

“Old Ghosts, New Dreams”: Cambodian Cinema at Film Society

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“Old Ghosts, New Dreams: The Emerging Cambodian Cinema” runs from April 19-25 at [Film Society of Lincoln Center](#) in conjunction with the citywide **“Season of Cambodia”** festival.

...I'm trying to forget things so as not to be too tormented. I'm doing my best to forget, and by trying hard, I really forget. When you remember, you have to fight against yourself. If you don't resist, why remember? I was willing to follow them [perpetrators of the Khmer Rouge regime], and to do so I had to ignore such cruelty. I forget, but when I look back I'm terrified. I shouldn't have done those things back then. But how could I protest?

- Kaing Guek Eav (or “Duch”), commandant of the torture prison house S21 in the capital city of Cambodia, Phnom Penh, and the first leader of the Khmer Rouge to be convicted and sentenced for life imprisonment, with an unflinching gaze.

I.

Fraught with a film industry that has gone through various politico-economic ups and downs since its “golden age” during the 1960s, Cambodia is in the midst of creating its collective societal memory since its independence from France in 1954. The calm, reflective voices and tears of desperation and hope that flow unashamed on the silver screen form part of a set of stories—about victimization, economic helplessness, societal resentment, and hesitant resignation—which will be presented in the Film Society of Lincoln Center’s newest series **“Old Ghosts, New Dreams: The Emerging Cambodian Cinema”** from April 19-25.

II. Then and Now

“Je suis un arpenteur de memoires” (“I am a surveyor of memories”), once said the famed documentarian Rithy

Panh when describing himself and his film work. Born in Cambodia in 1964, and eventually finding himself in Paris after fleeing to Thailand in 1979 from Phnom Penh during the Khmer Rouge regime, Panh studied film at the *Institut des Hautes Études Cinématographiques* (Institute for Advanced Cinematographic Studies). Since then, he has created a wealth of award-winning films dealing with events during and after the Khmer Rouge regime. From April 17, 1975 until January 6, 1979, the Khmer Rouge, fronted by Pol Pot, a Cambodian Communist revolutionary who had formed and led the Communist Party of Kampuchea (or “Khmer Rouge”) in 1968, perpetrated a genocide that killed millions throughout the nation in an attempt to purge the “Khmer race” of everything Western, and consequently corrupt. About 20 percent of the population was decimated. Children as young as 12 years old were coerced at gunpoint into becoming guards, interrogators, torturers, and executioners as members of the Khmer Rouge. Entire populations were displaced and deported, schools were closed, religions were banned, currency was abolished, forced labor camps were established, and a dictatorship of surveillance, famine, exhaustion, terror, and executions was enforced.

In the 1999 documentary “**The Land of Wandering Souls**” (“*La terre des âmes errantes*”) Panh follows the lives of several rural workers as they dig through kilometers of iron, stone, and earth to lay down the first fiber optic cables in Southeast Asia. As parents work tirelessly for hours on end, their children search through the muddied waters for fish and crabs. Family after family is shown struggling to make ends meet. Worker after worker encounters horrific remnants of the past. Bones, mines, and more bones. The souls of the dead wander among the living, who have no choice but to work “while they wait to die.”

The two documentaries “**S21: The Khmer Rouge Death Machine**” (“*S21, la machine de mort khmère rouge*”) and “**Duch, Master of the Forges of Hell**” (“*Duch, le maître des forges de l'enfer*”), made in 2002 and 2012, respectively, are a painfully raw, horrifically lucid, hair-raising set of witness testimonials not to be missed. Bringing together survivors and former members of the Khmer Rouge, “**S21**” forces captor and interrogator to enter into a live dialogue in the present and simultaneous reenactment of the past. As painter Vann Nath calmly confronts one of his torturers, Him Houy, and paints himself and others while he describes being tortured, electrocuted, shackled, hand-cuffed, blindfolded, strangled, kicked, photographed, and pulled like cattle, we find ourselves cringing in both disgust and sympathy towards these former Khmer Rouge guards. Every detail is retold as they look through pages and pages of confessions written in their own hands and piles of photographs, admitting coercion, humiliation, and falsification in a desperate, pathetic move to save their own skin. Both captor and torturer reveal their inevitable link: mere instruments of a dictatorship kept for use—the painter for his ability to give “delicate smooth skin like a young virgin” to his officials’ portraits, and the guard for his ability to renounce all morals and human rights to obey orders.

