDa Saphan - Masterclass Film Analysis: A Scholar's Perspectives

LinDa Saphan’s visit to Cine Hub coincided with the launch of her book, *Faded Reels*, and represented a different segment of the cinema community than the two filmmakers previously discussed. As a film scholar, Saphan sought to share film criticism techniques from the academic perspective, drawing from the work of her book to give a spirited lecture on the cinematic language of prewar movies. Her talk fits with the mission of her book, expressed during her book launch talk and previously discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis—in short, encouraging local interest in film criticism. As Saphan argued, criticism and scholarship form a symbiosis with filmmaking, thus a pillar of cinema culture. If the infrastructure for filmmaking education is limited, then the opportunities for film studies are even sparser. Saphan’s Cine Hub talk was a chance for her to engage directly, in person, with her book’s desired audience—the local film community and students.

The talk was presented in a lecture format, this time without a discussant. Using examples drawn from her book, she presented film clips, describing techniques used by the directors through her analytical lens. Viewed as a supplement to *Faded Reels*, this

presentation showcased the actual work behind the book, as Saphan took the audience through her process of analysis and shared her experiences conducting the archival research—further establishing her desire for the book to encourage and model future scholarship. In one example, while watching a film made in the 1960s, she felt something was off when she heard George Michael’s “Careless Whisper”—she quickly realized that the film had been edited because that song did not exist until 1984.⁷⁹ This story illustrates Saphan’s struggle to archive original films as the old film reels are mostly gone and surviving copies have been through multiple layers of copying and editing.

Cine Hub’s role as a public forum creates unique possibilities for film discourse, and Saphan’s talk was a prime example. Several prominent filmmakers were in attendance—including Davy Chou and Kavich Neang—whose perspectives enriched the conversation, almost transforming lecture into seminar. Chou, in particular, engaged Saphan in impromptu dialogue throughout her presentation, sharing his experiences in the same area of research during his work on *Golden Slumbers*. Similarly, in the discussion of cinematic language, Chou drew from his own practice, talking about early Khmer directors’ impacts on him. Himself a scholar of cinema and film language, albeit from the perspective of a practitioner, Chou’s dialogue with Saphan highlighted the significance of these early works in Khmer cinema and the generative possibilities of Cine Hub for local film discussion.

⁷⁹ A common occurrence in existing copies of films and, for this reason, Saphan finds a study of soundtracks in early Khmer film to be futile (Saphan 2022, 17-8). However, this multi-layered editing over time is a unique element of Khmer cinema that presents a fascinating opportunity for future study.

Cine Hub Future?

These events are only a small window into the breadth of experience the cine-curious can find at Cine Hub. The venue regularly hosts guests from throughout the film industry, with a wide range of roles. On any given week, visitors may learn about cinematography, scriptwriting, acting—to name just a few topics—all directly from active film professionals. The open, public nature of Cine Hub events cultivates an atmosphere of collaboration and access in which all are encouraged to join in and enjoy cinema, building toward an engaged and inclusive cinema community. Borrowing CIFF’s festival mood is a useful tool to this end, and establishing a more frequent regularity creates the consistent opportunities for participation needed at the early stages of developing lasting cinema culture.

Anti-Archive, Dambaul, and Building an Arts Community

Sharing the Anti-Archive Office

Down a quiet alley off Norodom Boulevard, hidden amongst an array of embassies, banks, and political headquarters, Phnom Penh’s arts community is building a space for artistic collaboration, discussion, and research. The modest building blends in with the surrounding residences and shop houses but inside, Anti-Archive is hard at work developing new Cambodian cinema. Anti-Archive shares the building with others in the arts scene, including curator Meta Moeng and her arts resource center Dambaul,⁸⁰

⁸⁰ The Khmer word ដំបូល meaning roof or rooftop, referring to its physical location above the Anti-Archive office.

documentarian and printmaker Prum Ero,⁸¹ and the architecture start-up VISOMI Architects. While Anti-Archive is at the forefront of Cambodian indie cinema, their partnerships outside the film scene suggest a commitment to mutual support within the arts scene as a whole. Their office connects multiple art tendencies into a potential nexus for cross-disciplinary community building.⁸²

