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Media Ruins

Cambodian Postwar Media Reconstruction and the Geopolitics of Technology

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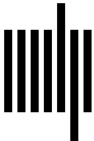
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**DISINTEGRATION NOISE: PREAH SORYA'S FILM
RECONSTRUCTION AND HEALING THE
"WAY OF THE HEART" (PHLAUV CHETT)**

I watch these original films many times because I want to remember (*chong cham*). I watch them again and again because they make me feel (*mean aaram*). When they cry, I cry . . . when they are happy, I am happy (*kay sabbaay, khnom sabbaay dei*).

—Vandy, Preah Sorya member

On a homemade rooftop cinema in Phnom Penh in September 2017, I joined a group of young film collectors to watch a grainy and soundless but richly colored shot of two actors, Sam Oeun and Kim Nova, rowing around a lake that once existed in the city. The scene cuts and repeats, the actors making slightly different gestures, indicating the director changed his instructions for this second take. This cut comes from *Golden Violence*, a film from 1967–1968—the height of Cambodia's film industry. The two stars were killed in the 1975–1979 Khmer Rouge genocide, and most of their films were destroyed during the regime. The group that has hosted me calls themselves Preah Sorya (Sun God) and they found this unedited version of this film on a reel with three other films in a collector's shop in Kampong Cham province, then digitized it at the Thai Film Archive in Bangkok. No full version exists. The group has traveled extensively through Cambodia and internationally to collect films like this one from before the Khmer Rouge regime, which they then repair, digitize, and disseminate through public film screenings and on Facebook.

This chapter explores how infrastructural restitution builds community through loss, realized materially as glitches. The films that these young people collect and document have a beautiful and romantic aesthetic of breakdown. What I call the films' *disintegration noise*—resulting from physical

breakdown, the transfer of film from one format to the other and the marks of reproduction of image, partial versions, and unedited scenes—makes the past visibly present while watching them today. I argue that this disintegration noise, rather than detracting from the films' value, emphasizes the film's status as old and original, and makes them more valuable for their collectors since historical documentation about and images of the past are scarce and deteriorating in this context. The noise also reminds the viewer of something of Cambodian history, both the peaceful and playful realities on screen as well as the period of war that occurred between the time of the production of the films and today.

Disintegration noise opens up the films to new creative possibilities for commemoration of the past. Preah Sorya's project documents and celebrates artists and a way of life that was lost during the Khmer Rouge/war period. Their project, though rooted in the past, helps them experience emotional healing and dream toward an emotionally healed future for themselves and their peers. They embrace the imperfections of the media they find and use them as an opportunity for producing new outputs interweaving the films, music, and live reenactment. They do so by putting to work new media tools as well as transnational networks, in-person film screenings, oral history interviews, and extensive provincial fieldwork.

My participants tell me that they use their film recovery and presentations as a way to heal the *banhhaa phlauv chett*—literally translated as *problems of the way of the heart*—a term used to describe the deep sadness and emotional and mental difficulty emerging from the experience of painful events and loss (often referring to but not limited to events of the Khmer Rouge period). Watching old films helps to heal both their own *banhhaa phlauv chett* (though they did not live through the Khmer Rouge themselves) as well as those of their parents' generation who more directly experienced the war period. The ways that Preah Sorya uses collected media to move past Cambodia's violent past demonstrates a new dimension in the relationship between media and memory.

As described in the first chapter, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, movie-going was a popular activity in Cambodia, and more Cambodian films were made in this period than at any time before or since.¹ Because of the dynamics explained in earlier chapters, it wasn't until the early 1990s that the search for old films could begin openly and in earnest. In 2010, there were only thirty-three known films, mostly sold on pirated videocassette

versions.² As of this writing, 100 of the approximately 500 films made during this period have been found, many of them in partial format, and they are not collected in a centralized institutional archive.³ Restored films have been found in haphazard locations such as private homes, spared cinemas, or in foreign countries, as many had been taken abroad during the war period. The lack of institutional attention to and funding for the search for these films has led to the need for volunteer groups such as Preah Sorya, the Cambodian youth group researching and collecting old films, whose activities I describe in this chapter. The findings in this chapter are based on semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and informal conversations with the group founders, audience members, and other Cambodian media creators and reconstructors.

Cambodia's relation to media has been changing dramatically, and the Cambodian population has begun to rapidly adopt digital tools. Media production has shifted from predominantly analog and film-based to various digital forms, and distribution has shifted from controlled spaces such as private homes and the cinema to the internet, primarily accessed on mobile phones. The contemporary Khmer-language film market, for both commercial and arthouse releases, is small, but many of my participants feel optimistic about its growth potential. Many Khmer films are first released in new commercial theaters and then on the internet. These changes in materiality and distribution have important consequences, such as increased viewership and expanded notions of connections to global media production. This change in the media landscape in Cambodia also shifts the way that restoring media is done and thought of as a project of national recovery.

