

Margaret Jack, **Media Ruins: Cambodian Postwar Media Reconstruction and the Geopolitics of Technology**, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 264 pp., \$45.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by

Codey Ryan Bills

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

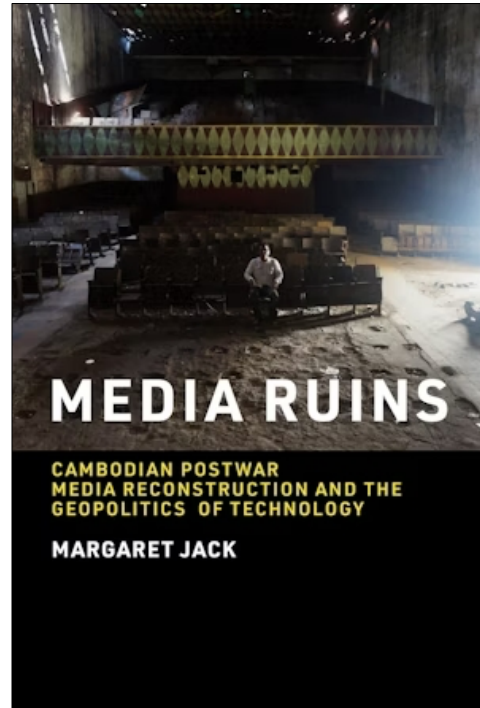
Media and technology studies has turned toward an infrastructural approach for a refreshed materialist perspective. An infrastructural approach seems to ground analysis in the hard technics of media production and circulation and foregrounds the granular connections among technical material, technical labor, and their nested, scalar contexts. Such an approach invites a type of synthetic analysis about how media technologies let political and social dynamics touch everyday life—and how we who live in the everyday might touch back.

Media Ruins: Cambodian Postwar Media Reconstruction and the Geopolitics of Technology

offers a new example of an infrastructural approach's utility for media and technology studies, both in terms of its content and in terms of its methodological approach. Like infrastructure studies more generally, author Margaret Jack uses an infrastructural approach to highlight the relations between the material qualities of technologies and their social and historical contexts. *Media Ruins* specifically extends strains of infrastructure studies that emphasize the materiality of work and labor. For Jack, the technical components of the Cambodian film and cinema infrastructures at the heart of her project are of the same level of materiality as the work of those who make new or rediscover old media artifacts.

The book documents the infrastructural work of Cambodian governments, citizens, artists, and activists from the 1960s to the contemporary moment. More specifically, Jack is concerned with how Cambodian infrastructural work reconstructs historical memory and grapples with historical violence. While this is not a book that documents the violence of the Khmer Rouge, an important corrective to histories that Jack suggests too often reduce the Cambodian context to that violence, much of this infrastructural work featured in the book grapples with that violence by necessity.

This infrastructural and historical approach has consequences for her choice of objects and her choice of methods. First, she focuses on the use of specific technologies and technological systems by different users in their unique contexts. Different Cambodian governments differently imagined radio and cinema, but Cambodian citizens, before and after the Khmer Rouge regime, used these technologies and infrastructures sometimes for quite different purposes. In its postcolonial situation, Cambodia developed film and radio infrastructures with complex and contested relations to global geopolitics and local



Cambodian politics. Second, Jack combines historical narrative and ethnographic approaches to narrate the inextricable connection between Cambodia's media and political history and its media and political present. The more historical chapters of the book document infrastructures developed before and after the Khmer Rouge, while the ethnographic chapters focus more specifically on how people in contemporary Cambodia do infrastructural work to grapple with a complex history. We certainly see groups grapple with historical violence, but we also see them excavate positive aspects from a ruined past in service of political action oriented toward a better future.

Jack develops two concepts for these purposes. *Media ruins* are decayed spaces of media technology, like an abandoned cinema, that signify the complexity of the past and its affective variety. As a decayed space, a media ruin might remind a passerby of loss, sorrow, and pain—it is not what it once was. But those decayed spaces were not always decayed, so one might be reminded of the joy and entertainment they once contained. *Infrastructural restitution* represents the work of media practitioners to rediscover, reconstruct, and recontextualize past media objects and infrastructures. Such activity reclaims positive aspects of the historical past in the present as a kind of political action that yearns for a better political future. Infrastructural restitution happens in or on media ruins and often uses contemporary digital tools.

