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A cooperation mission to establish the Cambodian Film Commission

This month SEA-Images talks with Franck Priot, the Deputy Director of **Film France**, who just came back from Cambodia where he worked on a two-week cooperative mission to assist the future launch of a Film Commission in the Kingdom.

This discussion will be useful in learning more about what a film commission does and what could be the potential and advantages of the future Cambodian Film Commission.

Could you give us a brief description of Film France?

Film France is an agency financed by the Ministry of Culture, entrusted with the mission of helping local and foreign producers to shoot and do postproduction in the French territory. Film France coordinates the network of 38 regional and departmental film commissions, which do the same job on the local scale.

How do you evaluate the current situation of the Cambodian audiovisual industry?

The most active part in the audiovisual field has been, by far, television for the last few years. There is an explosion of new TV networks. The 6 or 7 major channels, three of which are nationwide broadcasts, are the main engines of development of the audiovisual activities in the country. Those

are free TV and commercial channels, in the sense that they air (and sell) advertisements. Some are controlled by the state (TVK), and others, by the major political party or by private operators. These channels produce various contents: TV commercials, talk shows, fiction contents, which are mainly series.

This last point is important since the production of TV series not only generates skilled and trained technicians, but builds a star system for their actors.

So television is the first vector of audiovisual development in the country. We should remember that when the country established a democratic system in 1993 professionally-trained or experienced people were absent in the whole country. The "teachers" of the ones who are supposed to teach the younger generation now how to handle a camera, how to write a script, how to direct, etc., had all been killed. So there was a brutal stopping and a complete break in skill transmission and acquisition. The same can be applied in other fields, economic development, for example. Unlike its neighbour countries, such as Thailand, the currently active generation of Cambodian professionals have to develop the country's audiovisual savoir-faire as well as catch up with teaching the younger generation.

Film theatres are usually the second vector of audiovisual development. Film theatres started to reopen around the year 2004 in Phnom Penh, and now, some other towns also have one or more theatres. So there exists a small film exhibition business in Cambodia.

However, the theatres face a major problem: they have access only to Thai and Cambodian films, but no access to American or other foreign films. The reason is simple. Cambodia just passed copyright bills in its law, as late as the end of 2004, and furthermore, DVD piracy is rampant everywhere. The copyrights and piracy issues are serious obstacles in developing the exhibition industry.

The theatre-owners are recently facing a new problem: the rise of real estate prices.

Nowadays, it is far more profitable to build a bank, a hotel or a fast food restaurant than a cinema.

A possible solution will be to make the move towards the multi-screen model in order to break even their rents, as they will bring about more audience and profits when having more screens.

What kinds of Cambodian films are shown in these theatres?

There is a big similarity between the Cambodian trends and those of commercial Thai cinema. The most common genres are comedies and ghost films, or a combination of these two!

What was the goal of your mission in Cambodia?

It was a cooperative operation involving 4 different organisations – the Ministry of Culture of France, the Ministry of Culture of Cambodia, **Bophana** (the Audiovisual Resource Center of Cambodia, initiated by filmmaker Rithy Panh) and Film France.

The Ministry of Culture of Cambodia entrusted Bophana with the preparation of the creation of the Cambodian Film Commission and in the future, with running the commission.

My exact role was to research on Cambodia's potential of attracting foreign productions. I also met film professionals and officials from the Ministry of Culture to explain the several advantages of setting up a film commission.

Apart from providing its expertise, Film France will supply internet and software tools for the creation of the commission.

How would you evaluate the country's potential of attracting foreign productions?

There is strong links between France and Cambodia because of the history that the two countries share.

There are also a number of films and TV-features taking the Indochina colonial period as historical backgrounds, such as *Two Brothers* by Jean-Jacques Annaud, the film that Rithy Panh is currently shooting and many others.

So basically, any project taking place in Indochina during the colonial period could be shot in Cambodia.

Most of these films are French, but productions of other nationalities have recently used Cambodia for shooting locations such as America, UK and Korea.

Foreign films that might be interested in shooting in Cambodia are,

logically, those whose action takes place in a South-East Asian country. This is similar to what the Philippines used to offer when the films on the Vietnam War were shot there.

Any films taking place 'somewhere in South East Asia' could potentially be shot in Cambodia, and more concretely, films taking place 'somewhere in South-East Asia during the French colonial period' since there are still plenty of buildings in a typical colonial architectural style all over the Kingdom.

Of course, Cambodian locations can be used for the films taking place in Cambodia. This seems very logical, indeed! And Cambodia has a great advantage for that.

There are very few countries in the world where a single shot in a film enables the audience to immediately guess where the action takes place. Cambodia is one of them since it has a world famous landmark, the temples of Angkor. For example, in the opening sequence of Tomb Raider 2, there is a panoramic shot that of the protagonist with the temple in the background, and the audience can locate the action right away.

How do these foreign productions operate and interact with the local film industry?

And how would you compare Cambodia and its neighbour country Thailand, which is known to attract a lot of foreign productions?

Usually when a production is shooting abroad, they bring along the 'key technicians'. There are only a limited number of qualified film technicians in Cambodia. Bophana is also considering launching some training programs since most of the time, film crews are hired from Thailand. Unlike Thailand, Cambodia has no film equipment suppliers, so most of the time, everything, from camera to lighting spots, has to be rented from Bangkok suppliers, who often supply film technicians as well.

Thailand has also the advantages of a better road network and communication facilities, which Cambodia does not possess. However, cost levels in Cambodia are far lower: Daily wage for an extra is 8 USD, and a room in a 3-stars hotel outside Phnom Penh can be found at 20 USD per night. So production costs are very competitive compared to all the other countries in the region.

One more advantage of this country is the variety of sceneries and landscapes as there are not only tropical ones, but the mountain areas, which could be used for any heroic-fantasy productions.

Also Cambodia is not as urbanised as Thailand, and since construction costs are really low, sets can be entirely built at a reasonable cost. Judging from the Angkor temples, you can guess that Cambodian people are very talented in construction! With the same budget to rent a certain location in Thailand, you can actually build one in Cambodia.

On top of this, Cambodian people are known for their good humour and constant serenity.

As is the case with some other countries, the Cambodian government tries to verify what kind of projects are to be shot in its territory, but contrary to some other ones, they will never go as far as to prohibit a project from being shot simply because of its contents.

How Cambodia can benefit from attracting and hosting foreign productions?

First of all, any foreign film production will bring benefits to the local film network. It creates jobs for local film technicians and raises their professional profile by allowing them to have experience with a foreign project. Besides, a film always generates some economic activities in the locations of production. Later on, the film will have an efficient cultural and tourist exposure of Cambodia in foreign release territories.

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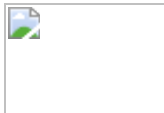


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