Muouy Meun Allay (in Khmer, "Ten Thousand Regrets," and the name of a popular melancholic song and film from the 1960s) and was the name of a three-day film festival that Preah Sorya organized to screen recovered films from the late 1960s and early 1970s. The festival took place at Chatamouk Theater, a 1960s modernist theater now used for public cultural events located on the Mekong River in central Phnom Penh. As I walked into the theater on the first day of the festival in August 2017, I was greeted by a team of around twenty volunteers, who are mostly students from the universities around Phnom Penh. The group sold tickets for 10,000 riels, or \$2.50, per movie and has made and is selling books about the 1960s actors and actresses, bags, and T-shirts for fundraising.

Preah Sorya began a project in 2010 to find and disseminate prewar film; the founders and participants in the group were a mix of university students and recent post-grads aged eighteen to twenty-six years old. Many of them were involved with the project because they wanted to know more about the golden age of cinema in Cambodia. Vandy, one of the leaders of the group, told me he wants to do the work because he finds the films so aesthetically beautiful. He also said it is important for him to keep alive the legacy of the actors who died and thinks it is important that his generation know about their creative legacy.

The first film I watched at the festival was called *Neeung Jew Kreu Fa* (the name of the protagonist), which was made in 1967 and opens with the young daughter of an earnest woman being kidnapped by evil witches as the mother and daughter travel through the forest. The materiality of the film is striking: first made on film in 1968, it was videorecorded using a camcorder and transferred to VHS sometime in the 1990s. The Preah Sorya team bought the film on VHS in 2010 and then digitized it at the Thai Film Archive in Bangkok. Now the remnants of the three media modes are clearly apparent in the viewing of the film. Occasionally cutting out, showing the horizontal stripes of black and white blur of the VHS format, the spots of the film, and the watermark of the digital platform, the translation of this memory from one era to the next was a striking part of the viewing experience.

Virak, one of the founders of Preah Sorya, explained how the group found the films in various formats through extensive digging in old shops in Phnom Penh, across Cambodia and abroad. They first started searching in collection shops in Phnom Penh. They traveled throughout the country to collect materials. They found film reels in Siem Reap, Kampong Cham, and Battambang provinces. Virak then traveled to Thailand, where he was able to find some Khmer films that were brought there and dubbed into Thai in the 1960s and 1970s and which are now stored at the Thai Film Archive. He has subsequently gotten copies and redubbed them into Khmer. They also found photos, posters, and other ephemera from this era through connections to Hong Kong and France. Sometimes for significant sums (thousands of dollars), they bought these films and pay for their repair and digitization at the Thai Film Archive.

The films have noise because they were not stored properly or were moved often during and after the war. Vandy later told me about the origins



Figure 5.1

Still from *Neeung Jew Kreu Fa*, with cassette and digital marks visible

and the significance of the noise in the films they collect. He explained to me, “When we transferred them, we edited the film. We looked at them frame by frame, because some frames had noise and some frames didn’t. Some frames were completely destroyed. In the places where the film was completely destroyed, we cut the image out of the film. Sometimes we could use the other side of the film. Sometimes, there was just a dirty mark and we were able to keep it.” I asked him what he thought about the noise, and he responded, “Sometimes, in new movies, they want to make noise as a style to make them look old, to make them more interesting. But this isn’t good—it isn’t real. In these original movies, they have noise because they are really old—and that has value.”

After the screening of *Neeung Jew Kreu Fa*, the team hosted an opening reception with nearly every seat of Chaktomuk Theater occupied (it has a capacity of 420). The event opened with thank-you speeches to sponsors, mostly local companies and individuals. Vandy gave the main speech of the night, which climaxed when he held up an old film reel and gave a hearty thank you for the financial support from the sponsors. These films, he explained, were expensive to buy, but he emphasized the group’s



Figure 5.2

Vandy with film reel at the front of Chaktomuk during the Muouy Meun Allay event

commitment to research and their experience traveling through the country to collect films and other ephemera. Vandy told me later that their budget is one of their biggest challenges. They have enlisted some sponsors for big events like the film festival; they also used some of their own money for events and finding new material. They asked for donations when they can, especially for special screenings. They also sold T-shirts, bags, and books at large cultural events around the country.