“**Duch**” is equally chilling to watch as Kaing Guek Eav, primary leader of the secretive S21 prison, faces the camera and dutifully narrates torture after torture while he sifts through archive documents and photographs. Scenes of survivors and former Khmer Rouge members reenacting their torture techniques through mimicking gestures in the dusty gray spacious prison cells are interspersed with shots of Kaing Guek Eav’s wide-eyed, unrelenting face and matter-of-fact descriptions. Through self-interrogation and awareness, subject and director masterfully create the ultimate trial for Kaing Guek Eav: full, voluntary admission of cowardly behavior that led to the conscious, monstrous murdering of millions of human beings.

Sochan Pen in “**Red Wedding**” (“*Noces Rouges*”) (2012), directed by Lida Chan and Guillaume Soun and produced by Rithy Panh, is still haunted by her forced marriage at age 16 to a much older man, and subsequent rape on her wedding night. During the Khmer Rouge dictatorship more than 250,000 Cambodian women were forced into marriage and kept under surveillance for several nights until executed if they did not “get along well” with their husband. As Pen takes care of her children from her second marriage and grows rice in one of many fields where hundreds died four decades ago, she defiantly travels around the heavily forested village interrogating women who were loyal to Khmer Rouge tactics. Determined to speak up for the thousands of women who were victims of the regime, Pen prepares her complaint to the UN-sanctioned Khmer Rouge Tribunal with the hope of finding some long-awaited justice.

III. Today and Beyond

Born into a country of dire poverty, many of the Cambodian filmmakers of today narrate a scathing portrait of a capital city with ever-increasing joblessness rates, child workers, illiterate youth, and mass industrial factory building, among other problems. "**Five Lives**" is a collection of five short films produced by Rithy Panh in 2010 that showcases the individual struggles and hopelessness of several Phnom Penh dwellers. Every frame is simple and unadorned, capturing the plain and harsh realities of poverty. In "**My Yesterday Night**" by Lida Chan, a young woman narrates her life from karaoke girl to singer and her hope of becoming a musician so as to make enough money to support her children. In "**A Scale Boy**" by Kavich Neang, we follow a young boy as he walks through the park looking for customers to weigh on his portable scale. All he can afford is to pay for food, water, and electricity. "**A Blurred Way of Life**," by Sopheak Sao, follows the life of a young girl who sells newspapers and magazines to send money back to her sick mother and siblings in the countryside. "**A Pedal Life**," by Katank Yos, zooms in on the aging elders who have worked as cyclo-drivers all their lives and share stories of accidental crashes and economic struggles to kill time. Returning to the youth, Sarin Chhoun focuses on two young transgender boys in "**I Can Be Who I Am**." Together they share their struggles to be accepted, their dreams to be hairdressers and garment workers, and experiences taking hormone pills. Kavich Neang returns with a full-length feature in "**Where I Go**" (2012) and briefly chronicles the daily racial discrimination San Pattica experiences for being of mixed Cambodian-Cameroonian descent.

Perhaps the most visually interesting film in the series for its carefully framed wide-angle shots and vibrant colors is "**A River Changes Course**" (2012) by Kalyanee Mam. Among the red-orange-colored earth and lush greenery we learn about the rural lives of three young Cambodians who eat and sell wild potatoes, rice, palm tree oil and leaves, and fish. As they each struggle with the increasing scarcity of the natural resources, both from their own abuse of the land and waters and from that of companies buying and ruining their lands at an alarming rate, one inevitable fate awaits them all: The destruction of jungles and pollution of rivers are forcing villagers into debt and migration to Phnom Penh in search of employment. One young villager boy knows best when he begins to sing, "Darling, you will have a Lexus and a villa. Wherever you go, you will be modern and stylish. If you marry a city man, you will be short of money. But if you choose me, you will have dollars to spend."

Can these stories raise public awareness and lead to change? Or must these moving images remain only as memories to remind us of our offensive behaviors?