

VYCKY FILMS
PRESENTS



GOLDEN SLUMBERS

A FILM BY
DAVY CHOU



«An elegantly assembled and
deeply moving remembrance
of Cambodian cinema»

VARIETY

DAVY CHOU

INTERVIEW



How did you discover the existence of this Cambodian film industry, which is now virtually non-existent?

When I was a kid I was told that my grandfather had made movies in Cambodia, without being given any further details. When I began to make movies, I asked my aunt what Cambodian moviemaking was like in the 60s. (...) And that's how I learned that my grandfather, Van Chann, was the most prolific film producer of the time: of the (approximately) 400 films made in Cambodia between 1960 and 1975, he produced around forty of them. I felt like I had just discovered a mysterious world, not understanding how it could have been hidden from me for such a long time. After this revelation it was clear that I had to make a film about it. This desire is probably linked to a biographical quest, but that wasn't the determining factor. Even without my family connection with this cinema, I think I would have made the film. A secret world really did exist, one that had been swallowed up, engulfed and utterly fascinating to explore. I wanted to tell the story of what had been revealed to me, it was something I had to do. There was also a kind of urgency: this story is forty years old, and those who can tell us about it are now nearly seventy. As nothing had been made, written or said about the subject, it was essential to make the film before it was "too late", before memories faded and people died.

How did you go about finding witnesses and obtaining a better understanding of this history?

The history of this cinema has passed among different generations of Cambodians. It is a part of folklore as these movies belong to the collective Khmer imagination and are part of our parents' cultural references. Some people my age (28), the children of Cambodian immigrants of 1970-1980, know about the existence of these films without ever having seen them. In my case my parents chose not to bring me up with this folklore. My first task then was to make up for lost time. Next I tried to find the material elements connected with this film industry. This was in vain, as I was unable to find any old films (my first port of call were Cambodian DVD shops), posters, photos or books on the subject. My first real discovery was a blog, written by Vathana Huy, a Cambodian living in France and a real film buff. Having fled Cambodia in 1979, he set about reconstructing the filmography of Cambodian filmmakers of this golden age, and his only source was his memory. (...)

Was it an immediately obvious decision to foreground the witnesses rather than the images from the film?

My first contact with this history determined the shape of my film. When I first heard about Cambodian movies, I still hadn't seen a single one – the reason being that they have practically all vanished, excepting some poor-quality videos (around thirty which circulate undercover). We get a glimpse of these at the very end of the film. Generally speaking, nobody outside of Cambodia knows what a Cambodian film is like. I was no exception to this rule (...) so

I understood that what was left of this history was to be found not so much in the images, whatever their nature (photos, film clips), as in the memory of the spectators and artists who had been part of their making. So I had to give this memory a voice by turning it into a film. I wanted my film to shuttle between the interviews of survivors and witnesses and its confrontation with places rather than through images.

There are different levels of testimony in your film: that of the survivors (an actress and some directors), the eyewitnesses (spectators), but also that of the people who heard this story from their parents or their grandparents. Why this approach?

Initially I had two approaches. What interested me was to see how memory circulates: what is its natural course as it is filtered through reminiscences. I wanted to understand how, despite the absence of the material evidence (the film), it manages to circulate, to be passed on and therefore, in my eyes, to live on. Proof of this phenomenon can be seen in the diversity of accounts: there were those who made movies, those who watched them, and even those who hadn't seen the movies but who provided indirect testimonies, such as the boy who lives in an abandoned cinema and who knows by heart the plots of movies his mother told him about. This brings me to my second aim; I wanted to gather as many points of view as possible, so as to be able to describe a situation of which it is very hard to have a global and objective understanding.

We also meet some young Cambodians in your film. Who are they and what is their relationship with this history?

They are a group of artists and students, formed after a video workshop that I set up when I got to Phnom Penh. They support each other in various artistic projects, film projects in particular. (...) In the scene in which they figure, they open a breach that allows in a new breath. This was somewhat intentional on my part, as I had asked them as an exercise, to redo the scene that was so famous at the time, from the lost film by Ly You Sreang, *Sacred Pond*, in which the actor Kong Sam Oeun appears naked for the only time in his career. Here, once again, is an example of testing the strength of testimony as well as its creative capacity, its autonomy. The group had only the director's storyline to work from, since the film no longer exists. Ly You Sreang did not come to the set, nor did they aim to shoot in the original location (which wasn't possible anyway). (...) Once the director had spoken, given his spoken testimony, he disappeared, and these young people's strength of characterization, their faces that suddenly and literally "devour" the screen, are already a way of breaking new ground. Once again, my method is not a nostalgic one. What interests me is to come upon signs in the present that radiate from the past, and to try to recreate something from those traces.

Could we say that in your film, testimony is as much, if not more, a support for the imagination (in particular for film buff fantasies about the greatness of films that have disappeared) as for History?

Yes, but only to a certain extent. The temptation of historical reality obviously exists with this kind of subject. But I realized that was not the right direction to follow, on the one hand because it wasn't possible, and on the other hand because that is not my profession. But obviously when we take an interest in history of which the material records have been lost and for which there exist no large-scale documentation, one feels almost invested by a responsibility to work in a thorough, accurate way in terms of respecting the memory. But this meticulousness is unattainable and cannot be the object of a film. I don't believe that the purpose of a work is to override historical research. I therefore had to start by asking myself how I could approach the subject through cinema. In other words I had to progress step by step, attaining perhaps, in fine, a truth that would be one of emotion and feeling, of what Cambodian cinema might have been, and of what it represented for those I interviewed. This is where imagination comes into it. Having said that I must clarify, since I don't want the film to fall into the trap of being totally disconnected from reality. That would make it purely an object of fantasy and imagination. When I speak of the "truth of feeling", I do not mean pure fiction but a different truth compared to that contributed by the factual elements – the secret heart of Cambodian cinema. (...)

GOLDEN SLUMBERS

A FILM BY **DAVY CHOU**

Cambodian cinema flourished in the 1960s, drawing huge crowds to theaters around the country, until the industry was destroyed by the Khmer Rouge in 1975. Of the 400 films produced, only 30 remain today. Almost all the actors were killed during the reign of Pol Pot and only a few of the directors were able to flee the country. Most of the old movie theaters of Phnom Penh have become restaurants, karaoke clubs or squats. Golden Slumbers resurrects the myths and legends of this lost cinema. Through survivors' stories and the search for remnants of their era in modern Phnom Penh, the film reveals the vital importance movies had for an entire generation, as well as the complex legacy they leave today's youth to inherit.

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