

ARCHIVES OF MEMORY: VIETNAMESE AMERICAN FILMS, PAST AND PRESENT

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Vietnamese American filmmaking must be seen in the context of a community's diasporic formations. As such, it maps out a politics of representation that encapsulates the issues of community and history that invariably striate the ways in which Vietnamese American films and videos have been produced, distributed, received, and archived.

At present, Vietnam's own film archive—the Viện Phim in Hanoi—offers a veritable trove of Vietnamese cinematic history but has also omitted texts that run counter to its narrative of nationhood, sacrifice, and revolution, making it at once rich and full of elisions. (Missing from its collection are South Vietnamese films produced during the Vietnam War, often produced in collaboration with the U.S. government; diasporic films about the refugee or reeducation experience of the four million overseas Vietnamese, many of whom fled the revolutionary regime; and the large number of colonial films produced before the founding of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1945.)

A major site for the archiving of South Vietnamese and Vietnamese American memories is the Viet Film Fest (formerly the Vietnamese International Film Festival), a vital archive shaped by transnational politics and local practices of commemoration, and thus outside of governmental control. Established in 2003 in Orange County, California, where the largest Vietnamese American community resides, Viet Film Fest (VFF) is the premier venue for films by and for the Vietnamese and Vietnamese diaspora. By dint of its programming, panel discussions, and festival selections, VFF is marked by a feeling of collective grief about the “loss” of the war and the need to celebrate the works of the community's own members.

The themes that undergird some of the major Vietnamese American films that have resonated with VFF audiences, as well as the local and geopolitical contexts that have shaped

the films' production, support this claim about the historicity and particularity of the Vietnamese American film festival. In earlier works, there was an underlying narrative of homecoming for the Vietnamese American subject, while later, the politics of southern Vietnamese resentment have been commemorated in film. Other, more recent works deal with second-generation Vietnamese Americans and queer sexuality more overtly, while still foregrounding the effects of war on refugee lives. Such films have also changed the discourses and discussions at VFF, as the film festival has become more attuned to social-justice issues, the LGBTQ community, and filmmaking by Vietnamese American youth.

Different from the works usually shown at Asian American film festivals, these VFF selections overwhelmingly center themes of war and displacement as well as homeland politics, whether they are filmed locally or in Vietnam. Accordingly, the ways in which they have been received and celebrated must also be seen through the lens of community and refugee politics, most notably through the framework of the local film-festival site. The Viet Film Fest represents an archive of memory for a refugee community that wants to rectify how its members have been represented by U.S. and Vietnamese national cultures in film, both in the past and in the present moment.

Vietnamese Americans in the United States

On April 30, 1975, the Vietnam War concluded with the communist takeover of Saigon, at that time the capital city of South Vietnam. The “reunification” of the country included brutal reeducation camps for former South Vietnamese soldiers and sex workers, the repossession of property and land in the region, and the forced migration of many urbanites to the countryside, to New Economic Zones (NEZs), for the country's surge toward a centrally planned economy. In the decades following the “fall” of Saigon, countless southern Vietnamese, many of whom were former U.S. allies, fled in successive waves to the United States, France, and Australia, forming a Vietnamese diaspora across the globe.

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As devastating images of fleeing refugees and “boat people” were broadcast throughout the world, and despite vehement protests at home, the United States accepted the Vietnamese refugees and urged other countries to follow suit.¹

The legacy of this war and the U.S. reception of Vietnamese refugees shaped the ways in which they were represented in American media and political discourses. Two types of discursive constructions emerged as a result: Vietnamese American refugees were seen initially as “wards of the state” but later transformed into “model minorities.” Meanwhile, U.S. films about the war presented the American war veteran as the wounded subject of war and history. A spate of Hollywood films on the Vietnam War from this perspective abounded in the seventies and eighties: *Platoon* (Oliver Stone, 1987), *Full Metal Jacket* (Stanley Kubrick, 1987), and *The Deer Hunter* (Michael Cimino, 1978). In these films, the Vietnamese were most often represented as anonymous peasants, perverse Vietcong, and female prostitutes and snipers who populated a deserted wasteland that fixes Vietnam in the U.S. imaginary.

