

# ARTISTS





# Im Heung-soon

*Not Silencing.  
Im Heung-soon's Cambodia*  
Adeena Mey



## NOT SILENCING. IM HEUNG-SOON'S CAMBODIA

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The point of entry to my discussion of Im Heung-soon's *Factory Complex* (2014–15) was sparked by a comment made by one of my students. I showed the film as part of an MFA seminar with the view to initiate a discussion about varieties of dynamics – historical, cultural, economic, political – in their intertwinement, at work across Asia. In this regard, my attempt to use *Factory Complex* as pedagogical support was relatively successful, but it also confronted me with several questions. Said student, a young Chinese artist, was able to identify locations which, for the others attending the class, were not necessarily obviously filmed outside of South Korea, such as the opening sequence composed of successive still shots of sculptures in Cambodia's Angkor Wat temples and its surrounding natural environment. He also recognised the foreign accents of the Southeast Asian migrant workers speaking Korean featured at a protest in the third quarter of the film. Furthermore, he made the point that to be able to fully engage and understand *Factory Complex*, some familiarity or knowledge about Asia was perhaps necessary.

Is this really the case? The fact that he was the only Asian student in the class first made me worry about the limited effects and the relevance of showing Im's film. But to be sure, that it won the Silver Lion at the 56th Venice Biennale in 2015 is a testament of its international relevance; and the post-screening conversation did generate a lot of questions and conversations, as well as emotional responses from most of the class, a Brazilian student saying 'I will never forget this film.' In any case, that this Chinese student could relate to *Factory Complex* through places and through the nuances in the Korean language spoken on screen, is telling. To some extent, the various Asian sceneries in the film as well as the linguistic hints given by the accented Korean mirrored my student's very experience of mobility and migration. Surely, it mirrored mine.

In this regard, it is probably not anecdotal to mention that the seminar in question, part of the WorkMaster programme at HEAD – Geneva, School of Art and Design, is titled 'Rethinking the Global'. It is attended by visual arts students, mostly international, the only Swiss student having also a multicultural background. It aims to introduce them to approaches within a broad spectrum of recent discourses about contemporary art in relation to more complex perspectives on 'the global', attempting to complicate canonical and usual accounts predominantly aligned with the expansion of art fairs and the phenomenon of 'biennalisation'. And so, students have been introduced to the recent history of Documenta, the contemporary art scene in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo, as well as to contemporary debates surrounding regionality and contemporaneity in Asia, looking at artistic practices and curatorial projects engaging and exploring new understandings of notions such as Eurasia, (Pan-)Asianism or Afroasia.

Im narrates and reconstructs the life, harmful labour and the devastating impact on the bodies and psyche of female workers in factories as a shared issue between South Korea and Southeast Asian countries – Cambodia in particular. His positioning that this

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Im-heung Soon, *Factory Complex*,  
2014–15, film still. Courtesy the artist

entanglement is additionally the result of codependent historical, economic and political processes thus offered a germane case of an artistic practice addressing East and Southeast Asian relationships. Moreover, I should also add that if I saw in the work educational and heuristic dimensions, it is without a doubt because the latter allowed me to project my own subjective attraction to it, of which several explanations can be given. The first is probably that, being Cambodian (but raised in Europe) and, over the years, having developed a particular connection with South Korea – through friendships, professional life and other interests, personal and beyond – the matrix of industrial and economic forces subjecting women, shifting from South Korea to Cambodia mapped in *Factory Complex* connects and draws a geography of problematics that mirrors mine. But beyond identification based on one's personal experiences and trajectory, yet for the same reasons the latter might be possible or not, I believe that what brings together my personal attachment to this film, its aesthetic and epistemological pertinence within the teaching situation I describe above, and the emotional and strong responses from my student cohort is its ability to speak to from and for a position of *out of placeness*.

