

Chapter 9

Long-Legged Girls and the Transnational Circuits of Vietnamese Popular Culture

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On a balmy summer evening, the crowds for Vu Ngoc Dang's *Nhung Co Gai Chan Dai*, or *Long-Legged Girls* (2004), at the Korean-owned Diamond Plaza in Ho Chi Minh City were enormous. Sleek motorbikes were stacked in rows around the mall; throngs of young, fashionable people animatedly congregated to meet for drinks and watch the latest film. Comprising four floors devoted to various consumerist pleasures, the mall is flanked by tall business towers and lies adjacent to the Notre Dame Cathedral and a national park, at night a notorious meeting place for lovers and for prostitutes and their clients. Diamond Plaza offers foreigners and an emerging Vietnamese middle class an air-conditioned respite from the heat during the summer months. It remains a place of leisure for a well-heeled generation of Vietnamese youth, also called the "@ generation."

Diamond Plaza is not, however, the only theater in Ho Chi Minh City. The other cineplex that I visited is located at the outskirts of downtown, near a famous ice cream parlor and the infamous Backpacker's Alley. Run-down and cavernous, the theater offers cheap tickets priced at less than \$2.00. At the Vinh Quang Cinema, amongst an audience of mostly young couples, I saw on my last visit a murky, dark videotaped version of Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000). Featuring painted movie posters along its exterior walls, the theater provides creaky seats that are large enough for two, accommodating those who want a covert sexual tryst. In fact, movie theaters in Viet Nam provide the few dark spaces for people's sexual encounters, since distinctions between private and public spaces are blurred and the domain of the home often includes both close and extended family members.

These cinema-going experiences at Diamond Plaza and Vinh Quang—their stark contrasts and unevenness in terms of projection and

sound quality, atmosphere and space—are reflections of the irregular development of Viet Nam's film industry and the country's economic trajectory, which have brought scattered transformations since *Doi Moi*.¹ A quick ethnography of the two spaces, whereupon the semipublic expressions of sexuality, youth culture, consumerism, and technology all converge, frames my interrogation of the context and contradictions of film spectatorship in Viet Nam, a focus that heretofore has not been discussed in scholarship on Vietnamese cultural productions.

Observations such as these also point to my positionality as a Vietnamese-born, U.S.-educated transnational feminist doing research in Viet Nam, and as one whose way of seeing has been shaped by the various discourses of feminism taught in the U.S. academy. Since much of what I observed within Viet Nam's visual culture was predicated on the display of women's bodies, I have struggled to identify the kinds of gendered discourses that I witnessed taking place in Viet Nam and to understand how women and men in Viet Nam view themselves on an everyday basis. Viet Nam is a country that, in the past thirty years, has emerged from a devastating war, undergone a decade of socialist reforms resulting in crushing poverty, and is currently grappling with a capitalist economy. Delineating what feminism means in Viet Nam is a problem, compounded by a cultural and linguistic challenge vis-à-vis the term "feminism." Within the Vietnamese language, there is no word for "feminism" as the term is understood by scholars in the West. The closest denotation is *nu quyền*, or literally, "women's rights and power," which represents official state feminism. Exhibits at the Vietnamese Women's Museums in Ha Noi and Sai Gon, for example, dwell upon notions of courageous motherhood and revolutionary heroism.² As a diasporic feminist subject doing U.S.-funded research in Viet Nam, one who must work in collaboration with the Vietnamese state, I asked myself a series of questions that relate to my estranged sense of being within the country of my birth and my research. What can transnational feminism mean in this context? How do we look at postwar Vietnamese cinema through a problematized feminist perspective? How do we understand the globalized circulation of bodies through the analytics of gender and sexuality? More specifically, when it comes to Viet Nam's culture industry, how do we define cinematic subjecthood for a young Vietnamese population, whose actual bodies are constantly surveilled and managed by the state? What does the country's changing economy, cultural landscape, and demographics mean for feminists working on and in Viet Nam?

