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Media Ruins

Cambodian Postwar Media Reconstruction and the Geopolitics of Technology

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INTERLUDE: WARTIME MEDIA

Sihanouk worked hard to control the audiovisual media infrastructures that he knew were vital to his authoritarian regime. Yet by the late 1960s, foreign and internal pressures became too much for Sihanouk to successfully control the country, let alone the media. In July 1969, Sihanouk reestablished ties with the United States, but this strategic move came too late to prevent the United States from backing Sihanouk's right-wing military general Lon Nol, who deposed Sihanouk in March 1970 while he was away in Paris for medical treatment. The United States went on to heavily support Lon Nol's Khmer Republic in its civil war against the Khmer Rouge from 1970 to 1975.

The Lon Nol regime used the Phnom Penh radio station and the Stung Menchey transmitter first built during the Sihanouk regime. Many of my participants tell me that filmgoing continued to be popular in Phnom Penh through the civil war, even when bombs started going off in cinemas. In January 1975, a clandestine radio broadcast from the Khmer Rouge started operating in Phnom Penh.¹ When the Khmer Rouge took over Phnom Penh, in April 1975, they took over the radio station. The Khmer Rouge regime made propaganda that they distributed on the radio and in work camps: songs, radio programming, and films. By 1978, their programming included vicious attacks of the enemy Vietnamese regime, mixed in with incendiary reports of Vietnamese people and culture.²

During the Khmer Rouge regime, the United States, too, continued to wage war through media. The Voice of America (VOA) broadcasted into the country during the regime; some refugees reported listening to it in work camps secretly. Dith Pran reported to Sydney Schanberg of the *New York Times* after he migrated to the United States as a refugee that his commune

chief had a radio. Schanberg reports that “sometimes at night—maybe once a week—Pran and four or five trusted friends would gather around it with him, and surreptitiously listen to the Voice of America.”³ During the war, VOA officials had no way to know if people were listening to their broadcasts within the country. They only heard that foreign-radio listening was a capital offense and that people did not have radios, or couldn’t get batteries for them if they did have them.⁴

I am deliberately omitting a detailed history of the American bombing, the civil war, or the Khmer Rouge regime, and the ways that media played a role in these events and periods. In this omission, I seek to adjust an imbalance in postcolonial histories of Cambodia. We already have a number of histories and cultural products of Cambodia that focus exclusively on the wartime period, including Rithy Panh’s work and much Western scholarship.⁵ Though an account of the Khmer Rouge era is essential to understanding the history and contemporary conditions of Cambodia, other critical moments in Cambodian postcolonial history are sometimes overlooked. I will address this imbalance and the politics of memory in the second part of this book, particularly when I address another one of Rithy Panh’s projects, the Bophana Center and its “Khmer Rouge learning app” in the final chapter.

Throughout my research, many of my Cambodian participants and friends shared with me unspeakably painful stories from their lives, including stories about the deaths of their families and violence they experienced during the Khmer Rouge period and the later war years. I have also interviewed and substantially interacted with admitted perpetrators of violence and people who continue to hold views of racial and ethnic hatred. These stories came out through living and working in Cambodia, often over the course of multiple interviews or experiences with participants, and were brought up by participants. As a general rule, I didn’t directly ask interview subjects about their Khmer Rouge–related experiences or losses unless they naturally came up in conversation. Some of these stories are captured briefly in this book, while most are left out.

Listening to these stories has been a profound personal development experience for me; I have tried to become more skilled in the art of bearing witness to others’ trauma. Active listening, for me, was important both within and outside the academic project; outside of the research, I was moved by the deeply human experience of connection that I felt

in many interviews and other moments of research. I have tried to be an active audience to stories, as I have come to believe testimonies themselves can sometimes provide some catharsis or respite to trauma sufferers. Testimonies allow survivors to articulate their traumas, helping them find meaning in their incomprehensible experiences and feel a sense of agency.⁶ The Transcultural Psychosocial Organization (TPO), the leading NGO in mental health care in Cambodia, follows this approach. They use testimonial-based therapy as their primary modality for easing symptoms of *baskbat*, the culturally specific trauma-induced condition of psychological distress in Khmer Rouge survivors.⁷ I have also needed to learn strategies as a researcher and friend to not hold onto others' trauma (and become vicariously traumatized). This set of strategies I felt was useful for listening to, acknowledging, and working with my own and my participants' emotional experiences during research, including interviews and more casual encounters.

Ultimately, many participants shared experiences of trauma with me and these stories took varied forms. Throughout the course of the project, I began to categorize different ways people talked to me about their personal histories, how their own lives intersected with the Cambodian war period, and how they interpreted their pasts to relate to contemporary Cambodian politics. The history of trauma in Cambodia has been discussed and written about extensively, and some say the country is stereotyped for its violent and tragic history. Sometimes as a reaction to this, some participants (particularly younger ones) made a point not to foreground national trauma with me, and several participants explicitly told me their reasoning for doing this. Some older people, in recounting their autobiographies, would skip over the 1970s decade entirely. Some participants acknowledged familial and national trauma as an accepted given that they have always had to work their lives around. Others told me that they have had limited opportunity to talk about their traumatic experiences and so my attentive presence as audience amounted to something important. Some told me detailed, troubling, and gruesome accounts. Many participants were more interested in talking about what has happened since the Khmer Rouge, highlighting the strength of their communities and creative efforts, and how far the country has come. Others lament social problems in Cambodia today as products of its history. As I explore through this project, historical memory of violence comes in a number of forms and can be captured

in either oral histories or historical artifacts, and it is often uncertain and sometimes repetitive.

