

Ethnographies of the Khmer Rouge Revolution

Democratic Kampuchea in Movies (1975-1978)

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Abstract

By 1978, the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia engaged in a limited 'open door' policy under the pressure of its Chinese ally. The country had been carefully sealed off thus far, but in need of a more positive image abroad, the leaders of Democratic Kampuchea invited journalists from friendly countries and representatives from Western Maoist organisations. These visitors filmed their journey in Cambodia in order to show the international public what the Khmer Rouge had achieved economically and socially within a few years. The paper examines two of the resulting productions: *Kampučija 1978* (*Kampuchea 1978*, 1978) by Yugoslav film director Nikola Vitorović and *Democratic Kampuchea* (*Demokratiska Kampuchea*, 1978) by Swedish writer Jan Myrdal. Drawing on anthropologist Faye Ginsburg's application of the notion of 'parallax effect', it compares the two works with Khmer Rouge propaganda movies. It proposes to investigate through an ethnographic lens the articulation of 'us' and 'them' performed in these films, and the way ideology both shaped and challenged forms of solidarity and identification. It argues that the 'parallax effect' enables a more nuanced view of the filmic representation of Democratic Kampuchea in the years 1975-1978, far from the monolithic perception people may have of it today.

In April 1978, for the third anniversary of the 'liberation' of Phnom Penh by the Khmer Rouge forces, Foreign Minister Ieng Sary invited foreign ambassadors to the projection of a new movie about Democratic Kampuchea (DK). As people were about to leave after the screening, the projectionists announced they had received the film made by Yugoslavian journalists in Cambodia a few weeks before. The guests sat back and watched the movie. Laurence Picq, a Frenchwoman married to a high-ranking Khmer Rouge cadre, recounts in her memoirs that it was a shock for the audience. Everyone could feel the terror pervading the sequences shot in the countryside, she writes. It spread to the spectators as they imagined the consequences of a diplomatic incident between

DK and Yugoslavia. The projectionists were immediately arrested and sent to prison.¹

In contrast, the film made later that year by Swedish writer Jan Myrdal when he travelled to Cambodia as member of the Sweden-Kampuchea Friendship Association must have satisfied the Khmer Rouge leaders. They invited Myrdal again in September 1979, although under radically changed circumstances since the DK regime had been overthrown by Vietnam in the meantime. These two movies held a mirror back to the Khmer Rouge. The latter looked at themselves being observed, 'us' filmed by 'them' from the West. Yet, in that period of anti-imperialist struggle and romanticisation of Third World revolutions, the divide between West and non-West was transcended by ideological solidarity. This makes objectification a fluctuating concept and therefore raises the questions of the possibility of an ethnographic gaze on DK and what it owes to the Khmer Rouge visual propaganda itself.

I propose to address this question through the notion of 'parallax effect', a scientific concept that anthropologist Faye Ginsburg applies to the 'related project of ethnographic film and aboriginal media'.²

By juxtaposing these different but related kinds of cinematic perspective on culture, one can create a kind of parallax effect; if harnessed analytically, these 'slightly different angles of vision' can offer a fuller comprehension of the social phenomenon we call culture.³

Taking my cue from Ginsburg, I juxtapose Khmer Rouge propaganda footage, Nikola Vitorović's movie *Kampučija 1978* (*Kampuchea 1978*, 1978) and Jan Myrdal's *Democratic Kampuchea* (*Demokratiska Kampuchea*, 1978), and compare these works with a focus on the 'social relations constituted and reimagined in media', and the 'social process engaged in the mediation of culture'.⁴ Bringing questions of ethnographic filmmaking to bear on the representation of DK and the role ideology played in it may contribute to shedding light on the way solidarity, identification, and criticism were articulated visually, and how this in turn reflected changing perceptions of the Khmer Rouge regime at a key period of its short-lived existence as a state.

Self-ethnography in the Land of Revolution

As the Four-Year Plan (1976) makes it clear, the Khmer Rouge leaders

¹ Laurence Picq, *Au-delà du ciel: Cinq ans chez les Khmers Rouges* (Paris: Barraud, 1984), p. 121.