The evening ended when the group introduced three famous artists from the 1960s. I realized through the din of loud clapping the true enthusiasm of the audience for this moment. They introduced each guest with a video montage before they slowly walked on stage. Tap Songva, an old musician, came out first. Then the group introduced Sar Kassora, a former actress who now lives in the United States, and Dy Saveth, the most famous living actress from the 1960s, who moved to France during the war and has subsequently returned to live in Phnom Penh.

On Sunday evening, I returned for the final event of the festival. The event started with Cambodian young people modeling 1960s-style clothes to the background of 1960s songs. We watched, for example, a young man



Figure 5.3
Muouy Meun Allay closing event

and woman gracefully walk around the stage to a 1960s duet of Sinn Sisamouth and Ros Sereysothea (two of the most famous 1960s Cambodian musicians), in formal Western attire. Then we watched four young men in trousers and short sleeve shirts, and four young women in a mix of Khmer traditional silk *sampots* and Western outfits, coming out to dance the Khmer version of “go go” dancing.

After the modeling finished, Vandy introduced the film of the evening. Made in 1962, the film, *Debt*, was famous in Phnom Penh throughout the 1960s. It is a comedy that portrays a cross-section of Cambodian society during the 1960s Sihanouk-dominated era, from Cambodian modern urban young people to their traditional parents, spiritual guides, and rural peasants. It features some of the most famous actors and actresses from the 1960s. Preah Sorya described the film with the following blurb: “*Debt* discusses the problems of Cambodian young people and their families, and shows the sacrifices that young people make for their society. It shows beautiful clips from 1960s Phnom Penh and Bokor Mountain.”⁴

The experience of the film showing was aesthetically striking. The group found only a partial version of the film reel and it starts about midway through the length of the film. They digitized the film directly from a film



Figure 5.4
Still from *Debt*

print (rather than from a VHS like *Neeung Jew Kreu Fa*) and the colors are bright and vivid, despite some weathering of the film.

At the beginning of the clip, we watched young people from the city get into a car and drive to Bokor Mountain (a vacation location and former French hill town in Kampot province). They see a guru and ask for a fortune telling; the dubious healer turns a duck into a snake into a rope. The film skips a few sections, then we watch as the car breaks down on the side of the road and the teenagers try to figure out how to fix it. The next scene is back in Phnom Penh and one of the boys starts to court one of the girls. Her father is difficult to please, and we witness a clash of traditional values and modern romance. One of the grandparents becomes sick and the teens help. Then the film abruptly ends without the original conclusion, leaving the audience with a mysterious and beautiful glimpse into 1960s life.



Figure 5.5
Group of young actors playing 1960s roles

After the film finished, the event took an unexplained break. We could see from our seats that actors were moving backstage. After a few minutes of rest and silence, the actors came out again and lip-synced to a 1960s song. Though this act was not in thematic continuation with the film, this reenactment felt as if they were reconstructing the part of the film that was lost. Virak ended the evening after the performance with a deeply emotional speech. He teared up and dedicated the event to the actors who were lost.

Vandy said to me in an interview, “The films help older people [who lived through the Khmer Rouge] feel that they live in this happy past time [captured in the films] and that they can forget the time of the Khmer Rouge for a short time. The films help them to heal the *banhhaa phlaur chett* for a short time.” *Banhhaa phlaur chett* is a way to describe the deep sadness and emotional and mental difficulty often emerging from a painful event. He continues, “One mother who lived through the Khmer Rouge watched an original film yesterday. For her, watching the film made her happy but it made her shocked.⁵ Society is progressing and happier, but this

film reminds her of being a child. Reminds her of the river, reminds her of the cyclo, reminds her of the marriages, of studying, and the film tickets that they gave away at school. The films for her make her happy, excited, but also almost crying.”

Vandy and his friends, however, did not live during the Khmer Rouge period. He told me, “We are not the victims of the Khmer Rouge. But I am deeply regretful—we should not have had the Khmer Rouge regime. They should not have destroyed everything—for people, for society, for the nation. They should not have destroyed the good things. I am so sad, regretful.” But for him, too, his *banhhaa phlauv chett* can be solved for a short time by watching the films and having the happy feelings that they elicit.

The final effect of the evening was spectacular. Though these films are what we might consider bad quality under different circumstances, the combination of the screening and the live reenactment was indicative of a high degree of care and appreciation from the Preah Sorya team. They filled in the literal holes of the films with striking live performances, with an almost eerie effect of seeing the past come alive again. By bringing together actors who survived since that time period, they also acknowledged through this performance the ways time has passed.