In 2003, the Vietnamese International Film Festival (now the Viet Film Fest) was spearheaded by two Vietnamese American women, Ysa Le and Tram Le, who wanted to counter these dominant representations by screening the films made by Vietnamese and Vietnamese diasporic filmmakers. The nonprofit community organization Vietnamese American Arts & Letters Association (VAALA) worked in collaboration with the University of California, Los Angeles, and the University of California, Irvine, to host the film-festival screenings and panel discussions. Its first iteration featured forty-eight films directed by filmmakers of Vietnamese descent from all over the world. Because of the groundswell of support from the community and institutions like the UC campuses, Viet Film Fest has become the central site for the exhibition of diasporic films and media, and, more recently, films made by Vietnamese Americans who live and work in Vietnam.

A Narrative of Homecoming in *Xich-Lo*

In 1994, then-president Bill Clinton lifted the nearly twenty-year-old U.S. trade embargo against Vietnam, and in 1995 trade was formally normalized between the two countries. Against a backdrop of political rapprochement between the United States and Vietnam, which allowed for further travel between the countries during this time period, the trope of exploring one’s identity in the homeland predominates in several films, including the short film *Xich-Lo* (1996) by M. Trinh Nguyen and the critically acclaimed

feature *Three Seasons* (1999) by Tony Bui, which emphasized the theme also in its production notes and reception.

The female diasporic subject is a shared concern of several filmmakers. M. Trinh Nguyen’s *Xich-Lo* documents the director’s journey back to Vietnam and represents an attempt at reconciliation with her familial and national pasts. The film positions Nguyen as an authorial presence: she discusses how her grandmother and father have wielded spiritual and political power over her, as her memories of Vietnam intervene. She uses home-movie footage and old photos as well as contemporaneous shots of traveling through the country to visualize her navigation through these coordinates of past and present. Nguyen’s in-betweenness and interstitiality are emphasized through her body on-screen, a presence whose figuration underscores the bifurcation of her cultural identity.

The final shot frames Nguyen’s body: she stands out once again as both inhabitant and intruder—this time, fittingly, at the entrance of her mother’s former house in the city of Saigon. Her family members do not let her in initially, not recognizing her, but eventually she gains entry. First, the camera had captured her outside of the home, surrounded by the iron gates of the compound; in the next shot, though, the viewer is inside the courtyard with her as she enters. The film ends with a hopeful yet ambiguous concluding line: “And then it was, as I hoped it to be.” This narrative of return, in which Nguyen’s body serves as a stand-in for the bicultural “Việt Kiều,” is undergirded by a wistful sense of displacement and emplacement likely shared by many in the audience.

Three Seasons: The Vietnamese American Feature Film and the Return Home

Released in 1999, Tony Bui’s *Three Seasons* was promoted as the first American movie to be shot in Vietnam since the end of the war in 1975. U.S. newspaper coverage retraced Bui’s journey to the United States as an immigrant and his return to Vietnam, which was difficult because he could not speak the language or tolerate the heat. Interviews accentuated the arduous process of making the movie.² Bui’s family’s immigration history and the narration of the difficult material conditions of the film’s production combine to project a compelling narrative arc of triumph over adversity beyond the cinematic, providing the specific codes for reading the film as authentic. The film has been recognized internationally, with awards at the Sundance, Cannes, and Havana film festivals. The Vietnamese American community also embraced it. Even the glossy publication *New Horizons: 25 Years of 25 Vietnamese Americans* has recognized *Three Seasons* as a spectacular event for the community, marking the artistic



A scene from *Three Seasons*, filmed on location in Vietnam.

achievements of “one of its own” and representing the community’s cultural productivity.³

One of the best-known Vietnamese American films made to date, *Three Seasons* has an appeal within the United States in part due to its symbolic capital as the first American film shot in Vietnam since the end of the Vietnam War. Also, its message of hope and revitalization dovetailed well with the restoration of economic and political relations between Vietnam and the United States. As part of this message of hope, each of the film’s four narratives featured deals with the triumph of human will and the possibility of redemption in poverty-ridden Vietnam.