In the first half of the book, Jack develops a media history of radio, cinema, democracy, and violence in pre- and post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia. In those chapters, Jack narrates how internal violence and external geopolitical dynamics shaped, reshaped, and fractured Cambodian audiovisual infrastructures. These chapters focus on the push and pull among changing Cambodian governments, geopolitical powers outside of Cambodia, international institutions, and Cambodian citizens before and after the violence of the Khmer Rouge era fractured Cambodian society. Through numerous regime changes and the waxing and waning of the influence of distinct foreign entities, media and politics in Cambodia remained tightly intertwined. Jack reconstructs this history for two reasons. First, her history is a needed corrective to the hyperfocus on the Khmer Rouge era in historical work on Cambodia. Rather than focusing on Khmer Rouge violence, Jack focuses on what that violence fractured and how Cambodians attempted to reconstruct their history and society after the Khmer Rouge. Jack emphasizes acts of reconstruction and moving on in order to avoid reducing Cambodia to its historical violence. Second, this history provides both the context and the setting for the subsequent, ethnographic chapters of the book. The book's structure makes a compelling argument for the necessity of this kind of storytelling. It is not simply that the events and infrastructures she describes frame contemporary infrastructural work in Cambodia, but that such infrastructural work actively reconstructs and grapples with that history as a kind of collective memory making.

In the second half of the book, Jack analyzes forms of infrastructural restitution in contemporary Cambodia. Media artists and activists in Cambodia use new and old tools to reflect on the violence of the past, laud certain moments in Cambodia's history, and to call for change in a context of restricted expression. These three chapters are ethnographic in nature and find Jack embedded with Cambodian groups of artists and activists doing the work of infrastructural restitution. Each group reconstructs Cambodian media history through the documentation of media relics from previous historical eras or by using digital tools to make lost media again accessible.

Throughout these chapters, infrastructural restitution takes a number of forms. In chapter 4, Jack suggests that the work of Rong Kon, a group that documents ruined and historical cinemas, performs a kind of infrastructural restitution that amounts to subtle political action. Rong Kon's careful reconstruction of pre-Khmer Rouge cinema architecture amounts to a call for public support for art and independent expression. Such activity makes concrete an alternative to a context of ever more limited freedom of expression. Chapter 5 thinks with Preah Sorya, a Phnom Penh group of film aficionados that works to find, preserve, repair, and screen pre-Khmer Rouge films, many of which were destroyed during the Khmer Rouge era. In this case, infrastructural restitution resurfaces lost memory of a time before violence and, in doing so, functions as a salve on the deep wound of historical trauma.

Preah Sorya uses digital tools to screen and repair the films they find, and chapter 6 deepens the analysis of infrastructural restitution through digital tools. Jack focuses on two digital projects that commemorate what was lost during the Khmer Rouge era. One focuses on the memory of Khmer Rouge violence, in the hopes that such memory might prevent future violence. The other focuses on commemorating pre-Khmer Rouge modernism. Both perform infrastructural restitution by using reconstructions of the past to inform action that might achieve a better future. Along the way, Jack returns to the historical concerns of earlier chapters. One app is grassroots while the other is funded by an international NGO, but both participate in a global economy of knowledge bent toward the construction of a "universal" digital archive. This archive's universality is an imperial flourish that eliminates reference to offline local practices of knowledge gathering and is dominated by transnational technology corporations that do not do the work of localization and translation. This is an essentially exploitative relationship. These apps rely on knowledge gathered in local contexts and in local languages, predominantly Khmer, construct that knowledge as local history, and then put that history out of reach of the people who lived it.

These concerns dominate the conclusion of the book, which emphasizes how transnational technology companies and global digital governance models continue the legacy of control in Cambodia, especially in its postcolonial situation. But Jack's infrastructural approach intervenes, here, to resist the universalization of contemporary diagrams of control. Instead, forms of infrastructural restitution—and, indeed, infrastructural work more generally—retrofit new technologies for their local contexts. This notion illustrates the utility of an infrastructural approach for media and technology studies. As *Media Ruins* demonstrates both narratively and structurally, the digital technologies of contemporary practices of Cambodian infrastructural restitution allow global technopolitics to touch life in Cambodia. At the same time, infrastructural work tweaks them into local forms, allowing Cambodians to touch back. By pairing historical and ethnographic work, Jack convincingly illustrates how an infrastructural approach can lead to fresh angles on how history, memory, and politics are instantiated in everyday technologies.