Palestinian-American literary critic Edward Said titled his memoirs *Out of Place* to capture the ambivalence he has always felt towards notions of home and belonging. In his own words: 'You always have the feeling you don't belong. You really don't belong. Because you don't really come from here. And the place you do come from, someone else is saying it's not yours, it's his. So even the idea of where you came from is always challenged.'<sup>1</sup> In cinematic terms – and to go back to my student's comment regarding the issue of language in Im's film – it is a feeling that can be brought close to what film scholars Tijana Mamula and Lisa Patti call the 'multilingual screen'. Mamula and Patti do not equate multilingualism with being polyglot. Rather, they approach it as a phenomenon that 'may derive from diasporic upbringing or from migration into a nonnative linguistic environment, or as a pervasive societal condition – brought about by various mass displacements and colonization projects, and recently intensified by media globalization – multilingualism encompasses both the generative experience of linguistic confrontation and exchange and the adversity of linguistic destabilization, repression, or loss.'<sup>2</sup> Of course, the language spoken in *Factory Complex* is mostly Korean, by native speakers and migrant workers, as well as some Khmer for the part shot in Cambodia. But beyond the issue of languages as systems of vocal or graphic signs and their use by specific communities and individuals, by constellating the struggles of South Korean and Southeast Asian workers, *Factory Complex* asks the question of the possibility for these workers to communicate their fights, in their own voice, the correlate of which being Im's position as a film-maker staging and representing these voices. The way these different layers and positions are staged and played out in the film are core factors in the articulation between aesthetics and politics in a director's filmic language. To borrow Trinh T. Minh Ha's words (who like Jean-Luc Godard talks about making films politically rather than making political films) what a 'politically made film unavoidably faces is at once: 1) the position of the filmmaker 2) the cinematic reality 3) and the viewers' readings. A film, in other words, is a site that sets into play a number of subjectivities – those of the filmmaker, the filmed subjects, and the viewers [...].'<sup>3</sup>



As the viewer can read at the end of *Factory Complex*, Im dedicated the film to '[his] mother who has worked in the sewing factory and all the women who fought to defend their labor rights'. The author's subjective involvement with the film's subjects and their lives is revealed in the end credits. This statement is meant to avoid the pitfall of the critical position which unveils mechanisms of power and subjection while speaking from a supposedly neutral or transparent position. Yet, its placement at the end serves, at the same time, to avoid overdetermining the reception of the film for the viewer through the autobiographical lens. And so, with regards to the history of women's labour and activism in South Korea, Im's position is neither inside nor outside; but with regards his picturing of Southeast Asian subjects, how does Im negotiate his positionality? As a speculative path towards elements of an answer, I propose to discuss *Factory Complex* in relation to the documentary *A Cambodian Spring* (2017) by British film-maker Chris Kelly, which stages three Cambodian activists whose struggles paralleled those of the Phnom Penh female workers in Im's film. However, as I hope to show, beyond their belonging to different genres and obvious distinct stylistic and aesthetic constructions, it is the way the representation and the voice of the other unfold, and ultimately their politics, that differ and deserve scrutiny.

Modelled on the name given to waves of protests across the Arab world in 2010–12, allegations of electoral fraud by the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) during the 2013 general elections was the final straw that led to the 'Cambodian Spring'. Epitomising a situation characterised by increasing wealth inequality, violent land grabs carried out by the state, pervasive corruption and a general climate of repression, protests spread across Cambodia to levels previously unseen. This not only signalled the emergence of a well-informed public sphere, as well as of the latter's growing discontent with the CPP which has been ruling the country (in varying capacities) since 1979.<sup>4</sup> These crises paralleled and are a factor in the fast-changing economic and urban development, which sets the backdrop of *A Cambodian Spring*. The film primarily focusses on the intersecting trajectories of Venerable Luon Sovath, a Buddhist monk and activist, and land rights activists Toul Srey Pov and Tep Vanny, as they navigate the complex nexus of capitalist urbanisation, state repression and personal life. Tech-savvy Venerable Luon Sovath (dubbed the 'multi-media monk' and seen filming with his phone and other video devices in the film), emerges as a prominent figure in the resistance, using social media to advocate for justice and human rights. The film also features Srey Pov and Tep Vanny, both residents of the former Boeung Kak Lake area in Phnom Penh which has now been filled and sold off for real estate projects. The mother of three, when confronted with the threat of dispossession, Srey affirms herself as community leader; as her profile description on the film's website aptly puts it, 'she is outspoken, articulate and insightful and is instrumental in her community obtaining an admission of wrongdoing from the World Bank'.<sup>5</sup> Also mother of three, labelled a 'professional protestor' by the Cambodian government, Tep's trajectory is rather remarkable. Starting out of the Beoung Kak grassroots activism, the film depicts how she became the most prominent representative of the movement, notably through her English language skills, achieving widespread recognition for her fight to protect her community's homes and lands. Indeed, Tep received a Global Leadership Award in 2013 from Hillary Clinton, the former US secretary of state having also intervened in the