To address such issues, an abbreviated review of Viet Nam's recent history is needed. In 1986, ten years after the end of the war, the Sixth

Party of Congress in Viet Nam inaugurated its historic phase of capitalistic development called *Doi Moi*, following border wars with Cambodia and China as well as disastrous attempts at land collectivization programs. The implementation of *Doi Moi* became an ideological compromise between the forces of globalization and the anticolonialist and nationalist spirit upon which Viet Nam was founded. More recently, I believe Viet Nam is also moving into a "postdevelopmental stage," which Aihwa Ong characterizes as "a new stage of state engagement (rather than disengagement) with global agencies and capital" (200). Since the 1990s, Viet Nam has been a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and recently attained World Trade Organization (WTO) accession. In the postwar era, the Vietnamese government has aspired to be a future Asian Tiger and has restored itself variously to adapt to global capitalism and post-Cold War geopolitics. These new reformulations of state governance, surveillance, and repressions require that feminists reconsider the ways in which gender relations and women's bodies are being reimagined in Vietnamese film and visual culture, as well as within the sphere of the everyday.

Made in 2004, the film *Long-Legged Girls* stands as a compelling case study for the analysis of the transformations that have been wrought within the spheres of state policy and popular culture. A privately funded film, it exemplifies the current metamorphoses in Vietnamese cinema and its political economy, signifying the trend toward commercial filmmaking and coproductions within the country's impoverished film industry. Marked by world cinema's influences, this transnational product is further enhanced by its English-language subtitles on the DVD version, which ensure its legibility and translatability in different contexts. Within the frames of the film, moreover, the sexualized images of young men and women accommodate popular taste and lend the film a more global and commercial appeal. Vu Ngoc Dang's blockbuster employs objectifying images of both men and women in a manner that cannot easily be dismissed by feminist film critics. I see the objectification of body parts in the film as a gesture that produces queer points of identification, which become particularly potent within a state that tries to regulate desire and cultivate an appreciation amongst youth for the wartime sacrifices that define twentieth-century Vietnamese history. Further, *Long-Legged Girls* constructs an array of subjectivities rarely found in Vietnamese and Vietnamese diasporic cinemas. As such, it challenges the cultural scripts provided to youth in contemporary Viet Nam. Traveling fluently outside of the country as "low culture," the film also usefully

tests the boundaries of gendered behaviors and cultural norms for multiple audiences.

The following sections interrogate the acts of consumption located within and surrounding Vu Ngoc Dang's *Long-Legged Girls*, stressing the politics of looking between same-sex subjects and the conspicuous consumption of technology that enables these looking relations to occur within the film. Focusing on the visualization of body parts in *Long-Legged Girls*, I explore the film's queer representations of gender and sexuality as part of its bid for the youthful spectator's attention and pleasure. In doing so, I cite instances of the articulation of female desires in the narrative and argue for the film's critical import in relation to the conceptions of the female gaze. My conclusion discusses the imbrication of sexuality in Viet Nam within the cultural context of the country's phase of rapid economic development. Finally, the essay's objective is to point to more innovative ways of looking at Vietnamese filmic texts. The historical juncture at which the country finds itself demands that the emerging study of Vietnamese films rigorously consider the state's flexible strategies in governance,³ its transforming film industry, the influences of and on youth culture, and the shifting notions of gender and sexuality that mark contemporary social relations.

Sexing the City: Technology, Desire, and Long Legs

In the same year as *Long-Legged Girls* was released, *Memories of Dien Bien Phu* was also shown in theaters, making very little profit at the box office. A lavish movie, costing about \$900,000.00 to make, *Memories of Dien Bien Phu* served to commemorate the nation's victory against the French in 1954. Head of the Viet Nam Feature Film Company, Nguyen Van Nam consequently lamented the loss of money and the corrupting influence of commercial demands on Viet Nam's incipient cinema.⁴ Vietnamese viewers, however, offer a different story. Box office receipts for commercial films expose the desire for films to reflect the tastes and trends of a growing community of urban moviegoers. Letters and commentaries in Vietnamese online and print magazines manifest an active, generative, and responsive imaginary underlying youth culture. On glossy forums singularly devoted to Vietnamese youth's growing preoccupation with cinema, the articles and blurbs about Viet Nam's film industry reveal an intense curiosity revolving around filmmaking, international cinema, and the star system.⁵

In order to situate the viewing practices of Viet Nam in the theater and at home, we must consider how clear lines are currently being drawn between "high" and "low" films by the state. As a result of rampant piracy, products flow illicitly through Viet Nam, with popular Hollywood and Asian cinematic imports remaining popular because their distribution is more accessible than that of indigenous films. The problem lies partially in the state's inability to enforce legal sanctions and its own tight hold on the country's cultural products.⁶