Many years of intense national conflict have left deep emotional imprints on Cambodia and Cambodians, whether or not they have lived through the crises themselves. There is discussion and debate about how useful the Western medicalized notion of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is to describe the experiences of survivors of the Khmer Rouge and their families. Some researchers cite a high incidence (though still, many claim, largely under-diagnosed) of PTSD in Cambodia and among Cambodian refugees in the diaspora.⁶ Researchers have also found that PTSD is passed down genetically and socially from Khmer Rouge survivors to their children.⁷ Um conducted an extensive series of oral histories with Cambodian American survivors of the Khmer Rouge, “1.5” (first-generation immigrants who moved to the new country in childhood) and second-generation Cambodian Americans, and Cambodians who remained in Cambodia. Trauma is a shared, collective, national, and transnational experience and also a deeply differentiated and personal one. Her book gives rich historical background on the origins of suffering and catalogs the experience of living through genocide and rebuilding lives when “the sequelae of trauma that remains is [*sic*] neither fully present or fully absent.”⁸

There is also substantial criticism about the applicability of the Western concept of trauma to Cambodian survivors of the Khmer Rouge, both because of its mismatch with the cultural context and its pathologization or essentialization of people who have experienced painful events. One response is Chhim's development of a more culturally specific concept for suffering after the Khmer Rouge. *Baksbat*, literally translated to *broken courage*, is used in Cambodia to express psychological experiences following the life-threatening and terrifying experiences of the Khmer Rouge period.⁹ Chhim and the staff of the Transcultural Psychosocial Organization (TPO) have argued that *baksbat* is a culturally specific set of symptoms of psychological distress, which include symptoms of the Western diagnosis of PTSD but also include symptoms that are specific to the crisis of the Khmer Rouge and the cultural environment of Cambodia. For example, people suffering from *baksbat* have a particular fear of authority, due in part to Cambodian cultural expectations for social hierarchy and the particular brutality and control of the Khmer Rouge authority figures.

Though it is important to acknowledge the shaping effects of pain and violent histories, scholars have also pushed back against essentializing people for their trauma. We can learn most about the emotional legacy of the Khmer Rouge from survivors and their families. Chhun writes about her experience living as the daughter of two Khmer Rouge survivors, witnessing the way their memories manifest as physical pain, and being open to the silences of their pasts. She follows a call from Eve Tuck, and, rather than focusing on "damage-centered" research, she narrates how her family, particularly her parents, continue to "walk with the ghost," by being present in their lives and "bearing witness to joy as well as loss."¹⁰ Chhun's narrative works as an "anticolonial feminist intervention" by attuning to the bodies and silences of her parents and to the full dimensionality of her own life and the lives of her family members.¹¹ I work from her example, in part, in shifting the focus of this book to memory practices that serve to light up joyful affect as well as loss.

Thompson has poignantly described some of the complex miscommunications and power relations between national and international actors around questions of commemoration in Cambodia. She shows the ways that international actors (from NGO donors to tourists) often overlook (or are not trained to see) long-standing Cambodian commemoration practices, which can reside outside Phnom Penh's cosmopolitan settings and

reside instead in villages, are connected to Cambodian spirituality, and sometimes are intentionally left to deteriorate according to Theravada Buddhist tradition.¹²

One of these international misunderstandings may be the role of international justice in moving past the Khmer Rouge. Since 2008, the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) has worked to promote healing through international justice standards of legal redress, by holding the leaders of the Khmer Rouge accountable for war crimes. Within Cambodia, many criticize the ECCC for being expensive, slow, divisive, and starting too late.¹³ Hinton's phenomenological investigation of the ECCC suggests that the transitional justice imaginary interacts within both local realities and international power structures, landing in complex ways within disparate audiences. Hinton concludes that, while offering some "limited set of benefits and possibilities," "transitional justice may not necessarily penetrate far below the surface."¹⁴ Schlund-Vials argues that the ECCC exists within an international response that continually fails to hold accountable US foreign policy for its role in the genocide.¹⁵

Apart from these internationally legible responses, Cambodians have been working, collectively and individually, since 1979 to heal psychological distress through many physical, psychological, and religious approaches. These include coining, cupping, Tiger Balm, massage, moxibustion, religious practice, visiting a traditional healer, fortune telling, and talking to friends, family, and community members.¹⁶ These approaches predate but are resonant with the growing scientific exploration of the embodied nature of trauma.¹⁷ Eisenbrook shows how these traditional approaches often attempt to restore balance in social relations and with spirit relations following the conflict.¹⁸

Anne Guillou, an anthropologist who studied Cambodian systems of resilience in villages in the 1990s, writes about how she observed, after the trauma of the Khmer Rouge, Cambodian people gradually becoming more involved in rebuilding their lives through such a restoration of spirit relations.¹⁹ She suggests that the "switch off/switch on" mechanisms of alternately forgetting and remembering are key to understanding post-conflict trauma and memory in rural Cambodia. *Neak ta* (literally translated as "person-grandfather" but can more broadly be understood as "village spirits") is essential to understanding this "switch on/switch off," dualistic approach to mourning and loss.