² Faye Ginsburg, 'The Parallax Effect: The Impact of Aboriginal Media on Ethnographic Film', in *Visual Anthropology Review*, 11. 2 (1995), 64–76 (p. 65). The parallax effect is the effect created by the slightly different angles of vision of each eye.

³ Ivi, p. 65.

⁴ Ivi, p. 70.

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favoured cinema as propaganda medium. They urged for the organisation of 'many groups to produce many films to show to the people in general'.⁵ Film director Rithy Panh, a child at the time, remembers that he attended some screenings: 'Sometimes leaders gathered several villages and showed us a movie about how people fought with their bare hands the powerful colonisers'.⁶ The Khmer Rouge were not the first Cambodian leaders to employ films in such a fashion. Indeed, they may have been inspired by Prince Norodom Sihanouk's use of cinema in the 1960s, as a means to communicate to 'little people' about his politics couched within familiar vernacular narratives.⁷ Of course, the Khmer Rouge rejected Sihanouk's exoticism, and in that respect their cinematic 'oeuvre' may be construed as the systematic deconstruction of the Prince's worldview. Coached by the Chinese, they produced a filmic representation of DK that celebrated the advent of a changed society and operated as a teaching tool for the population, enforcing a vision of the body politic, the nation, and the collective — in short, the new 'we' with which Cambodians were required to identify.⁸

Yet, 'we' was first of all the small core of Khmer Rouge leadership, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK). The long take opening the movie *Meeting at the Olympic Stadium* (1976) is a good illustration of the way they tried to picture themselves. It is a long shot of the red sun rising over a tree line and the Silver Pagoda. This obvious metaphor of a new dawn for Cambodia sent a clear message about the political identity of the masters of the country. The colour red functioned as a leitmotiv throughout the movie, reappearing in the flags, banners, and chairs in the meeting hall. In this film, as in others, the Khmer Rouge leadership was depicted as a collegial power: a group of men dressed in the same black uniform and endlessly clapping hands. Yet, *Pol Pot Visits a Rubber Plantation* (1978) suggests some shift in later movies. While it still described the CPK leadership as a group, it also included several medium shot sequences focusing on Prime Minister Pol Pot. The latter smiled, shook hands, hugged the workers. This was the body language of a charismatic leader close to his people. The image conjured up that of Sihanouk's walkabouts in the heydays of the Sangkum regime (1955-1970). In the context of growing tensions with Vietnam, Khmer Rouge propagandists possibly hoped that familiar

⁵ Central Committee of the Communist Party of Kampuchea, 'Four-Year Plan', in *Pol Pot Plans the Future: Confidential Leadership Documents from Democratic Kampuchea, 1976-1977*, ed. by David P. Chandler, Ben Kiernan, and Chanthou Boua (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1988), p. 114.

⁶ *The Missing Picture* (2013), sequence: 1:17:15–1:18:32.

⁷ On the subject of Sihanouk's cinema, see Eliza Romey, 'King, Politician, Artist: The Films of Norodom Sihanouk' (unpublished M.A. thesis, La Trobe University, 1998); Joanna Wolfarth, 'Royal Portraiture in the Cambodian Politico-Cultural Complex: Norodom Sihanouk and the Place of Photography', in *UDAYA, Journal of Khmer Studies*, 12 (2014), 145–167.

⁸ Recent testimonies of former Khmer Rouge photographers at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) confirm China's involvement in the visual production of the Khmer Rouge. On the subject of Chinese presence in DK, see Andrew Mertha, *Brothers in Arms: Chinese Aid to the Khmer Rouge, 1975–1979* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2014).

representations of leadership would help turn Pol Pot into a mobilizing figure, in the way the image of God-king Sihanouk had galvanized Cambodians into resistance and sacrifice during the civil war (1970-1975).