Bui is a member of the 1.5 Vietnamese American generation (those born in Vietnam who immigrated to the United States as children), and his film is inevitably tied to Hollywood’s own Vietnam War films. Shortly after *Three Seasons* was released, *Los Angeles Times* journalist John Balzar brought Bui and Oliver Stone—whose *Heaven and Earth* had been released in 1993—together for an interview. The article compares the two as filmmakers who share a similar project, but who come from vastly different backgrounds. Asked to give their visions of contemporary Vietnam, Bui emphatically argues that his film attempts to “give a different vision of Vietnam . . . to defend it.”⁴ Taking a defensive position to counter Hollywood films that portrayed the Vietnamese negatively, Bui plots a different trajectory for the Vietnamese in his films. Rather than stage multiple deaths or the symbolic death of the Vietnamese, both his short film *Yellow Lotus* (1995) and *Three Seasons* feature humanist, sensitive, and enlightened male subjects who continue to forge ahead in the future, despite the odds.

Loss and Mourning in *Journey from the Fall*

When Ham Tran’s *Journey from the Fall* (2006) was screened in Orange County in 2007, it showed to packed audiences, and

the ticket lines snaked around the movie theater. The mostly Vietnamese American audience wept throughout. Though it won the adulation of a Vietnamese American audience, the film was quickly banned by the Vietnamese government.

Part of the film’s positive reception by Vietnamese Americans has to do with its story: a bleak yet redemptive portrait of postwar Vietnam in the South. Tran broaches topics that few Vietnamese and Vietnamese diasporic films have been able to discuss, dealing explicitly with the plight of reeducation-camp prisoners as well as that of boat people—two taboo subjects for the Vietnamese state.

Journey focuses most of the time on the suffering that the South Vietnamese and Vietnamese refugees experienced in the years following the war, then ends on a note of reconciliation as the diasporic family is reconstituted in the United States. The final images of the film memorialize the South Vietnamese soldier in important ways but also visualizes the restoration of the nuclear family in the diaspora. Flying a kite along an open expanse of sun and sand, the diasporic family mourns the death of the patriarch in a reeducation camp. Metaphorically, they say good-bye to a country that symbolized destruction, dissolution, and death for them.

It is key that the film concludes on a note of reconciliation—not between Vietnam and its diasporic population, but between the United States and Vietnam states. The traumas of (economic and political) displacement that Vietnamese refugees faced in their U.S. resettlement are resolved with the film’s conclusion, which points to a new beginning that awaits them. This hope for renewal in the diaspora may be one of the reasons why the Vietnamese state banned the film soon after it was released and barred Tran from making a film in Vietnam for a short period of time.

Even so, director Ham Tran has been back to Vietnam many times. Ironically, his filmmaking prospects have only flourished in the country in the wake of the state’s recent overtures to welcome the diasporic community back “home.” In 2010, Tran was asked by film officials to edit a historic film about the origins of the country’s capital, Hanoi. A celebration of the millennial founding of the country’s political center, *Khát Vọng Thăng Long* (*The Prince and the Pagoda Boy*, Trong Ninh Luu, 2010) performed poorly at the Vietnamese box office. Yet it was through this collaboration that Tran was able to extend his stay in Vietnam and pursue his filmmaking projects there to this day.

Nước: War, Water, and the Ties between Women

If *Journey from the Fall* captures the importance of the boat-person narrative, Quyen Nguyen Le’s six-minute short, *Nước*



Thanh (Jayvee Mai The Hiep, left) and Long (Long Nguyen, right) in *Journey from the Fall*.

([Water], 2016), addresses the element of water through the evocations of food and food-making. What runs through the film are acts of making and eating food, specifically *cháo*, or rice porridge, which is constituted by both rice and water.

Liquids run as a current from beginning to end. *Nước* first situates the viewer in a photography darkroom where chemicals and water are used to create memory and culture—specifically, black-and-white photographs of family and of the war. In the darkroom, the main protagonist (Rosie) and a girlfriend (Jacqueline) flirt with one another. As they talk, some of the most iconic images of the Vietnam War can be seen hanging in the background: the shooting of a Vietcong soldier by Eddie Adams, a boat of refugees, and the “napalm girl” by Nick Ut.

As iconic pictures of the war, they are both literal and figurative in setting up how the war has often been captured and memorialized in war imagery and how the country, in turn, is viewed through the lens of victimization and trauma. The photographs also work as a setting that facilitates the erotics of memory that play out between the two women. The film’s emotional tenor takes a different turn, though,

when Jacqueline playfully suggests that Rosie’s mother, Hoa, may be watching them. A flashback follows in which the mother expresses her love for her daughter through acts of food making. When first seen, Hoa’s face is reflected in a basin of water, which she then uses to wash a white woman’s feet. A shift in temporality moves the setting to a nail salon, where the mother’s labor is performed assiduously, her time on-screen marked by silence.