Ang Choulean explains how *neak ta* (which can be seen throughout Cambodia) is a distinctive part of Cambodian religious practice and a ménage of transnational influences from India, China, Indonesia, and various forms of Buddhism, Hinduism, and animism.²⁰ A *neak ta* is a village guardian spirit and, as Choulean describes, is “two in one.” One of the two things is the “soil of the village community,” which means houses, rice fields, and other spaces used by the villagers. The second thing is a human, but it need not be a specific person and sometimes represents a legendary figure. *Neak ta* can take different forms like a tree or a stone or even termite mound, but all of them represent the unification of soil, which is associated with rice cultivation and people. Massive bereavement has been incorporated into the popular religious framework of Cambodia, particularly into the cult of the *neak ta* with whom the dead of the mass graves from the Khmer Rouge share many characteristics. This kind of bereavement allows a specific relationship between the dead and the living and a memory of the genocide that consists of alternately forgetting and remembering.

Acts of commemoration in Cambodia are not only integrated into the built environment but also developed through practices of art and craft. Uk describes the ways that the Jorai, an indigenous group who primarily live in remote jungles of Northeast Cambodia, have developed practices of resilience that have allowed this group to survive despite the ruptures of American bombing during the Vietnam War, the Khmer Rouge genocide, and the long-standing civil war that followed these events.²¹ She particularly focuses on the role of craft as a practice of resilience and argues that objects and the act of crafting provide a new lens for understanding how post-conflict communities interact with their past.

These responses through art and craft are not confined to Cambodia's national borders but are now created in the diaspora as well, reflective of the transnational origins and impacts of the history of violence. Cambodian American authors have analyzed the ways that diasporic Cambodians have responded to the genocide.²² Schlund-Vials has written extensively about the art production of the Cambodian American 1.5 generation for culturally specific genocide remembrance, by artists such as Socheata Poeuv, Loung Ung, Chanrithy Him, Prachh Ly, and Anita Young Ali.²³ Ly situates *baksbat* in the visual cultures of Cambodia and its diaspora, analyzing artistic remembrance of Khmer Rouge histories through case studies of the artists Amy Lee Sanford, Both Sonrin, Rithy Panh, and Sarith Peou. He

also interprets the work of artists who address the American bombing of Cambodia, including Vandy Rattana, Leang Seckon, and Chanthou Oeur.²⁴

Building on this literature, my concept of infrastructural restitution explores how practices of memory in Cambodia occur on and through media, the communication outlets or tools used to store and deliver information and data. Our memories are highly connected to the media (such as photographs and film and digital media) that we use to record, archive, and disseminate them. Freud was among the first to consider the relationship between psychic memory and material reproduction of memory in media, and suggested that media technologies shift our understanding of memory and storage away from the human brain.²⁵ Walter Benjamin deepened the link between media and memory, as he discussed the implications of early (1930s) mechanical reproduction of art. Benjamin argued that viewing the “mechanical” reproduction of art fundamentally changes the viewer’s experience of that art.²⁶

Later thinkers, including Marshall McLuhan and Frederic Kittler, expanded and elaborated this idea of memory-media determination.²⁷ McLuhan argued that media are “extensions of our human senses” and that there is a “psychic message from the medium.” Kittler similarly argued for the determination of media and delineated the tight linkages and representational relationships between memories and media. He argued that our bodies are extensions of technologies and that technologies represent our bodies. Kittler also tied media to the supernatural and argues that media allow “memories and dreams, the dead and ghosts” not only to live but to become technically reproducible. With the new technologies, Kittler argues that the “realm of the dead is as extensive as the storage and transmission capabilities of a given culture . . . In our mediascape, immortals have come to exist again.”²⁸

Painful memories, like ghosts, are uncertain, characterized by the registers of the emotional, magical, and subjective; likewise, scholarship on noise has highlighted the ways that media are fundamentally uncertain. This body of work emphasizes the ways that media degenerate, change with time, and become filled with error and glitches. This noise plays an important role in the messages we receive about the past. As Parikka has argued, “noise, not meaning, is often the focus of our technical media.”²⁹ There is never certainty that the message we send is the message received due to

the possibility of unplanned noise, the result of the technical properties of the machine we use to send the message.³⁰ Noise represents the “uncanny and alive” qualities of the technical medium outside the bounds of systematic control.³¹