The most important 'we' was of course the Kampuchean people. Khmer Rouge movies portrayed it as an entity in the making, whose revolutionary fervour was capable to physically remodel Cambodia. They stressed the radical transformation of man's relation to nature, as people were no longer victims of droughts and floods but controlled them. The films usually had the same structure. Establishing shots showed the landscape to be reshaped. Then were medium shots of the population at work, harrowing paddy fields, transplanting rice, loading baskets filled with stones and earth. Close-ups showed the smiling faces of the workers and peasants. The movies usually conveyed a sense of energy and efficacy. For instance, in *Collective Work in the Paddy Fields* (1975) the workers digging the canals were shot from a low angle, which amplified the impression of the men's indomitable force. The representation of the people's triumph over nature could become almost poetic at times, as may be seen in *Production of Salt in the Khmer Rouge Regime* (1978). The film offered a remarkable composition of the black silhouettes of the female workers appearing against the white landscape of the salt flats and reflecting into the water pools. This 'sublimation' turned their daily tasks, such as the raking up of salt into triangular cones, into a sort of ballet celebrating the beauty of collective work in DK.

The Khmer Rouge created new heroes for Cambodia in line with the imagery they had promoted during the civil war. They portrayed people as subjects with agency. They gave them a voice, literally so as some movies showed farmers and workers speaking. For example, *The Agricultural Sector of Democratic Kampuchea* (1976) included a sequence about three peasants chatting and joking while weaving baskets. In the sound movie *Reparation of the Railway Tracks* (1975), a couple with two children was shot commenting on their new house at the cooperative. In a later sequence, the voice (or dubbing) of the community chief addressing villagers could even be heard. Films on the industry in DK proceeded differently. They rather emphasised the professional gestures of the workers, their efficacy matching that of the machines, as the proof of the successful appropriation of imperialist technology by the Kampuchean people. Yet, metaphors were never far. The whole process of tire fabrication described in *Khmer Rouge Industry* (1977) may be interpreted as a representation of Khmer Rouge nation-building, the shapeless material collected and moulded into a useful tool evoking the Cambodian people (minus 'traitors' and 'exploiters') reformed thanks to the enlightened policies of the CPK.⁹ Was such a vision of the new Kampuchea effective? According to Y Phandara, who had attended

⁹ One may in hindsight have a more sinister interpretation of the movie and wonder to which extent it points to the idea of 'waste' (those who could not be 'cast'). In DK, let us not forget, 'we' was achieved at great human cost as a whole segment of the population, the 'new people' (the city residents), was discarded and eliminated.

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several screenings in the Boeng Trabek reeducation camp, many of these films were not even shown in the countryside 'because they were so fake and untrue that they would have aroused the anger of the workers there'.¹⁰ If Khmer Rouge propaganda did not work with the Cambodians themselves, could it work with an international audience? By the year 1978, this question became increasingly pressing and called for a different kind of answer, as will be seen in the next section.

Cambodia on Stage

The year 1978 was a period of image crisis for the DK regime faced with mounting accusation of human rights violations in the Western media and the escalating conflict with former ally Vietnam (diplomatic relationships were cut off in December 1977). In need of a more benevolent image, the Khmer Rouge leaders invited several foreign delegations to report about the situation in Cambodia. The visitors were mostly sympathisers from Maoist parties, pro-China organisations, and friendship associations in Western Europe and North America.¹¹ Unsurprisingly, the tour in DK was a fairly typical fellow traveller experience, fitting in the *delegacija* system described by Hans-Magnus Enzensberger and the 'techniques of hospitality' analysed by Paul Hollander.¹² Accompanied by a retinue of guides, drivers, and guards, the visitors were taken to model cooperatives, factories, hospitals, schools, and monuments. Their interaction with the population was limited, apart from meetings with well-coached people or Khmer Rouge officials passing off as workers and peasants.¹³

The delegations recorded their journey across DK, but these films are hardly available (their whereabouts are unknown or their authors do not wish to communicate on the subject). However, Vitorović's *Kampučija 1978* and Myrdal's *Democratic Kampuchea* are accessible. The first can be consulted at Bophana Center for Audiovisual Resources in Phnom Penh and is also available on the website of the Institut National d'Audiovisuel (INA) in France. The second can be consulted at the Documentation Center of Cambodia in Phnom Penh. Obviously, none shows any image of starvation or repression, although purges

¹⁰ Y Phandara, *Retour à Phnom Penh: Le Cambodge du génocide à la colonisation* (Paris: Editions A.-M. Métailié, 1982), p. 136.

