

Topic: Artistic Intellect: Cambodian Art in Political and Historic Discourse

Level: English/Composition 200 or higher of Regional Study abroad course, Humanities

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Section Notes :

This module focuses on discussions of the challenges to public creativity and intellectualism in Cambodia through the art of the Khmer people. Primarily, the mediums of music, audio visual production, and 2D political drawings are focused on. This section also highlights political satire art in modern digital media like Facebook and artists like Rithy Panh reflecting on Cambodia's past through multimedia cinema reflections of life under the Khmer Rouge. Finally, the section offers a brief look at the work and influence of artist Ung Bun Heang (Bun Heang Ung) and features examples of his work from his personal blog.

Lecture Notes for Instructor:

China's Chairman Mao had a strong influence on Pol Pot. The Cultural Revolution was a time in China's history where youth radicalized by the teachings of Mao were indoctrinated with the idea of "class enemies". "Class enemies" were those thought of as intellectuals, artists, or those who were influenced by western society. These people were often persecuted, physically beaten, and in some cases killed. Mao's cultural revolution, focus of agrarian collectivism, and creation of the idea of class enemies and class warfare were inspirations to Pol Pot. Pol Pot would use some of the same tactics, in combination with a strict code of secrecy, to strengthen loyalty of Khmer Rouge fighters during the conflict with the Lon Nol government and later strip away all connections to the "Western World" leaving behind what he thought to be a pure representation of the Cambodian people. In order to do this, government leadership, western influenced art forms, religion, and class had to be dismantled. This dismantling would motivate the wholesale killing of intellectuals, artists, musicians, singers, scientists, spiritual leaders, and performers of all types all over Cambodia.

Reading:

This website contains multiple drawings done by artist Bun Heang Ung. The Australian National University was gifted these drawings of the artists. The Blog was originally constructed by Bun and contains 90 of his original drawings explaining his life under the Khmer Rouge with comic book text included. Students should read slides no 1 - no 90

Blog: <http://khmerrouge-toons.blogspot.com.au/2008/10/no-1.html>

Web Link: <http://anulib.anu.edu.au/collections/rare-books-special-collections-manuscripts/drawings-bun-heang-ung-life-under-khmer-rouge>

Video:

- Missing Picture by Rithy Panh (Purchasable through YouTube retails)
- Don't Think I've Forgotten by Rithy Panh (Purchasable through YouTube retails)

Note: These questions may be used as debriefing questions by the instructor or assigned as take home reflections for the class.

Don't Think I've Forgotten: Video Reflection Questions:

1. What were the major musical influences on Cambodian music during the pre Khmer Rouge period?
2. Choose one of the artists presented by Panh who grabs your attention and listen to no less than three of their songs. While you may not be able to understand the lyrics, explain in a short paragraph what attracts you to the music.
3. Cambodian music also had some international influences. Panh identifies several countries; can you name them? Which countries surprised/interested you the most? Why?
4. Examine King Norodom Sihanouk's musical background. Why was he influential in development of Cambodian music and arts after Cambodia's independence?
5. What group of people did groups like the Bayon Boys attract? Why do you think this was important for artist like Sinn Sisamouth?
6. In what ways did the War in Vietnam affect the music that Cambodians were listening to and producing?
7. Panh uses a mixture of found film footage, interviews, and music to relay his story to his viewers. In two paragraphs, reflect on what was the most compelling or interesting combination of these documentary creation tools that you saw in his film?
8. The 50's, 60's, and 70's music in Cambodia each had different styles. In your own words, explain how you saw and heard music change throughout Panh's documentary?
9. Explain what life was like for those connected to musical art forms after the Khmer Rouge and why the Khmer Rouge targeted artist in specific.
10. Why is the song "Oh Phnom Penh" significant?

The Missing Picture: Video Reflection Questions

1. In *The Missing Picture* actors are substituted for carved figures of people. People connect to actors emotionally because they tend to look like us and portray many of the same emotions and problems we have through becoming a character. What does the substitution of actors for carved figures do to your ability to relate to them? Does it make the story seem less real or not? Why?
2. “*With clay and with water, with the dead, with rice fields, with living hands, a man is made.*” Panh uses this quote to describe carving a figure of his father. Explain its’ meaning and significance to Panh’s story and the narrative of Cambodia?
3. Panh uses something called mixed media to tell his story. What types of media are used to build the narrative?
4. Panh says the Khmer Rouge transformed the citizens of Phnom Penh into “new people” and created Democratic Kampuchea ? What does Panh mean by this? How was this transformation achieved?
5. In a short paper, compare Panh’s imagery and storytelling to that of the graphic comic style of Bun Hueng Ung.
6. “To hang on, you must hide within yourself a strength, a memory, and idea that no one can take from you. For a picture can be stolen, a thought cannot” Knowing what you know about Cambodian history, what do you think Panh might mean by this quote.
7. There are times in *The Missing Picture* where Panh speaks as if he is a member of “the Angkar and uses some of their propaganda speech slogans. Why do you think he does this? What effects does it have on you as a viewer?
8. How can hunger be used as a weapon? Is there more than one type of hunger? Can it be used differently?
9. Why does Panh’s father stop eating? Why was this act important given their living conditions?
10. How was film used by the Khmer Rouge?
11. What pictures are missing? Why?

Writing/Presentation Prompt:

- Design your own piece of art reflecting the challenges of intellectualism and expression in Cambodia inspired by the work of Cambodian artists like Rithy Panh. Then, present your work to the class and discuss the styles and influences behind your creation in a 5-minute power point presentation.

Or

- Build an 8-10 minute presentation discussing and explaining the meaning and influences behind or history connected to one piece of art, musical work, or musical group that you have encountered in this section or through your research on Cambodia outside of class. Use scholarly sources to help support your discussion and analysis.

Or

- In many ways the arts have always been a part of social discourse. Artists like Bun Heang Ung are part of the long international tradition of intellectual artists. Write a 4-5 page essay in which you reflect on what makes the arts popular mediums to discuss our problems, thoughts, and goals using any of the Cambodian artists discussed in this section.