activist's arrest and conviction. Within these difficult paths where life and political struggle cannot be dissociated, Venerable Luon Sovath faced increasing threats that forced him to live in exile, while Tep's rise to fame would fuel divisions within the community that ultimately benefited the government and real estate developers.

Broadly speaking, *A Cambodian Spring* produces a powerful and moving account of a sociopolitical issue that is pervasive in Cambodia and that has become synonymous with the violence inherent in the process of neoliberalisation in the country, as well as in Southeast Asia more generally. Like many others, this grassroots movement, advocating for basic land and housing rights, is met with brutality and criminalisation. This has led to a decline in the number of protesters, not only due to imprisonment but primarily because of the pervasive fear state repression instills, ultimately eroding collective action and hindering meaningful dialogue with political stakeholders. If what Venerable Luon Sovath, Srey and Tep and their communities fight for undoubtedly deserves our attention and respect, what I question is its audiovisual treatment by the film. Indeed, the way Kelly brings these activists' voices into the realm of the sensible relies on a particular premise regarding the very idea of 'empowerment'. Further to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal question 'Can the subaltern speak?', political theorist Jay Maggio has asked *how* they can speak. As Maggio puts it, the 'essential Spivakian puzzle is, "How can we account for the subaltern?" [...] The intellectual, or anyone, trying to analyze the subaltern must be conscious of the position of the reader/writer vis-à-vis the subaltern and the dominant discourse. It is not as simple as empowering the "native," for the act of "empowerment" itself has a silencing effect. In other words, it might be impossible to enable the subaltern to speak. The two traps – speaking for or pretending that they can speak "on their own" – are always waiting for the well-intentioned intellectual. One cannot "intervene benevolently." Are we, therefore, always condemned to a shallow "representation" of the subaltern?'<sup>6</sup> As a matter of fact, despite their differences, the three protagonists of *A Cambodian Spring* are immediately identifiable as activists, the way the film unfolds hardly leaving any space for other forms of agency. They are empowered activists: their persona becomes almost inseparable from these roles, and activism a teleology they are designed to fulfil. The most striking feature is the language they use. At one point, Srey laments, 'This is a fake democracy'; during one meeting, Tep claims 'We need development, but it has to be fair and transparent'; filming a man after he has gotten horribly beaten up by the police, Venerable Luon Sovath tells the camera 'The UN will want to see this video as well' *Aphivat! Aphivat!* (អភិវឌ្ឍន៍, 'development' in Khmer), becomes an inflated slogan uttered by all those on the good side of this Cambodian Spring, all well versed in the language of development, of international aid, of NGOs, of the UN. There is no denying the activists' right to a better life and the atrocities they experience, but one might rightly wonder whether *A Cambodian Spring* does let its protagonists speak on their own terms. As Barnaby Ralph has noted, 'Cambodia is largely represented as primitive and violent in developed countries, and this is often used as justification for the neo-colonialist transplanting of external education models, languages and values by both governments and NGOs.'<sup>7</sup> And indeed, the latter are responsible for a particular narrative of Cambodian history. The literature produced since the end of the Vietnamese occupation and the establishment of a provisional government under the aegis of the UN in 1991, mainly



in the context of initiatives emanating from NGOs or international organisations, constructs a linear history and a liberal teleology which covers the period from Independence in 1954 to the present day with the aim of historicising the so-called 'post-conflict' era.<sup>8</sup> This liberal teleology deploys a motif used uncritically in Cambodian development circles, dividing contemporary history into pre-conflict, conflict and post-conflict eras, the latter being equated with 'opening up to the market and entering the mode of development and progress'.<sup>9</sup> As Pamela Corey, an art historian specialising in Southeast Asia, rightly points out, this type of historical narrative, indexed to the discourse of development aid, has guided many of the cultural projects carried out in Cambodia since the early 2000s. She sees the work of the artists who started out of the Stiev Selapak<sup>10</sup> collective as responding to the 'archival climate of [...] the *Age of Restoration*' while maintaining a distance from the discourse of non-governmental and international organisations.<sup>11</sup>