Because of its status as an ordinary commodity, *Long Legged Girls* has a popular currency outside Viet Nam, as it is free from any underlying taint of "politics." Within the Vietnamese diaspora, and particularly in the United States, the film's mobility and accessibility attest to changes in U.S.-Viet Nam relations. Since the lifting of the Trade Embargo between the United States and Viet Nam in 1994, the movement of capital, culture, and people has increased exponentially. The vociferousness with which Vietnamese cultural productions were once denounced as Communist propaganda within Vietnamese American communities has lessened slightly, depending on the nature and classification of the imported works. Popular cultural items, including fashion shows, theatrical comedies, and beauty pageants, circulate amongst the Vietnamese and in the diaspora more freely than ever before. In opposition to cultural forms that deal with *Realpolitik*, which are usually defined in masculinist terms, what is considered harmless "low culture" from Viet Nam has found a market in the overseas communities; conversely, Vietnamese American cultural products, such as the serialized extravaganza show *Paris by Night*, find an enthusiastic audience in the homeland. Within the digitized circuits of a black market economy, such multi-directional movements of transnational commodities signal the ways in which cultural politics are being refashioned by everyday consumers in multiple places, the distinctions of taste defying official demarcations of Vietnamese culture in both the homeland and diaspora.

Cultural elites and government officials have deemed the content of *Long-Legged Girls* as inherently apolitical and without value. I would like to contest precisely this perception. For amidst a crisis regarding national identity and moral value often lamented within Vietnamese public discourses, director Vu Ngoc Dang assigns virtue in his film to the youths of Ho Chi Minh City. The film speaks to modes of consumption that have provocative political implications for Vietnamese and diasporic viewers; its content alludes to the public fantasies of the youth population and elicits spectatorial identification with its gendered subjects on-screen. More specifically, the film eradicates

the question of war and history altogether, dealing fetishistically instead with the endless reproduction of images from television, photography, film, and cellular phone technology. Its glaring absence of flashbacks, a predominant feature of the Vietnamese feature films that preceded it, testifies to the film's express intent to be situated in the present moment.⁷ This elision of Viet Nam's struggles with foreign invaders speaks to the country's overwhelmingly young population, the majority of whom are under twenty-five and who have no memory of the war that ended over thirty years ago. *Long-Legged Girls'* mobile camera movements, swooping angles, and MTV-style editing show a knowing sensibility, as well as a queer, cosmopolitan way of seeing and experiencing Ho Chi Minh City in the *Doi Moi* era.

Indeed, *Long-Legged Girls* derives its "cosmopolitanism" mostly from its metropolitan setting and stylish characters. The main story deals with the rise and fall of the fashion model, Thuy, whose values are called into question on the road to success. The country girl, who migrates to the city, realizes that she has lost herself in the pursuit of fame. She alienates her boyfriend and destroys her relationship with her older sister in the process. True to the trajectory of most romantic comedies, the movie concludes happily: Thuy returns to her sister's house, wherein her virtue is restored; she reconciles with her boyfriend; and the finale celebrates heterosexual coupledness.

Despite the heteronormative narrative, the film's introduction signals its extravagant play on sexuality between the three main characters. Undergirding the love story, or what superficially serves as the primary narrative, is a gay male fantasy that inaugurates both the film and its irreverent tone toward gendered identities. It opens with a rock musical video sequence that establishes the love triangle between the three characters: Khoa, Hoang, and Thuy. First, we see Thuy in a rural setting, atop a haystack as she hunts for something; the camera then swoops down so that we see the object of her pursuit: a baby pig. Abruptly, the camera cuts to a shot of two semi-naked men sleeping together in a closed room, one embracing the other. It is this intimate image of the two roommates, Khoa and Hoang, that the film repeats in its insistence to trouble the relationship between the two heterosexual leads. In a similar swinging action to Thuy's chasing of the pig, the camera plunges downward, as one of the men raises his leg to get up and take a shower. Due to the quick parallel editing, when the camera swoops down, the object of the spectators' "pursuit" in this scene becomes the man's genitals, as the camera gaze plays peek-a-boo with the covers and the anchoring of Hoang's leg. The invisibility of Hoang's sex, which, in essentialist terms, signals his

sexuality, is anxiously figured as unknowable; this ambiguity surrounding his object-choice keys in directly to the ways in which the opening sets up audience expectations for a male-to-male romance between the two roommates. For the spectator, the search for Hoang's sex—or his sexual orientation—becomes a challenge that is established from the start.