¹¹ Toward the end of the year the Khmer Rouge extended the invitation to non-communist journalists Elizabeth Becker from the *Washington Post* and Richard Dudman from the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*.

¹² Hans-Magnus Enzensberger, 'Tourists of the Revolution', in *Critical Essays*, ed. by Reinhold Grimm and Bruce Armstrong (New York: Continuum, 1982), pp. 159–185; Paul Hollander, *Political Pilgrims: Western Intellectuals in the Search of Good Society* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2009) (first publ. by Harper Colophon Books in 1981).

¹³ See for instance Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975–1979* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), pp. 191–192.

were in full swing in DK at the time. Yet, although both films were made in the same locations and conditions, they produced a completely different image of the Khmer Rouge regime, as will be discussed now.

The Yugoslavian Case

The Yugoslavian delegation arrived in Cambodia in March 1978 for a two-week stay. It included journalist Dragoslav Rančić from the daily *Politika*, correspondent Slavko Stanić for the news agency Tanjug, and a team from Televizija Beograd led by film director Nikola Vitorović. Behind this invitation was, supposedly, Prime Minister Pol Pot's 'soft spot' for Tito's Republic, since the summer he had spent there as a student volunteering on the Belgrade-Zagreb highway in 1951.¹⁴ The need for support in the non-aligned movement, then increasingly torn between China and the USSR, was certainly a more plausible explanation. However, the public relations operation did not produce the expected results. *Kampučija 1978*, the resulting movie, was presented with great caution in Western mainstream media and often followed by critical debates with opponents to the Khmer Rouge.¹⁵ In France, the movie was broadcast in April 1978 on public channel A2. Interestingly, Vitorović participated in the post-screening discussion. His lacklustre performance, bespeaking his own doubts vis-à-vis DK, reinforced the negative impact of the movie. The public outrage demonstrated that the Yugoslavian film director had managed to strike a fine balance. While not being openly critical of the Pol Pot regime, his movie was a devastating account of life in Khmer Rouge Cambodia.

Kampučija 1978 started with a long tracking shot of Phnom Penh's Twilight Zone-like empty streets. Besides rendering powerfully the shock of the Yugoslavian journalists at their first encounter with DK, the sequence provided narrative continuity with the last events recorded by foreign journalists in Cambodia in April 1975, the forced evacuation of the cities. Cutaway shots of construction sites in the countryside crowded with workers soon clarified what had happened to the city inhabitants. 'The cities are empty but the countryside is full', the voice-over said. Phnom Penh appeared again later in the film with a similar montage that contrasted past and present, official discourse and reality. Shots of abandoned houses, closed cinemas, deserted pagodas, dead traffic lights, and white paint-covered street names alternated with footage images of a busy crossroads in Phnom Penh before 1975 and passages of the interview of

¹⁴ Slavko Stanić, 'Pol Pot Meets with Yugoslav Journalists, Tells Life Story', ref. LD181031Y Belgrade TANJUG Domestic Service in Serbo-Croatian 0822 GMT 18 Mar 78 LD (archives of the Documentation Center of Cambodia).

¹⁵ See for instance A.C. 'Aperto Appoggio del PCI all'Aggressione al Kampuchea', in *Linea Proletaria*, 18 (May 1978). This article was published by a member of the Italy-Kampuchea Friendship Association in the Maoist newspaper *Linea Proletaria* after the movie aired on TV on 27 April 1978.

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Pol Pot justifying the evacuation of the city. In that respect, *Kampučija 1978* was a precursor of the reportages made in Cambodia in 1979, after the fall of the Khmer Rouge. All included long tracking shots of Phnom Penh's streets. Next to the skulls and starving children, the 'ghost city' became an iconic representation of Khmer Rouge terror and insanity, and undoubtedly Vitorović's movie played a role in that.