Back to *Factory Complex* and to Im's audio-visualisation of workers' struggles in Cambodia. As in the other parts of the film, here, Im initiates conversations with women engaged in various precarious labour, using direct interview methods and frontal shots. These are interspersed with pictorial compositions depicting their work environments or various surrounding spaces. The latter allow Im to address the degradation and inequalities they have endured without resorting solely to the workers' voices, but turning to various spatial environments and landscapes as witnesses in their own, non-human, agency.<sup>12</sup> The first part of this Cambodian segment comprises interviews with three Cambodian women who expose to the camera how they live and work, how much they earn, where the money goes, but also their aspirations, such as saving to study. Shots of their living habitat, with their clothes, rudimentary plastic furniture, as well as of the factory, of the work of sewing, ironing, machine sounds in the background create folds, cracks, suspended moments and different textures within the concrete space of neoliberalism that the factory represents. A sequence showing the violent crackdown on the factory workers, entirely composed of phone footage and journalistic films, is introduced with the informative intertitles: '2014 Bloodshed in Cambodia. In January 2014, a demonstration took place asking for a raise of salary to USD160 a month. Airborne troops were dispatched as a repressive measure. 5 were killed by gunshot and 40 were injured. Rumors of intervention from Korean corporations and the embassy were covered in domestic and international media'. Here Im reveals the transnational nature of these events and the complicity of global powers in the extreme repression measures. These scenes are followed by shots of the infamous mug shots of S-21 prisoners, a Phnom Penh school-turned-torture centre-turned-museum of the Cambodian genocide. According to Jacques Rancière, major international exhibitions, biennales in particular, are among the privileged sites where the analytical and discursive logics of the critical tradition, in the form of curatorial statements based on the denunciation and unveiling of social and political problems, are deployed with the greatest ardour.<sup>13</sup> In the case of Cambodia, this is reflected in the imperative to commemorate the genocide perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge. The annihilation of artists, intellectuals and all traces of cultural activity prior to Pol Pot's regime by his troops from 1975 to 1979 meant that the only visual output from this period was produced by the Khmer Rouge themselves, in the form of propaganda films and of the

infamous S-21 mug shots of prisoners.<sup>14</sup> By including this scene, Im draws a genealogy of political violence in Cambodia. However, while showing the transnational and transhistorical ramifications of a contemporary issue, Im neither falls into the trap of showing historical and socio-economic causality, nor – unlike *A Cambodian Spring* – does he surrender to the illusion of empowering the other. Instead, after the S-21 sequence, we return to the site of the factory. Workers and machines and their routines are back and we learn that the salaries are just twice the price of a piece of clothing sold in China, Japan and Korea, after which the film moves on to the protest by Southeast Asian workers in Korea I mentioned at the beginning. Yes, Im shows that neoliberal economic forces repeat themselves, expand and continue to extract the labour of female workers. But without any messianism or illusory utopianism, through his audiovisual poetics, he also makes the statement that women, the other and all subalterns can speak on their own terms, and that Im listens to them. .