Further overlaying such shots is the catchy tune that becomes central in reading the queer-identified sequence. The scenes are further accented by the song's lyrics. Sung by a male singer named Aikia, the words revolve around notions of love, sex, and romance regarding a long-legged lover whose sex is never named ("Like the long legs I had dreamed of coming to see. For me to love."). The lyrics bring a dynamic coherency to the queer images put forth on screen, visualizing a moment of pleasure for the gay character, Khoa. As he is the only figure on screen, the lyrics work to articulate his fantasy. Image and sound cohere because of the ways in which Khoa's face consistently conveys pleasure throughout this sequence. Serene in sleep, the character's smiling face is intercut with shots of his roommate's dancing legs, buttocks, and body in the shower. One shot shows Hoang's gyrating half-nude body; then immediately after, another shot presents us with Khoa sleeping restfully. During these quick juxtapositions, the sexually explicit lyrics intoned are, "These long legs that came here many times, even if only in my dreams, I thank you for coming." Brightly lit and filling the screen for long moments of time, Khoa's expressions register the erotic desire that constitute the song's words.

These scenes are further endowed with meaning not merely because of the simultaneous emphases on the visual and aural registers underlying the shots, but also, because of the allusions to sexual dreams and fantasies they provide, functioning as they do at the level of wish fulfillment.⁸ Drawing on the work of Freud and Metz, Teresa de Lauretis contends that popular cultural narratives hold great emotive value for spectators and thus serve as "public fantasies," since they "perform at the societal level and in the public sphere, a function similar to that of the private fantasies, daydreams and reveries by which individual subjects imagine their erotic, ambitious, or destructive aspirations" (304). In sleep and in his waking reality, Khoa's private fantasies and longing are projected on screen and are often situated within the space of the apartment and public sphere of the gym. These instances give way to a rare moment in Vietnamese film history: a depiction of homosexual desire, one that rivals the heterosexual romance between the two lead actors. This sequence and others establish the play of and on sexual identities underlying the

narrative. As queer theorists of film have noted, notions of play, irony, and camp are central to the figuration of (mostly male) queerness on the filmic screen: "Playfulness is perhaps the crucial tool of queer theoretical practice which allows barriers and thresholds to be crossed, sexual and gender roles to be explored, and, importantly, the acknowledgement of the role of fantasy within different discourses" (Krzywinska 1995, 103). Briefly indulged on screen are, therefore, the subjective queer male fantasies of Khoa, a key player in the film who constitutes the third but crucial vector of a love triangle.

In the same way that the filmmaker Vu visualizes Khoa's desires, he also renders women's pleasures in looking but executes this circuitry of gazes in a more conventional manner. At the center of the film is the spectacle of women's bodies and specifically their legs, which are often fetishistically imaged on film. Because the film revolves around the fashion industry, it often presents images of photography and film equipment in the *mise-en-scène* to signal the milieu within which the film takes place and to comment meta-cinematically upon feminine performance and spectacle. *Vis-à-vis* the camera, we are afforded voyeuristic views of models undressing and of titillating shots of women's legs that stress a masculinist, heterosexual way of looking. This is most evident when the character of a top photographer, Dong Hai, is introduced for the first time and looks at the models and their bodies in the film. Through his point of view and an eyeline match, we see the model's long legs and witness the model's smile, which conveys her delight in being looked at.

