FILMMAKING AS RESISTANT POETIC AMPLITUDE

Installation view of *Landscape Series #1*, 2013, video and 35mm slide projection: 5 min, at Nha San Collective, Hanoi, 2013. All images courtesy the artist.

A CONVERSATION WITH NGUYEN TRINH THI

BY MINH NGUYEN

Nguyen Trinh Thi's first name means "poetry" in Chinese-Vietnamese, and, as though a promise, her works brim with prismatic literary sensibilities. Her films *Spring Comes Winter After* (2008) and *Unsubtitled* (2010) trace the history of the North Vietnamese literary movement, Nhan Van-Giai Pham ("Humanism and Works of Beauty"), that the Viet Minh regime suppressed in the late 1950s, while *Love Man Love Woman* (2007) features the distinct dialect of the indigenous religion Dao Mau, spoken by a spirit medium. Texts also guide the forms of Nguyen's works, such as *Letters from Panduranga* (2015), an epistolary narrative on the indigenous Cham people of Vietnam, and *Eleven Men* (2016), which is based on a short story by Franz Kafka. Along with an intuitive deftness for language arts, her oeuvre reveals her unswerving commitment to fighting against state power, as she approaches poetics as a stance against hegemonic systems of communication.

Trained in journalism and filmmaking, Nguyen wields her expertise to puncture the prescriptive orders of both fields. Her signature form, the essay-film, evokes what cultural theorist Walter Benjamin wrote in his essay "The Storyteller" (1936), concerning the bombardment of information and how it is mistaken as meaningful exchange: storytelling, according to Benjamin, provides the amplitude that information lacks, where self-knowledge and connections can bloom, transmuting our relationship to truth. In 2009, Nguyen founded Doclab in Hanoi, a "small center for big ideas" that hosts screenings, workshops and talks by visiting independent filmmakers and artists. The artist's own works have been screened at events including the 9th Asia Pacific Triennale of Contemporary Art, in 2018, at the Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, in Brisbane; the 21st Biennale of Sydney, in 2018; the Rotterdam International Film Festival, in 2016; Jeu de Paume, Paris, the Lyon Biennale, and CAPC Bordeaux, in 2015, among numerous other exhibitions and film festivals in Vietnam and beyond in the last decade.

ArtAsiaPacific contributor Minh Nguyen caught up with the artist to discuss the power of ambivalence, montage techniques, and negotiating precision versus essence in both linguistic and visual translations.

Installation view of *Unsubtitled*, 2010, ten-channel video installation with color, sound, and 19 wooden cut-out screens, durations and dimensions variable, at "Unsubtitled," Nha San Collective, Hanoi, 2010.

Does your literary inclination relate to your background as a journalist?

My grandfather was a poet, and he gave me my name—"Thi," which is "poetry." So I guess I'm stuck with the name. I'm joking, but it's true that for me, poetry and art are quite similar. Referencing literary works has allowed my films—which have rather specific contexts—to expand into other conceptual realms and timeframes.

Speaking of references, whose works have made lasting impressions on you?

Among filmmakers, I was strongly influenced by Chris Marker, from whom I borrowed compositional strategies and structures, including that of collage, especially for my essay-films. Marker approaches filmmaking as an attempt to trace memories, whether that memory be public or private. Like memories, certain images come up unexpectedly in his worlds, leading to more unexpected associations. Another important inspiration is John Cage, who prompted me to closely consider the relationship between backgrounds and foregrounds, as well as chance and indeterminacy, and Eastern traditions and philosophy.

Regarding influences from within Vietnam, over ten years ago I started to work on a documentary project on Nhan Van-Giai Pham—the suppressed literary movement of the late 1950s and the only instance of widespread intellectual dissidence to occur in North Vietnam. I met and filmed several surviving poets of the Nhan Van-Giai Pham movement, including Le Dat and Hoang Cam, and then Vietnamese writers of later generations such as Bui Ngoc Tan, Duong Tuong, Hoang Hung, and Nguyen Ngoc, who have continuously informed my work.