Noise can act as a point of creative inspiration. Kelly describes the experimental music genre *glitch*, in which an artist breaks or manipulates media technologies within performance.³² He defines *cracked media* as the media playback tools stretched beyond their intended purposes and a *crack* as a “point of rupture” ripe for new creative possibilities. Kelly describe cracks in a variety of forms such as the gentle manipulation of a vinyl record to the destruction of a CD player. Krapp suggests that glitches give artists a way to make visible and embrace fundamental limitations.³³ Menkman explains that the ways glitches develop meaning are constantly mutating, as media technologies change and as writers, users, or readers interpret them through shifting social, aesthetic, and economic dynamics.³⁴ Poor-quality ripped films are common (perhaps particularly in low-income countries) and have value for many reasons, including for displaying “defiance and appropriation.”³⁵

I argue that noise-ridden media associated, but separate from, painful memory can help with the processing of painful national history. The history of Cambodia’s conflicts gives the errors, glitches, and poor images in the films exhibited by Preah Sorya a particular meaning and importance. The films are full of *disintegration noise*—they are partial, unedited, or show grainy marks of past formats, due to their condition of being “lost” and then recovered.³⁶ This case shows the limits of original materiality and a moment of creation and, in so doing, the nature of the relationship between media and memory as it moves through time. Media in this case do not simply and constantly constitute memory, but do so partially through uncontrolled and unintended mechanisms of noise, which change over time. The meanings granted to noise are also constantly changing within shifting political and social dynamics. Disintegration noise, like other kinds of error, is unintentional, though it can be embraced as a catalyst for new forms of creativity.

The noise also provides an opportunity for healing. Preah Sorya actively commemorates these films in order to move away from the painful past into a better future. Though the films do not directly refer to memories of

war or genocide (in ways that some art critics or tourists look for in commemorative contemporary art in Cambodia), this project celebrates artists who died. Preah Sorya commemorates them by focusing on what they believe are the most beautiful parts of Cambodian history: artist role models and their way of life that has subsequently disappeared. The films are not remembered sitting in a hard drive, but they are actively remembered, rewatched, and played during in-person events. This case gives insight into how historical media are artifacts of active commemoration and sites for dreaming forward. Their disintegration noise thus helps us understand the complex relationship between media and memory, and how positive-affect laden media still associated with violent pasts allow us to process painful memories. Rather than representing past events or states of consciousness, media are rather an emotional access point to histories of violence and provide space for healing.³⁷

A few weeks after the film festival, I went to the house of Preah Sorya, located on a small alley a kilometer from the Royal University of Phnom Penh. Virak greeted me at the metal gate and asked me to take my shoes off and park my moto in the main room of the first floor of a vertical townhouse. There were sixteen people in the group, and many of them lived together in this house, “like a family,” one suggested. Since many of them were students and came from the provinces to study, this home was a good place for them to live in Phnom Penh.

I followed Virak and climbed six flights of stairs to the roof. I arrived around 6:30 pm, just after sunset, and a glimmer of light remained around the wide horizon. Coming from (increasingly) congested Phnom Penh with skyscrapers filling the cityscape, the view from this roof in this neighborhood (near the airport) looked vast and uncluttered. They had a huge balcony on the roof overlooking a green, swampy field. The group recently built twenty benches and set up a projector in the back (“high definition—we bought it in the provinces,” they told me proudly). An eight-by-five-foot screen was set up in the front of the room. I asked about the history of this makeshift cinema and they told me that they built it within the past few months and that showing this film to me was their first “public” screening. They had had showings before but they limited them to the “Preah Sorya family” and other family members.

The group posted about this screening immediately on Facebook. They shared a lot of old film material on Facebook, as well as information about

their screening events. I asked them about the benefits of the Facebook platform for their group. They said that it was easier to share movies with their peers on it. Vandy said his friends are “the new generation in Cambodia” and wanted access to clips of these films in high quality and that he wanted to create easier access to them. Normally, they posted clips and film montages a few times a week, though full films were not generally available on their page.

That night we watched a series of three films that came an original film reel from a collector’s shop in Kampong Cham province. The three films were all partial versions and were stuck on the same reel they found in the shop. The members of the group had watched all of these films a number of times already. Vandy later told me, “I watch these original films many times because I want to remember (*chong cham*). I watch them again and again because they make me feel (*mean aaram*). When they cry, I cry . . . when they are happy, I am happy (*kay sabbaay, khnom sabbaay dei*). I watch a movie, for example, four times and it still looks really good. The film plays (*lang*) the daily life (*jiwut*) of the past. Watching it is exciting. . . . For a [contemporary] ghost movie, one time is enough because I get scared. I like to watch these movies again and again. The stories, the special effects . . . they make me feel.”