For this aspirational community center, Meta Moeng plays a key role. Her Dambaul project seeks to build a community-driven space for artists—as she calls it, an “arts resource home”—and moving it to the Anti-Archive building is a step toward that goal. The center maintains a robust arts library and operates as a meeting and co-working space, open to all. When Moeng envisions Dambaul as a “home,” she refers to her desire for the space to cultivate a sense of belonging where artists and researchers can comfortably work, study, and collaborate.⁸³ In partnering with Anti-Archive, she also hopes to use Dambaul as an extension of their space, where guests at their events can also visit upstairs and share the space. Nurturing interdisciplinary arts community is her mission and moving in with Anti-Archive ultimately makes Dambaul a more accessible space with more opportunity to bring artists together.

⁸¹ Prum frequently collaborates on Anti-Archive projects and runs a printshop to support visual artists and photographers like Khvay Samnang, Lim Sokchanlina, and others.

⁸² This is not the first instance of Anti-Archive’s involvement in community space building. Daniel Mattes was a co-owner of the former TINI Cafe + Bar (2015-2020), which was opened with the goal of creating an arts community-oriented space for meeting, working, and simply hanging out. TINI also hosted art exhibitions and film screenings, becoming a regular space for many across the Phnom Penh art scene (Mattes, pers. comm., July 2022). For more on the space itself, see *Light* 2016.

⁸³ Khleang 2022

I visited Dambaul on multiple occasions, under a few different circumstances—each time providing an opportunity to explore different aspects of the project. The first time, I was visiting the Anti-Archive office when Daniel Mattes invited me upstairs to meet Moeng and to tour Dambaul. In my conversation with Moeng and Mattes, I learned the purpose and plans for the resource center which had only recently moved into this new space. Still in the middle of the transition, Moeng was busy building up the library and raising awareness of the center’s resources—despite this, she said, several other researchers had already visited Dambaul to access its library. On another occasion, I returned to Dambaul to browse the library, which holds books across a wide range of arts-related subjects with a primary focus on Cambodian and Southeast Asian arts, including several difficult-to-find books on Khmer cinema. For a researcher interested in Cambodian art, Dambaul is a valuable resource for local texts. During this visit, I was instead accompanied by Danech San, who explained that Moeng splits her time between Dambaul and her other projects as a curator. On days Moeng is out, it is usually San—who works full-time in the Anti-Archive office—that opens Dambaul to visitors. This arrangement signals a shared ownership of Dambaul as it evolves into a community-driven space. For another example of how the space is used by the community, during an Anti-Archive party I attended, Dambaul was opened to guests as a quieter space to socialize, presenting the two floors as one community center.

At this stage, it may be too early to tell precisely what role Dambaul will ultimately play in the growing art and film community, though at the present, Moeng’s

practice is focused on building the center and bringing artists together. With plans to use the space for more art events, such as classes and exhibitions, Dambaul's future as a fixture of the art community appears promising. As for the Anti-Archive office, in addition to hosting community gatherings, it is currently the site of important film discourse through the semi-regular practice of the Anti-Cine-Club.

Anti-Cine-Club

Beginning as early as 2015, the Anti-Archive team has hosted a periodic film club at the office, where they screen art films for group discussion. At Anti-Cine-Club meetings, members of the community share films and engage in lively conversation from a variety of unique perspectives—with the Anti-Archive team often sharing directly from their own filmmaking practice. The atmosphere at these meetings is a mix of cinephilic and technical, though always inclusive, as the group's passion for cinema and interest in filmmaking converge.