You often work with archival and found images. How do you gather these materials? Do you begin searching with a clear subject in mind?

I don't have a specific method. In general, I work more intuitively than methodologically. In fact, the way that I incorporate found and archival materials into my works has become increasingly messy. In my first found-footage film, *Song to the Front* (2011), for example, I used a single classic Vietnamese film made in 1973, featuring Nhu Quynh as the main actress.

Later, I expanded this into *Eleven Men* (2016), using a range of narrative films spanning three decades of Nhu Quynh's legendary acting career. The film's text was adapted from Franz Kafka's short story "Eleven Sons" (1919), in which the narrator describes each of his children in detail. Kafka's piece is effectively a set of vignettes about 11 different lives. What I like about the quality of his text is its openness and ambivalence. It was almost like a canvas on which I could draw with my own material.

Song to the Front, 2010, still from video: 5 min 14 sec.

Landscape Series #1, 2013, stills from video and 35mm slide projection: 5 min.

Everyday's the Seventies, 2018, still from three-channel video with four-channel sound: 15 min.

I collect still-images related to a single topic as well. For *Landscape Series #1* (2013), I started looking for existing Vietnamese photographs that could speak to how landscapes bear witness to history. So, I looked for photographs that were taken in places of historical significance, but instead of scenes depicting events and people, I wanted frames that only show nature. In the process of searching for these images I came across many local press photos with a witness pointing to things in a landscape. And the work became that.

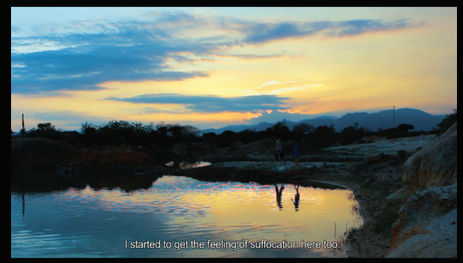
Then, the parameters for my research became broader. Though I eventually trimmed *Vietnam the Movie* (2015) down to include mainly segments from popular Hollywood films, I had originally looked at sources ranging from big-budget feature movies to art-house productions, documentaries, newsreels, educational films, and army propaganda. I gathered these materials from online archives, including eBay and YouTube. What threaded them together was the mention of the word "Vietnam" in the scenes. Because there isn't an official film archive in the country, I had to build my own collection of movies related to Vietnam.

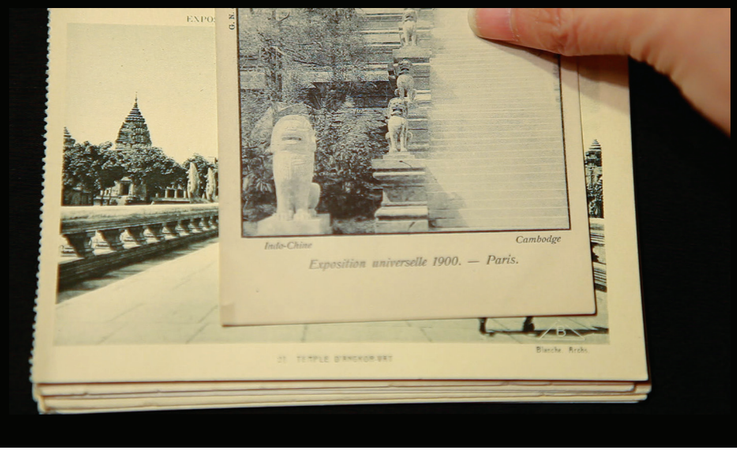
These found components play increasingly complicated roles in my work. *Everyday's the Seventies* (2018) includes three channels of video and four channels of sound. The three projections respectively comprise clips from 1980s and '90s Hong Kong movies, wire-service footage of the Vietnam War and the Vietnamese refugee crisis in Hong Kong from the late 1970s until 1997, and my own recordings of the Hong Kong-based shop Paul's Records. This last channel was accompanied by the voice of shop owner Paul, who narrates his experiences of growing up in Saigon's Chinatown during the Vietnam War and escaping to Hong Kong just before the cease-fire in 1975. Different versions of the same history—one personal, another depicted by cinema, the third described by news media—are laid out side by side.

