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## Karmalink (Cambodia, 2021)

12 July, 2022



*Karmalink* attempts to bridge science fiction speculation and religious beliefs. It presents the rather weird idea that there will be a time when science will be used to validate religious spiritual dogma, like karma, in the pursuit of “spiritual” knowledge. This speculative imagination makes us observe how such marriage between science and religion may affect how people perceive and practice both. American-born director, Jake Watchel not only bridges science and religion in a way that is seemingly unproblematic, but also ultimately trusts the audience to grasp the world he is presenting as it is.

The film follows Leng Heng (Leng Heng Prak), a kid who often dreams a golden Buddha that was stolen from a temple by who he believes as his past life. He sets his mind to follow these revelations and trace the Buddha statue

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which he thinks can solve a pressing community problem. The premise of *Karmalink* is set against the backdrop of social inequality underneath the futuristic imagination of policy makers and businesses. Leng Heng's mother (Sveng Socheata) is at the forefront of their community's struggle against development aggression. Their community is in danger of getting erased by the construction of a railroad to Beijing and Leng Heng thinks that selling the golden statue might just prevent their community from being torn apart.

Along with his friends, Leng Heng seeks help from Srey Leak (Srey Leak Chhith), a hustler who has talent for finding things. They hit on the solution of recording Leng Heng's dreams by using "Augr", a technology which connects a person's nervous system to a graphic interface, thereby gaining visual access to one's own thoughts. But the moment that they try it for the first time, it's revealed that Leng Heng's thoughts are already being accessed by another operating system.

*Karmalink* is reminiscent of Mattie Do's *The Long Walk* (2019) from Laos, in the way that science fiction speculation is also bridged with religious beliefs. Both also utilize detective procedural in their narrative approaches that necessitate thickening conflicts which ultimately unfold neatly. But *Karmalink* adds another layer of complexity with the "detective" and the "client" being one and the same. Leng Heng's knowledge of the implanted exploit makes him suspicious of everything he has found out about the golden Buddha.



These suspicions broadly expand the film's exploration of its own subtext: that most of the problems facing the protagonist and his community's come from the outside. Aggressive development will only benefit those who are outside their community, the "futuristic" other side of the wall that is trying to connect not to Leng Heng's community, but to Beijing. There is also the matter of Dr. Sophia (Cindy Sirinya Bishop), an American researcher who had Leng Heng's own grandmother participate in her research. Leng Heng and

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Srey Leak come to suspect that it was Dr. Sophia who is responsible for placing the exploit in his mind.

But to the film's credit, fortunately, these suspicions are not placed to present Cambodia as a kind of paradise ravished by outsiders that seeks a pre-modernist restoration. These are placed, however, to situate Cambodia within its own history that went through both colonialism and capitalist imperialism. The weirdness of its own synthesis of science fiction and religion comes from an understanding of how colonial and imperialist intrusion affects people's lives, practices and developments.

Watchel's handling of the film in a way reflects his own position in relation to Cambodia, thereby providing a hint of his own understanding between what's inside and outside of the community that he's engaged in. *Karmalink* is a generous exercise that presents to the outside the nuances of Cambodia's contemporary problems and hopes without pandering much to what is already popular in its own history. By extending its historical scope, from the colonial past to a near imperialist future, *Karmalink* is as educational as it is compelling and entertaining.

Tags: Cambodia, Jake Watchel, Karmalink, Leng Heng Prak, reviews, Srey Leak Chhith

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## About The Author



### **EpoY Deyto**

EpoY Deyto has been writing about films and anime since 2009 and has recently moved his writings from Kawts Kamote to Missing Codec. He's currently taking his Master's in Media Studies (Film) at the UP Film Institute.

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