The sequences filmed in the countryside too exuded emptiness and sadness, such as the long shot of the coastal landscape of Kep void of any human presence. *Kampučija 1978* reflected the feelings of unease and alienation of the Yugoslavian journalists toward the 'unusual' aspects of life in DK (the term was used in the voice-over comment). 'The people do not go hungry, but they are not very happy either. There was no singing to be heard, nor did we see any folk dancing, except for a show put on by a state ensemble', Stanić wrote.¹⁶ To the Yugoslavs, nothing looked like the socialism they knew.¹⁷ In this context, 'them' and 'us' were clearly identified: on the one hand, a population that could not be approached; on the other hand, a small group of foreigners trying to understand the extent of Cambodia's physical and mental changes, for example the disappearance of the Buddhist clergy. The meeting with the Honourable Tran Tach Tai, a former high-ranking monk who had allegedly joined the Khmer Rouge forces during the civil war, illustrates how the television crew managed to render the highly monitored environment in which they had to report. The choice of indirect speech, the voice-over telling what the ex-monk had said (he repeated the regime's propaganda), effectively translated the Yugoslavs' perception of the many filters through which they were allowed to communicate with the locals.

Vitorović and his team tried to penetrate the daily lives of Cambodians in other ways. They used the body language of the workers as a means to unpack the population's actual life conditions. For instance, the sequence on the salt flats near Kampot had little to do with the Khmer Rouge depiction of the same site. There was no poetry there, but unbearable working conditions for women standing in the heat and salty water — 'nine hours a day, with three days of rest per month', the voice-over said as the camera lingered, medium shots, on the legs and feet of the workers. This continued in the sequence about the children on a fishing boat at the harbour of Kompong Som (ex-Sihanoukville). Full shots showed how much the workload exceeded their physical capacities, and close-ups on their faces revealed no smile at all. It was the same with the children working in a water pumps factory in the suburb of Phnom Penh. They are 'barely tall enough to operate these machines', the voice-over commented, while the

¹⁶ Slavko Stanić, 'Kampuchea: Socialism without a Model', in *Socialist Thought and Practice*, 18.10 (October 1978), 67–84 (p. 67)

¹⁷ On the subject, see Dragoslav Rančić, 'Kampuchea, Three Years Old', *Seven Days*, 9 May 1978 (repr. in Kampuchea Support Committee, *New War in Southeast Asia: Documents on Democratic Kampuchea and the Current Struggle for National Independence* (New York: Kampuchea Support Committee, 1979), pp. 9–10).

camera focused on the heavy machinery and the small seven or eight-year old ‘workers’, climbing on boxes to reach the commands or struggling with weighty contraptions, their faces frown in intense concentration rather than happiness.

At this point, a shift undeniably occurred in the definition of ‘us’ and ‘them’. In this new configuration, ‘us’ was the Yugoslavs speaking on the behalf of the silent (or ‘gagged’) Cambodian population, in opposition to ‘them’, the Khmer Rouge apparatus. This may explain why Vitorović and his crew felt compelled to disclose Khmer Rouge propaganda, within the limitations of ‘socialist brotherhood’ of course. They could not be openly unsympathetic, but they could at least instill some critical distance, for instance through the soundtrack. Music brought a further level of affective commentary. ‘Staged’ scenes came with Khmer Rouge revolutionary songs, whereas the delegation’s personal take on the same scenes came with an ominous music. The sequence at the opera (the state ensemble show mentioned by Stanić) provided the television crew with the perfect symbolic device. Not only did the artificial depiction of work by the performers stress, by contrast, the reality of hard labour in Cambodia. The theatrical metaphor also allowed Vitorović to convey more strongly to the public the idea of Khmer Rouge *mise-en-scène*. The Yugoslavs had managed to some extent to peek behind-the-scenes, or at least to lift the veil for a while, hence the damning effect (for the Khmer Rouge) of *Kampučija 1978*. Yet, the question remained of what ‘ethnography’ was possible in DK, when the country was seen from ‘a bubble that glided by people and places’ as journalist Elizabeth Becker once described her own visit.¹⁸ As will be argued in the next section, Myrdal’s *Democratic Kampuchea* proposed a completely different perspective on that issue.