> What I admire about your work is that while it always arcs toward justice, it also evades simple narratives about heroes and villains, the notion of a homeland, and even colonization. *Letters from Panduranga*, for example, focuses on the Cham indigenous people, whom the present-day Vietnamese people displaced. The film had me thinking about displacement on a broader timescale, and about the vastness of the Vietnamese experience beyond a monolithic victimhood as framed by the Vietnam War. What informed your decision to use the letter format for this film? Are these characters allegories?

Before arriving at the essay-film format, I had tried to use many different forms including installations and photography. I felt uncomfortable with the thought that I'm trying to tell the Cham's story on their behalf, that I would be speaking as an outsider, as well as being overwhelmed by the story's complexity, to the extent that I had almost dropped the project.

The essay-film is a good way for me to include these self-reflections. The Cham story became half the film, and the other half became my reflections on working in Vietnam as an artist and filmmaker. It became my self-portrait. I used two voices, and set the story in different locations and times.





Letters from Panduranga, 2015, stills from single-channel, color and black-and-white video with sound: 35 min. Photo by Jamie Maxtone-Graham.

> In her text on *Vietnam the Movie*, curator Loredana Pazzini-Paracciani quotes film scholar Rick Berg, who wrote that the Vietnam War became "a resource for the American culture industry" in the 1970s and '80s. She also quotes writer Viet Thanh Nguyen, who states that "while the United States lost the war, in fact, it won the war in memory on most of the world's cultural front outside of Vietnam." To me, *Vietnam the Movie* functions as a meta-history of the US's dominance in this cultural memory. Is the film directed to non-Vietnamese or Vietnamese viewers?

It's difficult to please everyone, so as a filmmaker you have to decide for yourself who your audience is, and where you want to show the film. For me, I am my first audience. In making my works, especially those regarding Vietnam, I always feel at once like an outsider and an insider. In this sense, *Vietnam the Movie* was directed to both non-Vietnamese and Vietnamese viewers.

To address your point about the work functioning as a meta-history though, I have to say my interest isn't in piecing together a comprehensible and linear narrative. Rather, I like to explore history's gaps and holes. This is reflected in the format of *Vietnam the Movie*. I just can't write an overtly political essay because to have meaning and no meaning are equally important.

> That's a significant point. It reminds me of Trinh T. Minh-ha's films, which also adopt nonlinear formats as a means of radical deviation from traditional filmic narratives. In an interview, she cited as an inspiration filmmaker Raul Ruiz, who connected "central conflict theory" [in which an A versus B conflict is manufactured for the audience to side with an archetypal protagonist] in film with United States hegemony. Barry Barclay, a Māori filmmaker whose essay "Celebrating Fourth Cinema" (2003) you adapted in your 2018 film *Fifth Cinema*, makes the same connection.
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> In "Celebrating Fourth Cinema," Barclay introduces Fourth Cinema as an addition to the First-Second-Third Cinema framework: "First Cinema being American cinema, Second Cinema Art House cinema, and Third Cinema the cinema of the so-called Third World." According to Barclay, "the First Cinema camera's intention has been, over one hundred years of cinema, to show action and relationships within Western societies and Western ideological landscapes." He calls the First-Second-Third Cinema framework "invader cinema." Fourth Cinema, Indigenous Cinema, is "outside the national outlook by definition, for Indigenous cultures are ancient remnant cultures persisting within the modern nation state." Can you talk about this essay's impression on you, and how you treated it in *Fifth Cinema*?