Nevertheless, the camera is also used to highlight women's gazes at each other. Various forms of technology enable the looking relations that are instigated between women characters. Thoroughly engaged as well as implicated in the politics of looking, both women, though cast in the requisite roles of virtuous heroine and evil villain, possess contradictory and ambivalent desires that are significantly realized on film. Especially if *Long-Legged Girls* is placed amongst dominant Vietnamese and Vietnamese diasporic cinematic representations of female virtue and femininity, this becomes an imperative move. In contrast to how native women in indigenous and diasporic films represent anteriority and fixity, *Long-Legged Girls* shows Vietnamese women to be thoroughly modern in their mobile gazes as well as in their consumption and manipulation of technology.⁹ Soon after she arrives in the city, Thuy happens upon a photo shoot in the street. Instantly, she becomes captivated by the top star of the fashion world, Xuan Lan. Shot in slow motion, the scene is marked by upbeat, cheerful music, the same music that will later be used to herald the arrival

of the new star, Thuy. Centralized in the shots, Xuan Lan and her movements are slowed down as she poses seductively for the photographer's/director's/spectator's gaze. Dressed as the quintessential woman in red, the centerfold-type poses the model enacts are tinged with an ironic performativity, as spectators witness the framing and objectification of the cliché of feminine "Oriental" beauty. Emphatically framed as the "woman-as-spectacle," the model paradoxically contains these notions of femininity by contradicting the conventions of Vietnamese female beauty with her dominatrix-like attributes.¹⁰ Juxtaposed with these shots of a parodic femininity are shots of Thuy's covetous looks of desire and appreciation.

Though coded as envy and admiration for Xuan Lan's status as object-of-the-look, Thuy's looking contains a frisson of female-to-female desire that runs concurrently, especially given the other queer-identified sequence that preceded it. Much like the musical video sequence that begins the film, these scenes are excessive to the diegetic narrative. Framed as a (hetero)sexual object of desire, Xuan Lan nonetheless poses (homo)erotically for Thuy's female gaze as well as for the audience. Most conspicuously, "when the woman looks" in this film, as our heroine does often, her look is usually framed in a homosocial, yet eroticized gaze that is directed at other women and their body parts.¹¹ When Thuy looks with fascination upon a fashion show, for example, her looks of ecstasy and wonderment are accentuated in a sequence that cuts back and forth between the show and her apparent pleasures in beholding the spectacle of women's bodies. Scopophilic pleasures for women are simultaneously relayed and registered as deeply gratifying. Outside of this homoerotic subtext, Thuy's looking signifies a longing for status that consolidates class and access within a nexus of power relations, one that reflects back on how women are situated in a visual culture where their bodies are often objectified. When Xuan Lan returns the look, for instance, her gaze incriminates Thuy and effects a form of punishment for Thuy's queer, excessive identification with her. In a scene that takes place in an underground nightclub, Xuan Lan uses her Nokia cellular phone to humiliate Thuy by digitally capturing her performance within an illegal modeling show. Yet, the final look executed between Xuan Lan and Thuy shows a mutual understanding that indexes the kind of competitive and exploitative milieu in which the models are uncertainly positioned.

Significantly, the complicit looks amongst the women in *Long-Legged Girls* differ from the circuits of gendered looking in Vietnamese and Vietnamese diasporic films that utilize "woman" as a naturalized repository of tradition. In such films, she does not and cannot look

back. "High" cultural productions, like *Nostalgia for the Countryland* (1995) by Vietnamese director Dang Nhat Minh, have centralized female characters. Yet, in Dang's film, women serve as ciphers for a male subject, who alone possesses the capacity to narrate stories and capture images with his totalizing gaze. The timeless and feminized construction of Viet Nam can similarly be found in "high," artistic Vietnamese diasporic filmic productions, for example, Tony Bui's *Three Seasons* (1999) and Tran Anh Hung's *Scent of Green Papaya* (1993).¹² In such highly acclaimed works, "Vietnam" does not occupy synchronous temporality with the West.¹³ Directed by an overseas male elite, diasporic imaginings of the country feature the homeland as a battleground for the struggles between tradition and modernity, socialism versus capitalism. These battles are often played out on native women's bodies, marked as authentic signifiers for the homeland.¹⁴

Though Vu Ngoc Dang is not known to be a gay director in Viet Nam, his second film, *Long-Legged Girls*, contains self-conscious representations of femininity, queerness, and female desires that set it radically apart from other films. The most prominent features of the film are the politics of looking between same-sex subjects, the conspicuous consumption of technology by women, and the contemporaneity of Viet Nam that pervade it. Unlike other works that construct an essential "Vietnam," *Long-Legged Girls* demands a sense of contemporaneity for the country, drawing upon a notion of present time that runs counter to the ways that Viet Nam has been reified in Vietnamese nationalist discourses as a country with a tragic but glorious past. The film proclaims Ho Chi Minh City's modernization and technological progress and in so doing, promotes an exciting urbanity not only to the Vietnamese population but to the Vietnamese diaspora as well.