We started with the first movie made by Ly Bun Yim, one of the most prominent producers and directors from the 1960s Cambodian film scene. As the film began, Virak explained some background about the film to me: “It was one of the first color films and one of the first films connecting sound to image in Cambodia.” Yim also starred in it as an actor; his father-in-law played the humorous villain; and his first wife played the love interest. Yim’s first wife, Virak explained, died in the Khmer Rouge era, and their only child now lived in the United States. One of the shots took place at Wat Ounalom (still a standing and popular wat in downtown Phnom Penh)—and some of the students watching in the back shouted, “Ounalom!,” visibly happy to see the familiar landmark in an earlier age.

The film cut out about halfway through and another film began. This one was called *Golden Violence*, starring Kong Sam Oeun and Kim Nova.³⁸ As Nova appeared on screen, multiple students came up to me and described her as “one of the beautiful Khmer women.” A girl in the back murmured, “Ooooh, very handsome!” (*saart na*) with the first close-up of Sam Oeun. The film was made in 1969 and no remaining full version exists; this film



Figure 5.6
Preah Sorya cinema and screening

was an unedited early version. Some shots repeated over and over with slight differences based on different takes. The film's effect was eerie and mesmerizing, an abstract collection of clips showing beautiful places and a different time in Cambodia. The color of the film reel was vibrant. One series of shots that lasted for over twenty minutes showed Sam Oeun and Kim Nova sitting on a paddleboat riding around Boeng Keng Lake wearing "modern" outfits.³⁹

The third film of the evening was a comedy from 1968 (made by the same director of *King Kong*, Virak pointed out to me). The film was a slapstick comedy about marriage. It differed from other films I've seen from this era in that it didn't have a modern feel; the movie was set in rural Cambodia with most scenes taking place in a typical wooden, two-story Khmer house. Virak explained that this director made films in a studio in Kandal province (a few kilometers outside Phnom Penh) with four hectares of land, giving them an authentic rural feel. By the time the film ended and I got ready to leave, eight students had gathered to watch the end of the film, as well as an older woman in her late twenties and her toddler daughter.

I walked downstairs and as I started to get ready to ride out, I noticed that the group had converted the entryway of their home into a makeshift archive. In this main room, I saw an old projector, cassettes, and lots of posters and ephemera from 1960s films. Virak explained in an earlier interview that the group liked having control over the films. "If we want to watch a film, we can do it," he said, and they wanted freedom for their organization. They had an extensive collection of magazines and novels from the 1960s—printed and copied inside plastic folders—that they found at collectors' shops. They also had a stack of old film boards and advertisements. Virak showed me an ad from the first international film festival in 1964, which he found in an old magazine. He had information about films in historical magazines in French, Chinese, English, and Khmer. He told me that one of their goals for the future was to make a more official physical archive.

I was grateful for being invited to Preah Sorya's oasis of film history, which existed hidden within the rapidly developing city. They shared with me their broad and deep knowledge of the history of Cambodian film, its actors, producers, and technologies, which they had been able to glean through their artifacts and research. They knew and celebrated the actors

who had died, left Cambodia, or stopped making art. Through the films, even though they are spotty and partial, the group is able to see and show images of prewar Cambodia, including both its modernist urban aesthetics and traditional ways of life. They could share bits of this imagery through Facebook, on which they give frequent glimpses of the work they do and the resources they have.

The case of Preah Sorya highlights the ways that media technologies change over time due to deterioration and the layering of history, emphasizing the unpredictability of how media constitutes changing and unreliable memory through time. The films are full of *disintegration noise* such as spots and blurriness from material deterioration, the visible layering of formats on top of each other, unedited scenes, soundlessness, and partiality. In *Neeung Jew Kreu Fa*, for example, we see three formats of film all collaged on top of each other (film, VHS, digital), and the past becomes radically visible in the present through materiality. The flecks of the original film reel, the shaking of a hand holding a camcorder, the black and white streaks of VCR screening, and the moments of digital watermark—all of these are visual reminders of the layers of history in these films and the way memories are filtered as they are transferred. The members of the group watch these films over and over again.

Disintegration noise contributes two ideas to theory of media and memory. First, it suggests that noise can be an asset in old media in relation to memory: rather than highlighting media's representation of a past reality, it demonstrates media's status as old and, therefore, valuable. Second, it gives the opportunity for new creative possibilities and allows the memory media to help Preah Sorya experience positive affect around the history of the country and build promising a new future. I therefore return to the two understandings of how media act as mechanisms for accessing and storing memory with which I opened the chapter. I show that these films both document and reconstruct the past, while also acknowledging its uncertainty (made visible through noise). The noise and uncertainty give room for the hope of healing.