- 1 Edward Said and Ari Shavit, 'My Right of Return' [interview], *Haaretz*,  
18 August 2020, available at [https://lists.h-net.org/cgi-bin/logbrowse.  
pl?trx=vx&list=h-radhist&month=0008&week=e&msg=nY%2B/  
t%2BkE9pOqjTxZIFSnsww&user=&pw=](https://lists.h-net.org/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=h-radhist&month=0008&week=e&msg=nY%2B/t%2BkE9pOqjTxZIFSnsww&user=&pw=) (last accessed on 19 January 2024).
- 2 Tijana Mamula and Lisa Patti, 'Introduction', in T. Mamula and L. Patti  
(eds.), *The Multilingual Screen: New Reflections on Cinema and Linguistic  
Difference*, New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2016, p.1.
- 3 Trinh T. Minh Ha, 'Questions of Images and Politics', in *When the Moon Waxes  
Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics*, New York and London:  
Routledge, 1991, p.148.
- 4 For an overview of the social-political changes in Cambodia in the 2010s,  
see Astrid Norén-Nilsson and Frédéric Bourdier, 'Introduction: Social  
Movements in Cambodia', *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, vol.38,  
no.1, 2019, pp.3–9, available at <https://doi.org/10.1177/1868103419848192> (last  
accessed on 18 December 2024).
- 5 'Toul Srey Pov', <https://acambodianspring.com/portfolio-item/srey-pov/>.
- 6 Jay Maggio, "'Can the Subaltern Be Heard?": Political Theory, Translation,  
Representation, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak', *Alternatives: Global,  
Local, Political*, vol.32, no.4, 2007, pp. 426–27.
- 7 Barnaby Ralph, 'Mommy Knows Best: NGOs and the Otherizing of Cambodia',  
2011, available at <https://twcu.repo.nii.ac.jp/records/23832> (last accessed on  
18 December 2024).
- 8 More specifically, this historicisation is as follows: the Sangkum (1955–70), the  
years administered by Prince Sihanouk, commonly referred to as Cambodia's  
'golden age', when the country experienced little unrest; the era of conflict  
that brought together General Lon Nol's Khmer Republic (1970–75), during  
which the country 'descended into chaos'; the Khmer Rouge regime (1975–  
79), which destroyed the social and traditional foundations of Cambodian  
society; the pro-Vietnamese government of Heng Samrin (1979–92), a decade  
of recovery for the country; and finally the period from UNTAC (United  
Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia, 1992–93) to the present day.  
This periodisation can be found in Fabienne Luco, *Between a Tiger and a  
Crocodile: Management of Local Conflicts in Cambodia – An Anthropological  
Approach to Traditional and New Practices* (trans. E. Richardson), Phnom  
Penh: UNESCO, 2002.
- 9 Veena Krishnamurthy, *The Impact of Armed Conflict on Social Capital:  
A Study of two Villages in Cambodia*, Phnom Penh, Social Services of  
Cambodia, The World Bank, 2009, p.16.
- 10 Co-founded by Vandy Rattana, Khvay Samnang, Lim Sokchanlina and Vuth  
Lyono in 2007, the Stiev Selapak collective ('art rebels' in Khmer) ran the Sa  
Sa Bassac art space (<http://www.sasabassac.com>) and the space dedicated  
to experimental projects Sa Sa Art Projects (<http://www.sasaart.info>), both in  
Phnom Penh. Roger Nelson details the recent work of its members in 'Stiev  
Selapak: a Cambodian artists' collective', *Art Monthly Australia*, no.261, July  
2013, pp.47–49.
- 11 Pamela Corey, 'Urban Imaginaries in Cambodian Contemporary Art',  
*Phnom Penh: Rescue Archaeology. Contemporary Art and Urban Change  
in Cambodia*, Berlin: Institut für Auslandsbeziehung, 2013, p.118. Ingrid Muan,  
coined the terms 'age of restoration' and 'restoration culture' in 'Citing  
Angkor: The 'Cambodian Arts' in the Age of Restoration 1918–2000', doctoral  
thesis, Columbia University, New York, 2001.
- 12 The status of landscapes in Im's work has been much debated. See Yoo  
Un-seong, 'Nameless History: The Second Conversation between Film  
Critics Y and Video Artist P', in Im Heung-soon: *Towards a Poetics of  
Opacity and Hauntology*, Seoul: MMCA Artist Studies, 2018, pp.249–56; Kim  
Jihoon, 'Testimonies, Landscapes, and Reenactments in Im Heung-Soon's  
Documentary Works', *Interventions*, vol.23, no.5, 2021, pp. 728–53.
- 13 Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, London and New York: Verso,  
2009.
- 14 See the DVD in the INA's Mystère d'archives collection, 'Saison 2. 1978. Les  
images retrouvées des Khmers rouges', Paris, Arte, INA, 2011. On the portraits  
of S-21 and their exhibition a critique of these photographs exhibited in the  
context of contemporary art, see Thierry de Duve, 'Art in the Face of Radical  
Evil', *October*, no.125, Summer 2008, pp.3–23.



Above and following pages:  
Im-heung Soon, *Factory Complex*, 2014–15,  
film still. Courtesy the artist