When I came across Barclay's name in New Zealand a couple of years ago, I had been quite affected by an ongoing situation in Vietnam. The government had decided to build the country's first two nuclear power plants in the land of the Cham ethnic minority group. This led me to learn about the history of the Cham people and in turn made me more aware of the life of indigenous people in Vietnam. My research resulted in *Letters from Panduranga*, filmed in the South-Central coastal region where Cham communities live. Concurrently, I was troubled by the escalation of environmental and ecological destruction in the country—issues usually tied to the fact that local and indigenous communities have no say whatsoever in the matters.

In *Fifth Cinema*, the text "Fourth Cinema" and its notion of indigeneity work metaphorically, standing in for the beauty and wisdom of the world, and all things oppressed—women, minority groups, the colonized. In his text, Barclay illustrates cinema's alliance with imperial power through the example of a scene from the popular Hollywood movie *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1962), in which the camera is on a ship's deck, and therefore controlled by the people who own the ship. I wanted to draw a connection with the dynamics in Vietnam, so I placed that part of the text on top of found footage of the Vietnam War, shot from helicopters flown by US soldiers. I also inserted maps from online archives showing the US Army's bombing targets during the war.

Barclay's description of how indigenous people were looked at from the white colonist's ship in *Mutiny on the Bounty* finds another parallel in how Vietnamese women were portrayed in North and South Vietnam during the war. In the North, the image of the woman was that of a heroine and a fighter. In the South, women were typically shown as entertainers. To this day I think these associations still exist. The two groups were depicted in seemingly opposite ways that are actually, in fundamental terms, similar—the images were instrumentalized, in propagandistic pro-war and socialism efforts, and entertainment, respectively.

I make films that engage with local and national identity, history and memories, but at the same time address something that is universal. I seek the underlying rules that govern our lives, worlds and realities—the way we look at things.

> This balance of universals and particulars also impacts translation, which plays a significant part in your work, whether it be from Vietnamese to English or vice versa.

It's true, I consider translation and subtitling an integral part of my work. I actually do the translations and subtitling myself.

> How do you negotiate translating for precision versus for essence?

I try to translate for the essence of a phrase or sentence rather than for precision. I'm not a native English speaker, but I prefer using my English in subtitles instead of asking a native speaker to "correct" my text, because my pattern of thinking is different, and is expressed in the idiosyncratic way that I use language. At the same time, I try to preserve the two cultures' ways of understanding the world. You have to be able to think and feel in both languages.

> You've previously stated in an interview that in film, "form is the content." I noticed while watching *Fifth Cinema* that at times the images and text reinforce each other in unexpected and startling ways. How do you decide whether to pair your videos and images with voiceovers or texts?

Essay-films do not tell a story the way narrative-based films do—they follow the patterns of thought more closely. I also like essay-films because there are many things happening in between images and sounds or texts, so when watching them you have to connect two tracks.

I wanted people to have a different experience of Barclay's text—one that is more like reading a poem where you can only focus on several words at a time. This way people pay attention to the interaction between the words and the images with which they appear on screen. I wasn't trying to have the audience understand everything that is "said," but rather experience the combination of those elements. The key relationship in the essay-film is between the eye and the ear, not between shots, as with narrative-based films. In other words, the viewing experience is horizontal, rather than vertical.

> This notion of horizontal montage seems compatible with Chris Marker's method. In contrast to a "traditional montage," in which the succession of the shots corresponds to the length of the film, a horizontal montage presents images that don't refer to the one that preceded it or the one that will follow.

In *Fifth Cinema*, I managed to reduce the text from Barclay, and also spread it out, so the words appearing at any given time do not form full sentences—in many parts a sentence is spread over an extensive period of time, and while reading the fragments, viewers would have most likely forgotten how the sentence began. I liked this approach when I was editing the film. It served to create a poetic experience of the work.