During the summer of 2022, after Davy Chou's return from France, Anti-Archive revived the Anti-Cine-Club for a new series of screenings. The film lineup included a mix of "canonical" cinema—works by Hou Hsiao-Hsien and Satyajit Ray, for example—and films important to the Anti-Archive team and other members of the community. Rather than following set themes, the Anti-Cine-Club follows a "sharing" ethos where members bring films they want to share with the group. The meetings are highly informal, though they do follow a general format. To start, the film's presenter offers a brief introduction, discussing the film's relevance, context, director, why they chose to share it, or any other

details they consider important. After the screening, the group discusses the film, with each attendee given time to share their impressions, thoughts, and critiques. For the Anti-Archive team, this typically involves them sharing their knowledge of filmmaking, sometimes analyzing the directors' techniques. Most important, however, is that all levels of film experience are welcome and the club maintains an inclusive atmosphere which encourages everyone to share. To demonstrate the film club's relevance, the following discussion will draw details from two of the meetings I attended over the summer.

A Glimpse into the Anti-Cine-Club

At one meeting, Danech San presented Gregg Araki's 2004 film *Mysterious Skin*. In her introduction, San explained that the film was shocking when she first saw it but she became inspired by Araki's affective practice. A pioneer of the New Queer Cinema movement of the 1990s, Araki directed *Mysterious Skin* later in his career. The film, featuring an early-career Joseph Gordon-Levitt in the lead role, examines the long-term effects of child sexual abuse through the parallel stories of two young men. Araki's film also influenced another Anti-Archive member, Davy Chou, who took inspiration from several scenes for his debut feature *Diamond Island* (2016).

Mysterious Skin is particularly served by group discussion, as it is a challenging film, explicit and unsparing in its themes and aesthetics. Informal spaces like the Anti-Cine-Club facilitate viewing and discussing films like this, which are unlikely to be found in public venues. As for this particular discussion, it facilitated open conversation about a

difficult yet influential film that also left a mark on Khmer cinema through its influence over members of the Anti-Archive team.

Another club meeting held a screening of Stan Lai's 1992 film *Secret Love for the Peach Blossom Spring*, presented by Sansitny Ruth. Ruth, a Khmer Canadian documentarian, photographer, and film teacher based in Phnom Penh, shared the film for its structural uniqueness, aesthetic beauty,⁸⁴ political themes, and its relative rarity. The film is an adaptation of Lai's landmark 1986 play, written in the waning years of martial law in Taiwan. Both versions follow two theatre companies as they struggle to share a rehearsal space following a scheduling mishap—one play a tragic romance set against the backdrop of the Chinese Civil War and post-war Taiwan, the other a farcical comedy set in the mythical utopia Peach Blossom Land. Lai uses this setup to explore themes of history, memory, and the nature of theatre.

Today, *Secret Love for the Peach Blossom Spring* is difficult to find in high quality and with English subtitles so, to share the film with the Anti-Cine-Club, Ruth personally timed English subtitles over his own copy. During the post-screening discussion, he explained that, growing up in Canada, Khmer media was largely unavailable. Looking for alternatives to dominant western media, he turned to other Asian communities, developing an interest in Chinese cinema. This sparked a conversation about access to Khmer media outside Cambodia and alternatives to western mainstream cinema for diasporic youth. Several others present shared Ruth's experience growing up in the

⁸⁴ The film was shot by Christopher Doyle, best known for his collaborations with Wong Kar-wai and a favorite of many in the community.

Khmer diaspora, including Davy Chou, myself, and a fellow graduate student conducting research in Cambodia. A common experience which emerged was a tendency toward pan-Asian friend groups and media consumption as several in the group grew up outside of Khmer enclave communities. This discussion highlights the potential of informal film spaces for discourse beyond the more structured—but still generative—conversations which occur at Cine Hub.

The Anti-Cine-Club represents a diverse group across the spectrum of the local arts community, bringing together people from varied backgrounds and experiences. Beyond the quality of discussion, these meetings also highlight the passion within the community through the collaborative process of sharing films. For example, Ruth's time-consuming labor of subtitling demonstrates a high level of care for his community and for the film. It is important to note, however, that Anti-Cine-Club is not public in the way Cine Hub is. Rather, the film club is attended by those within the Anti-Archive network. This is not to say it is exclusionary—it is simply not targeted to the same sweeping audience of youth that Cine Hub cultivates. The relatively more specialized audience of Anti-Cine-Club means it can be a space for intimate film discussion, of a wider array of films. Both spaces foster discussion but hold different purposes.