Kampuchea as Diary

The Sweden-Kampuchea Friendship Association delegation arrived in Cambodia on 12 August 1978 for two weeks.¹⁹ Besides China’s old friend writer Jan Myrdal, it included chairman Gunnar Bergström, Hedda Ekerwald, and Marita Wikander.²⁰ Much has been written on their journey, including the

¹⁸ Elizabeth Becker, *When the War was Over: Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge Revolution* (New York: PublicAffairs, 1998 (first publ. by Simon and Schuster in 1986), p. 399.

¹⁹ Established in April 1977, the Sweden-Kampuchea Friendship Association replaced the initial support workgroup Kampuchea born out of the anti-Vietnam War movement and the Swedish Clarté League, an old socialist student association affiliated for a time with the Communist League Marxist-Leninist (KFML). See: Peter Fröberg Idling, *De Glimlach van Pol Pot: Over en Zweedse Reis door het Cambodja van de Rode Khmer* (Amsterdam: Nieuw Amsterdam, 2009), pp. 65–66; Per-Olof Eriksson, ‘När vibildade Vänskapsforening’, *Kampuchea*, 2, 1977; Perry Johansson, ‘Mao and the Swedish United Front against USA’, in *The Cold War in Asia: The Battle for Hearts and Minds*, ed. by Yangwen Zheng, Hing Liu, and Michael Szonyi (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010), pp. 217–240 (pp. 223–226).

²⁰ Marita Wikander was the wife of Someth Huor, a former representative of DK in East Berlin who

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articles the delegates published upon return and Peter Fröberg Idling's popular book *Pol Pots Leende* (2006). As well, Myrdal's pro-Khmer Rouge positions, unchanged since the 1970s, are well known. These make his articulation of ethnography and ideology a unique one. As the movie's first sequence, which showed the Swedes visiting Angkor Wat, reminded it, the link between ethnography and ideology had long been a concern for Myrdal. Obviously, the latter's appearance in front of the most identifiable landmark in Cambodia reinforced his status as eyewitness. But for those who knew his previous works, it was also a reminder of his earlier engagement with the country, which he had visited with his wife Gun Kessle on the invitation of Sihanouk in 1968, in the days of heavy bombing by the US Army. The resulting account, *Angkor: An Essay on Art and Imperialism*, was a lengthy discussion of ethnographic issues. Through the deconstruction of the myths of European superiority, Myrdal devised a political project based on cultural alterity. This, in his view, was how solidarities with the Third World against imperialism could be built.²¹ The meaning of 'us', thus, could not be clearer. It included those, non-Westerners and Westerners alike, who participated physically or intellectually in this great cultural and political change.

Logically, 'them' included those standing in the way of change, such as Vitorović with his defamatory movie on DK. Myrdal conceived of *Democratic Kampuchea* as the refutation of it. Therefore, he had to tackle the 'ghost city' issue. Myrdal knew it was a critical point. Unable to provide a sound explanation about the situation in Phnom Penh, he did not dwell on it, dedicating only one sequence to the subject. The few shots of Phnom Penh's streets (where, conveniently, some truck happened to drive) were followed by a long take of the Royal Palace and Silver Pagoda, possibly as a counter-effect demonstrating the Khmer Rouge's respect for Cambodian heritage. The next scene was a tracking shot from a boat going down the stream of the Tonle Bassac River. During the cruise, the Swedes encountered a man on a pirogue and a group of children swimming and playing in the river — having a good time, unlike the children in Vitorović's film. This sequence may be considered as the movie's actual opening. Far from the violent contrast between cities and countryside established in the first minutes of *Kampučija 1978*, Myrdal took the spectator to a fluid journey into the new Kampuchea. The story he told from that point, using Khmer Rouge official numbers and arguments, was that of a successful economic and social experiment. Myrdal depicted the mutual transformation of man and nature in a style close to that of Khmer Rouge film production. Through the alternation of wide shots of landscapes and medium shots of enthusiastic farmers and workers, he reconstructed the entire line of rice production, from the building of dams enabling the control of waters to the final product: the big bowls of rice served

had not been heard of since his return to Cambodia in 1977.