I do not (and cannot) make claims to a truth of history that stands outside what was told to me by my participants or represented in their media creations. We must take care when presenting painful and traumatic imagery not to exploit the “pain of others” (Susan Sontag’s phrase). There is a way in which trauma study can be voyeuristic or grounded in unacknowledgable fascination or fantasies about victimhood.⁸ The critic can also cast their analytical eye as “finer” than those suffering, as the sole person who can align the truth of the traumatic event with the representation of the trauma.⁹ Suffering at a distance is routinely appropriated and commodified in popular culture (particularly American popular culture). It is important to avoid essentializing, naturalizing, or sentimentalizing suffering in this way. Images of suffering are appropriated to appeal emotionally and morally both to global audiences and to local populations in film and in the mass media. As Arthur and Joan Kleinman argue, “the cultural capital of trauma victims—their wounds, their scars, their tragedy—is appropriated by the same popular codes through which physical and sexual violence are commodified” in other forms.¹⁰ Sometimes oversaturation of atrocity images also creates “atrocity fatigue” and immobilizes viewers.¹¹

Media creators too struggle with the ethics of traumatic representation. Rithy Panh, who himself lived through the Khmer Rouge, struggled with the ethics of presenting suffering of others in his film *S-21* (where he brought together victims from Tuol Sleng and former prison guards and torturers). He said about the film, “The idea of putting victims and executioners together is very seductive, but it’s also very tricky. You don’t want to be a voyeur. You have to develop a kind of ethic of the image.”¹² Other scholars analyzing traumatic media claim their work understanding and describing violent media can have positive outcomes and even mobilize political action. Caswell, who analyzes Tuol Sleng mug shots, argues that viewing the photos, when they are properly contextualized, can be a form of “co-witnessing.” Publishing and digitizing the photos, and deploying them as legal evidence, can be the “highest form of respect.”¹³

Bringing all of these experiences together, I decided to tell stories primarily of moving forward; this gives me a way to acknowledge trauma without dwelling on it or essentializing my participants for the suffering that they

have often experienced. I hope these stories instead give us space to focus on strength amid pain. The focus of this project is therefore to discern the role of media infrastructures and their reconstruction in processes of post-conflict healing. So, rather than detail the ways that media were used as active agents of war during the most violent periods, I instead focus on the ways in which media infrastructures were reconstructed and the ways in which media were used in processes of rebuilding after the fall of the Khmer Rouge in 1979. I move toward this project in the next chapter, addressing the media context of the immediate post-Khmer Rouge context, beginning in 1979.

For readers who want more on the Khmer Rouge period, I suggest as a starting point Rithy Panh's 2014 documentary *The Missing Picture*, a compelling and personal narration of Democratic Kampuchea and its relation to contemporary media. This film combines archival footage of Khmer Rouge propaganda, narration, and clay figures to recreate the image of Pol Pot-era Cambodia. *The Missing Picture* demonstrates that materially rebuilding the "missing picture" of the Khmer Rouge period is fundamental to contemporary Khmer creation and future-building. For Panh, the "missing picture" is a visualization of what life was like for common people during the Democratic Kampuchea period.

The next chapter transitions to the period directly following the Khmer Rouge: the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) (1979–1991). During the bulk of the PRK period, the PRK government had a sometimes tense but powerful alliance with Vietnam; it also had strong ties to the other socialist states of the Soviet Union. Hun Sen was involved from the beginning of the regime and became prime minister in 1985. Though the Cambodian economy was officially collective and state-driven, state policy on collective farming shifted and loosened throughout the decade, and many communities slowly moved back into informal traditional family farming by 1990.¹⁴ The economic tumult and postwar conditions led to instability, and the majority of Cambodians were impoverished during this decade.

Throughout the 1980s, in addition to the PRK, there were three other competing Cambodian political parties: the Royalist United National Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Co-operative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC, headed by Sihanouk's son Prince Ranariddh), the Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF, a right-wing, non-Communist,

pro-Western party led by Son Sann, the prime minister from 1967 to 1968), and the Khmer Rouge. FUNCINPEC, the KPNLF, and the Khmer Rouge formed the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) in 1982 despite ideological differences in order to stop what they called “the occupation of the Vietnamese” and had bases in Thai refugee camps along the Cambodian border. Under Cold War conditions (and anticommunist, anti-Vietnamese sentiment), Western powers supported the coalition and gave them the Cambodian seat in the UN, but the PRK ruled Cambodia.

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