Emerging Community, Emerging Industry

Across both the more structured space of Cine Hub and the flexible space of the Anti-Archive office, film discourse, education, and community building are practiced from the grassroots of an emerging industry. As Trice argues, screening environments

affect audience encounters with films—this certainly holds true in the Cambodian film scene and is a fact clearly recognized by figures like Chandara So. In contrast with the mainstream multiplex experience, Cine Hub offers a different year-round space to engage with film and, in this collaborative environment, a more engaged audience emerges. Through both Cine Hub and Anti-Cine-Club, the necessity of establishing screening regularity is recognized and it is through this consistency that a cinema culture can develop.

Cambodian independent cinema remains an industry in flux, developing through the fragmented efforts of many passionate artists. Put simply, the industry is different people engaging in different practices, for different reasons. Consequently, it is difficult to predict the future of Cambodian indie cinema as the industry has not yet matured to the point of producing a steady supply of feature films. In the present, however, it is clear that the community embodies an ethos of collaboration, working together to build Khmer cinema for the future.

Conclusion: Toward a Cinematic Future

Although vibrant, dynamic, and exciting, the Cambodian film industry is multi-centered, decentralized in its growth. It is being built from the grassroots, with change driven by passionate individuals committed to cinema and to community. Institutions like the government, the Cambodia Film Commission, and the Cambodian International Film Festival, may envision a growing mainstream film industry and the economic success that comes with it, but, for now, art and expression are the main forces behind Khmer cinema. When the industry grows large enough, though, the implications of who holds power will likely come into focus. As Khmer cinema marches toward a Khmer *national* cinema, questions of cultural authenticity and “Khmerness”—just like those which impede other Southeast Asian indie filmmakers from local audiences—are sure to follow.

This thesis is an exploration of the film community, viewed through several important sites of practice for many of those passionate artists, audiences, and scholars who dedicate so much energy to push Cambodian cinema to greater heights. *Faded Reels*, CIFF, Cine Hub, Dambaul, Anti-Archive—all of these represent dedication and care for Cambodian art and film, from the diaspora and homeland alike.

Cambodia’s arts renaissance embodies the spirit of youth, of struggle, of collaboration and of innovation. As new generations of Cambodian artists emerge onto the world stage, they raise their own voices, express their own experiences, convey their own realities. These voices resist totalizing views of Cambodia—as a country defined by its recent history of war and genocide. They resist the too-common expectation that

“Cambodian situation[s] must be explained through this violence” by presenting new stories and by expressing their own ways of relating to history, rather than those imposed by prevailing academic and popular narratives.⁸⁵ The generative approach to nostalgia is one of these ways, acknowledging the past, borrowing from it where necessary, but firmly anchored in the material now and the ideal soon-to-be.

A recent development for the future of Cambodian cinema is the potentially changing expectations for who a Khmer filmmaker must be and what types of film they must make. Davy Chou’s latest film, *Return to Seoul* (2022), is stunningly transnational—a French-Cambodian takes inspiration from his French-Korean friend’s life experiences as a transnational adoptee to make a film which ultimately bridges both their experiences of diaspora. Though the film does speak partially from his experiences visiting Cambodia for the first time at age 25—the same age as his character, Freddie—it does not exactly tell a “Cambodian” story. Instead, Chou tells a Korean story, though in many ways, also a diaspora story.

As *Return to Seoul* screens around the world, wins awards throughout the international festival circuit, and sparks an avalanche of rave reviews in major publications, Davy Chou is in Cambodia. The film catapulted him to the highest levels of the cinema world, shortlisting him for an Academy Award nomination and getting him on a prestigious Cannes jury—but after all of the glamor, Chou returned to Cambodia to continue his work in his Khmer film community. His achievements brought Cambodia

⁸⁵ Grant 2022, 10

into the international cinema spotlight once again and *Return to Seoul* has been warmly received by the Cambodian film industry—but is a film set in Korea, about Koreans, made by a *French-Cambodian* director truly *Khmer*? For now, it certainly is.

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