²¹ On the subject see E. San Juan Jr., *Racism and Cultural Studies: Critiques of Multiculturalist Ideology and the Politics of Difference* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002).

at cooperatives and the bags of rice for export stored at warehouses in Kompong Som.

Myrdal certainly thought he was filming DK from within, as one of ‘us’. He made his standpoint clear from the outset. ‘These are notes from a journey in DK during the monsoons. These notes are biased’, he said at the start of the movie. Those familiar with his *Report from a Chinese Village* knew what he meant since he had provided a detailed explanation of the term ‘bias’ in the book: the subjective inclination colouring any ‘objective’ account. His own was ‘of an intellectual and humanistic tradition’ and a ‘peasant bias’ stemming from Sweden’s historical tradition of peasant insurrection and his own family story.²² How did this influence his filming of the locals in DK? Myrdal tried to show the companionable mingling of the delegates with the Cambodians — for instance, Bergström was shot sitting with women and children at a bus station. Of course, the shots of peasants smiling at the camera emphasised the friendly atmosphere. Yet, far from offering the empathetic scrutiny to be expected from such a champion of peasant revolutions, Myrdal made no attempt to go beyond the façade. He ignored the small signs such as ‘a wayward facial expression or something in people’s eyes’ that might have revealed a different reality.²³ In that sense, his depiction of Cambodian farmers was a benevolent objectification that turned them into interchangeable props serving a pre-determined discourse. This raised the question who was the actual ‘hero’ in the movie — the Kampuchean people or Myrdal himself? Drawing on scholar Elena Balzamo’s analysis of Myrdal’s identification with specific causes as the projection of personal issues onto the political realm, one may interpret his ethnography of DK as the combination of emotional blindness and ideological tunnel vision.²⁴ Myrdal did not only hold a mirror back to the Khmer Rouge. Cambodia was also the very mirror in which he contemplated himself. In that sense, the photo published in the book *Gunnar in the Living Hell*, showing Myrdal standing on a muddy pathway and filming the Kampuchean landscape, is an apt representation of the ethnography of fellow travellers in the Third World, Westerners observing themselves being on the ‘right’ side of progressive struggles.²⁵

²² Jan Myrdal and Gun Kessle, *Report from a Chinese Village* (London: Heinemann, 1965), pp. xiv–xv.

²³ He had done the same in China. See Perry Johansson, *Saluting the Yellow Emperor: A Case of Swedish Sinography* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), p. 211.

²⁴ Elena Balzamo, ‘Jan Myrdal: L’Autobiographie comme apologie’, *Germanica*, 20 (1997), 31–45 (pp. 36–37).

²⁵ *Gunnar in the Living Hell* (Phnom Penh: Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2008) contains about hundred photos of the travel of the Swedish delegation in DK, courtesy of Bergström. It was also an exhibition project presented in Cambodia, and in another form at the Living History Forum in Stockholm in 2009–2010. See Conny Mithander, ‘From the Holocaust to the Gulag: The Crimes of Nazism and Communism Swedish post-1989 Memory Politics’, *European Studies*, 30 (2013), 177–208.

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Conclusion

To the untrained eye, films about Khmer Rouge Cambodia all look the same. Yet, as seen with the impact of *Kampučija 1978* in DK and in Western Europe, editing choices could make a difference and enlarge the gap between mere propaganda and the attempt, however limited, to deconstruct the scenery elaborated by the CPK leaders. The movies of Vitorović and Myrdal both deployed in the wake of Khmer Rouge visual production. Yet, they offered contrasted ethnographies of DK, organised around distinct perceptions of ‘us’ and ‘them’, solidarity, identification, and denunciation. By shifting the focus on small dissonances, the ‘parallax effect’ enables a more nuanced view of the representation of DK in films in the years 1975–1978, far from the monolithic perception people may have of it today. As such, it helps reframe questions about the representation of cultural difference, as Ginsburg suggests, and thus contributes new perspectives to the analysis of the role of visual culture in the memorialisation of the Khmer Rouge period.²⁶

²⁶ Ginsburg, p. 65.