Queering the State: The Legislation of Homosexuality in Viet Nam

Following Gayatri Gopinath's work on queer diasporic cinematic representations, I wish to place the queer subjectivities and the "impossible desires" engendered by this film within different contexts—in this case, Viet Nam and diaspora—to further explore their impact.¹⁵ While such moments of queer desire are fleeting, these expressions are especially potent within an official context in Viet Nam that sees homosexuality primarily as a pathological sickness as well as a Western import and refuses to acknowledge homosexuality and bisexuality as

related to HIV and/or AIDS. While the film can certainly play up to the fears of Western contamination that might result from Viet Nam's "open door" policy, it also creates new viewing positions from which to contemplate the contemporaneity of Viet Nam—notably through the prism of gender and sexuality. *Long-Legged Girls* projects the libidinal and erotic desires of a youthful population in Viet Nam, a move that has rarely been activated in Vietnamese cinema.

Screened outside of Viet Nam, the film disrupts the Western paradigm of gay identity politics, as it demonstrates the ways in which constructions of sexuality and the private and public space are configured differently in Vietnamese society. The intimate "play" between Khoa and Hoang relies upon a culturally bound form of homoeroticism that can be publicly displayed, tactile, and sensual, especially within a "tolerant" heterosexist society.¹⁶ Codes of masculinity in the public space are thus tied to men's social positions as husbands and fathers in a relational and societal hierarchy. As such, they are not related to sexual identity per se. Sexual identities in Viet Nam are not rooted within a set of sexual behaviors or sex acts. Instead, normative constructions of heterosexuality are intimately linked to concepts of marriage, parenthood, and the family, which can be perfunctorily performed within a public arena (Laurent 2005, 192). This slippage suggests that men who have sex with men (MSMs) may self-identify as heterosexual and occupy the symbolic placeholder of father within a social sphere.¹⁷ Rather than "coming out of the closet" within a binary of visibility and invisibility, which has hegemonically been defined as *the* gay experience, queer subjects in Viet Nam often have to redefine normativities and renegotiate their identities within the public and private differently. Consequently, sexual relations and/or intimate gestures between the sexes can arise within private spaces, despite societal constraints and gendered expectations. Though I do not mean to ahistoricize the wide range of homosocial and homoerotic acts that occur in Viet Nam, I do want to emphasize this fluid notion of sexuality, the ways in which it becomes envisaged in this film, and the implications it has for its viewing subjects in multiple contexts.

For diasporans, queering the modern Vietnamese home overturns the reified notion that the homeland is invested with an anteriority and authenticity which the diaspora can only mirror as a false copy.¹⁸ In the Vietnamese context, the film imagines what has not yet been codified in legal terms, since homosexuality has "never been illegal in Vietnam" ("Frank" 1).¹⁹ Within this fluid field of social relations, different subjectivities can go unmarked under the radar of a repressive

regime and can thus clear a space for the contestation of hegemonically defined gendered and sexualized identities. Though not an ideal space, and certainly not one that represents a sexual Utopia as "Asia" is sometimes figured, it is still important to note that for the Vietnamese state, this field of social relations is exceedingly difficult to delimit and manage.

Thus, in 1998 in the Mekong Delta, two lesbians, Cao Tien Duyen, twenty, and Hong Kim Huong, thirty, were married in a public ceremony with about hundred guests in attendance. At first, the local authorities denied the certification of marriage but did not know what else to do with the two women. Three months later, the National Assembly decided to ban gay marriages. Soon after in June, local officials visited the two women's home and emerged with a signed affidavit that the women no longer see each other. The appalling punishment was exacted because of the ceremony's public nature and the two women's justifiable need for the visible and legal recognition of their relationship within the communal and civic domains. Authorities were more disturbed, it seems, because of the visibility of the event, the public attention it claimed, and the civic reinscriptions it demanded. At a very basic level, this event exposes the sheer invisibility of lesbians and undecidability of female desire within Vietnamese medical discourses and studies on Vietnamese sexuality, dominated as they are by analyses of female prostitution, sex trafficking, and HIV/AIDS. However, it also illustrates the fact that queer subjects are still very much positioned within a field of state surveillance and that disciplinary measures certainly exist for those who defy social and cultural codes, if not legal regulations. The women's desire for visibility in this case cannot be seen as an ascription to a Western model of "coming out." It demonstrates instead how queer subjects in Viet Nam, marked by class and always already restricted as heteronormative national subjects in the public space, are currently negotiating the prospect of cultural visibility and performing gender in different spaces.