Material representations of memories in this context are scarce and deteriorating—just as these films are. The disintegration noise therefore does not detract from their value but instead highlights their rarity. The films are important because they are rare and envision a former time in

Phnom Penh. Though many Cambodian young people have told me that they know some things about the country's history through school classes or talking to relatives about their experiences, many also tell me that it can be very difficult to talk to their parents and other relatives about the depth of their experiences and that they have a shallow understanding of the wartime and before. Preah Sorya collects as much as they can to learn about Cambodian film history, including 1960s films, journals, songs, and other ephemera, and then they repair, digitize, and redisplay them in media formats that are digestible to their peers in film screenings and on Facebook. Preah Sorya loves these films because they enhance their knowledge of the prewar time; they can see actors who died during the Khmer Rouge era, Phnom Penh before it was evacuated, and a way of life that ended during the war.

Excavating and reimagining the Phnom Penh shown in the films is a process that will never be complete. Though the group has tried to gather as much information about this era as they can, there is still a deep sense of the unknowability of the pre-Khmer Rouge era. The limits of what the group sees on screen correlate to the limits of the memory of that time. The group members can't know what the off-screen world in Phnom Penh was like when these films were made or even how most of these films end. Due to the limited number of films available and the value of each, Preah Sorya constantly repeats them, both in public film screenings and by sharing and resharing parts of them on Facebook. Vandy said he could watch the same movie four times and still *feel*.

The disintegration noise in the films also gives Preah Sorya a creative opportunity to fill in gaps by putting together the media that they have with other creative forms. The group combines the partial forms of media with in-person presentations of aging actors and reenactments, leading to an exciting new creative output. They literally finish the story of unfinished films through their own lip-synced rendition of a period song dressed in period clothes. Like self-described glitch artists, Preah Sorya, through all of these activities, embraces rather than ignores the imperfections of their historical media resources in order to realize new creative possibilities. They make the best of what they have and put together a fantastic viewing experience through inventiveness and imagination from (what could be understood to be) poor quality and partial films.

This case therefore points to one of the core arguments of this book: that infrastructural restitution is an avenue for accessing positive affect about the past amid an overwhelmingly painful history, and thus acts as a vector for healing. The group focuses on memories that allude to the trauma of the wars without directly referencing them. The group focuses not on memories from the traumatic event (the Khmer Rouge and wartime) but instead on the positive cultural outputs from the period before that. The students are able to commemorate lost artists without focusing on violence; they thus decenter what they often perceive to be a simplification of their national history through an international focus on the Khmer Rouge period.

Cambodian young people often tell me that they feel trapped and made one-dimensional by the force and darkness of their national history. They hope to generate optimism and a feeling of creative empowerment among their peers through the dissemination of knowledge about the cultural “glories” of the past.⁴⁰ In so doing, however, this case also showcases another theme of this book: these commemoration practices are not neutral. The period Preah Sorya romanticizes was one of deep inequality. What they choose to focus on (the 1960s and early 1970s film culture) was also deeply embedded in imperial and elite politics. Some readers of this deeply nostalgic project could also see a problematic subtext of ethnonationalism.

The creative ways that the students collect, repair, and display these films is done for *their* generation as a form of dreaming forward. The group wants to know about the past for themselves and for their friends—it excites them to see these historical cultural outputs. We can see the targeting of a young, urban, and educated audience in the choice to disseminate and discuss these memories through their active Facebook presence. The films provide an alternative Phnom Penh: the past gives them artistic role models and images of a Phnom Penh full of natural space and youth opportunity. They want to build a Cambodia that encourages more artistic production and integrates some of the best parts of this pre-Khmer Rouge society.⁴¹

These films also allow them to dream forward toward an emotionally healed Cambodia. Other scholars cite the important links between memory, violent histories, and hope. As Crownshaw and colleagues argue, memories of violence must also be accompanied by the “remembrance of the future” as a way to move toward hope.⁴² Memory is a site for the reevaluation of identities in a postcolonial and post-conflict world.⁴³ Harvey comments that

the “power of collective memory is politically very important, provided it is connected also to the notion of desiring something different.”⁴⁴ In an arguably more modest intervention, Chhun’s anticolonial feminist approach is to acknowledge how people can live full lives while “walking with the ghost.” This project allows the students to move past trauma, past *baksbat*, and past violence. In serving to alleviate the “problems of the way of the heart,” watching these films gives the group an emotionally smoother way forward.

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