In the metaphorical and affective registers of the film, fluidity—between temporalities, spatial geographies, and genders as well as generations—is symbolized by water. Water is the liquid encasement that fuses together mother with motherland and life with feminist lineage; it is water that binds the diasporic subject to her mother/land. It is appropriate that the concluding scene of the film features rain as an iterative act of rebirth. Notions that associate the mother as a nourishing, vital life force are clarified as the film continues. As the mother and daughter eat *cháo* together, scenes in which Hoa appears compose a concise study of the ways in which women are often nourished, not only through daily food but through the vital stories they tell one another.

Ultimately, in *Nước*, it is the primal relationship between mother and daughter that constitutes the film's main affective artery, as viscerally communicated in its penultimate scene when the female protagonist pulls a bloody umbilical cord from her body. In this scene of painful gestation and delivery, the daughter labors to disconnect herself from the umbilical cord. Projected onto her body is the prostitute sequence from Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*. On the soundtrack, the words "me so horny" can be heard. Once the cord is severed from her body, the young woman finds herself outside of the birth canal and in a body of water. In the next shot, in a markedly different setting, her mother pulls her out of the water and onto the boat that she is on, in effect saving her daughter's life and steering her toward safety. Water's life-giving powers are vested precisely in the film's conflation of mother and country, woman and family.

The two women's mundane act of eating, sharing food, and silence can then be seen to constitute a revolutionary act. In the last line of dialogue, the mother invites Rosie's friend Jacqueline to a meal in their home. *Nước*, then, poignantly underscores the complicated stages that the diasporic subject has to navigate to effect a meaningful, dialectical relationship between mother and daughter, homeland and diaspora. The labor of making Vietnamese American refugee memory-work into film has always been a precarious endeavor.

Viet Film Fest: At the Crossroads of Community and Culture

Since 2003, VFF has been an important place for the screening of films about Vietnam and the diaspora, including those just discussed. It draws thousands of attendees each year to venues in southern California. Staffed mostly by volunteers and only recently supported by corporate funders—tellingly, in terms of community evolution, Wells Fargo and Macy's—VFF has become an important cultural event for Vietnamese Americans in the region.

VFF allows its community to see (sometimes for the first time) independent and commercial films made all

around the world that relate to Vietnam and the Vietnamese diaspora. Audiences get to talk to actors, producers, and directors during panel discussions within a festival space that, at once expansive and intimate, emphasizes community. VFF is creating a pipeline for younger and emergent Vietnamese/diasporic filmmakers to make connections within what has become a transnational industry and bolstering the reputations of established filmmakers who, living in Vietnam, continue to make highly popular and critically acclaimed films that are seen in the diaspora.

VFF and its networks are crucial sites for rectifying the cinematic erasures enacted by a U.S. national culture that has never adequately dealt with Vietnamese refugees, the history of South Vietnam, or the role that southern Vietnamese allies played in the war. VFF's mode of curating films that deal with refugee politics and its own archive of films stand in contrast to the ways in which Vietnam's own state-run film archive elides the filmic accomplishments of the Vietnamese in the South and of Vietnamese Americans during and after the war. In essence, VFF represents a critical archive of memory for a refugee diasporic community in the United States as well as for the people of Vietnam today. Through mobilizing the emotional impact of films experienced in a shared space by a community too often deprived of such an experience, the VFF has become a meaningful site for the redistribution of affect concerning both war and homeland for those Vietnamese in the U.S. diaspora.

Notes

1. Jeremy Hein, *States and International Migrants: The Incorporation of Indochinese Refugees in the United States and France* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), 114.
2. Pamela Briggs, "Tony Bui Looks East from West." *Release Print* 19, no. 1 (1996): 28–36.
3. Nguyen Vu Viet-Huong, "Making History with Tony Bui," in *New Horizons: 25 Vietnamese Americans in 25 Years*, ed. Nguyen Thi Diem Huyen and Nguyen Thi Thuy (San Jose, CA: New Horizons, 2000), 24–29.
4. John Balzar, "Vietnam and Culture: Lessons and Legacies 25 Years after Vietnam; Coming Home Is Never Easy," *Los Angeles Times*, April 16, 2000, 4.