> I like that. To me, the experience of watching *Fifth Cinema* distinguishes knowing versus learning. Instead of telling us something, the work draws out of us what we already know, reminding us that we knew all along.
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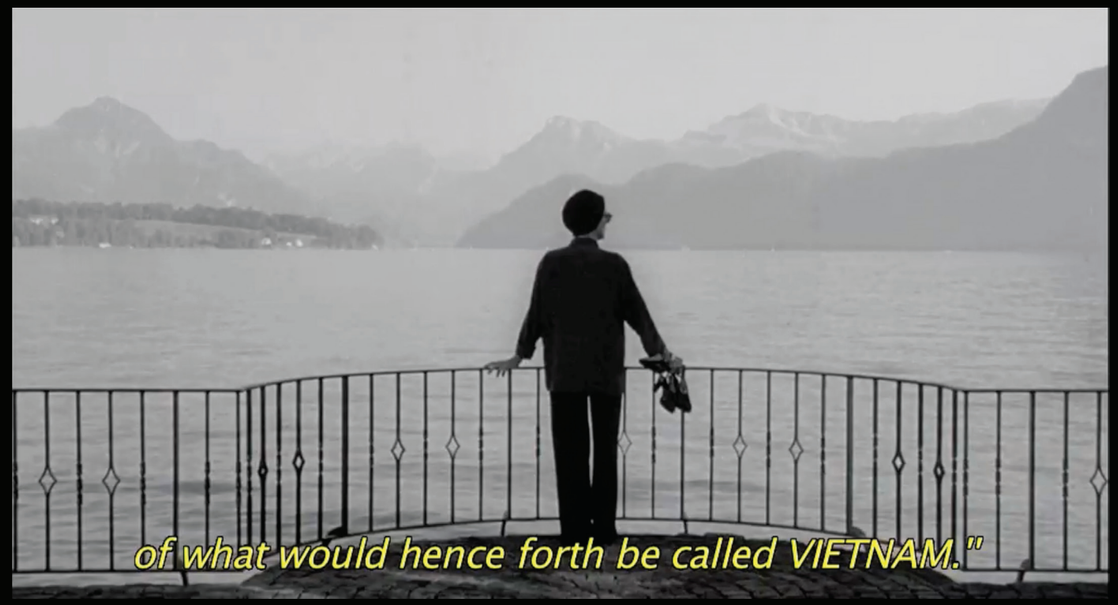
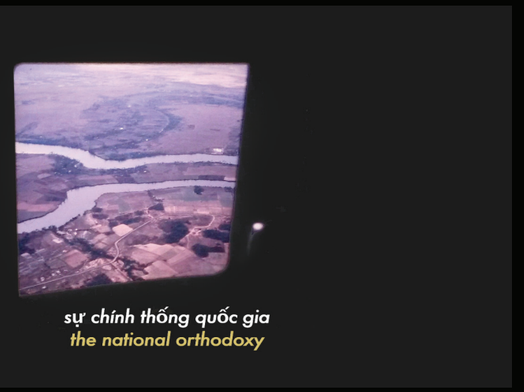
> On the note of pedagogy, I'm interested in your experience making experimental films and teaching filmmaking in Hanoi. Could you speak about the reception of your work among different audiences, be they Vietnamese, Vietnamese-diasporic, or non-Vietnamese? Do different audiences notice varying aspects, and find their own points of resonance?

An understanding of the history and local context relevant to my work is important to some extent for the audience to enter my films. However, my works usually contain multiple, different layers, and local and national history is only one of these tiers. With *Eleven Men*, for example, if you're not familiar with Vietnamese cinema or Vietnamese history you can still understand and enjoy the work from a different point of view—that of humanity and universality.

The recurring themes in my work—power structures, representation, an artist's role and ethics—are quite universal, so I found all kinds of people, from inside and outside of Vietnam, are able to connect to the films.



Vietnam the Movie, 2015, still from from single-channel, color and black-and-white video with sound: 47 min.



Fifth Cinema, 2018, stills from single-channel, color and black-and-white video with sound: 56 min. Photo by Jamie Maxtone-Graham.