As a highly consumable commodity, *Long-Legged Girls* reorients the politics of consumption by carrying out an important cultural and political work that crosses national boundaries. Largely seen as a vacuous form of "low" culture in Viet Nam's struggling film industry, Vu Ngoc Dang's *Long-Legged Girls* is an undoubtedly glossy but thoroughly self-conscious catalogue of city spaces, urban sexualities, and gendered identities. My analysis has focused on "low" popular culture, yet I do not intend to celebrate a postmodern, globalized, and sexualized identity that travels across borders freely. Rather, the emphases on temporality, space, and sexualities present in *Long-Legged Girls* are

locally specific and speak to a key segment of the Vietnamese population within contemporary times, specifically in the *Doi Moi* era. The focus upon urban youths is especially timely, as public discourses in Viet Nam manifest deep anxieties about a population, which does not intimately apprehend the country's history of sacrifice and war.

Because of the "absence" of politics enacted by *Long-Legged Girls*, audiences in the Vietnamese diaspora can also access the film locally. Starkly different from dominant Western representations of Viet Nam as primarily a site of tragedy and "country of war," images of cosmopolitan Ho Chi Minh City predominate in the film. It shows a city that has been made over by transnational corporations and joint ventures from countries such as Korea and Japan. Through the film's evacuation of Viet Nam's history of war, this global city reverberates with joint-productions and economic collaborations that mark Viet Nam's new economy within the twenty-first century.

Returning to the questions that frame this article, I end this study with an emphasis upon the transnational capital that has transformed Viet Nam's economy and cinema industry, stressing the role of the state and the ways that it currently negotiates with this capital in terms of its own citizenry. While promoting the potential of its young, English-speaking laboring classes to foreign countries, the government's authoritative powers continue to regulate the social behaviors of its young subject-citizens, whose speech and identities are constantly managed within public forums and spaces. Similar to Negar Mottahedeh's instructive study on the state and Iranian cinema, I would like to envision a transnational film feminism that is "alert to the materiality of culture and to the power differentials informed by the intervention of colonialism, imperialism, and global capitalism in national cultures" (1405).

Both Mottahedeh's analysis and the line of inquiry that begins this essay underline the ways in which transnational feminism can be used as a strategic practice in looking at cultural productions from the global south. Following Grewal and Kaplan's formulations of transnational feminism, it is crucial to attend to the history of colonialism and the developments of global capitalism occurring in these regions. Such are the key elements for a feminism that not only tracks the linkages between multinational corporate strategies and dominant nationalist agendas, but also critiques the notion of a "global sisterhood."²⁰ Indeed, the notion of a global alliance *continues* to undergird some Western feminist accounts of what is seen—from a sweeping perspective—as the defeat of socialism to realize equality in postwar Viet Nam.²¹ To counter reductive analyses, we should not only interrogate past images

of “women warriors,” but should understand that in the wake of these socialist failures, the Vietnamese re-negotiate every day what it means to be men and women as heterosexualized subjects within the public space. Moreover, drawing from the practices of transnational feminism, we can take into account the quotidian ways that globalization has affected the lives of the Vietnamese within the realms of local culture and popular cultural productions. For it is in this sphere that unscripted and unofficial enactments—like the sexual activities that occur in public parks and the congregations of youths who partake in unabashed consumerism—take place outside of and despite state surveillance.

As I am now situated back in the United States and peruse the aisles of Vietnamese movies that crowd the shelves in the marketplaces in northern and southern California, I am struck by the rapidity with which cultural products currently travel to and from Viet Nam within an ethnic economy, moving as they do through electronic routes that escape US legal sanctions and Vietnamese laws concerning piracy and copying. In straddling the local and the global, the national and the transnational, it is an underground network that signals the dynamic processes of the production of culture. Such a network reminds me of the imperative to not only interrogate Viet Nam’s “high” cultural forms, which the population itself rarely has access to, but to also examine youth culture and popular culture in Viet Nam along with their intimate linkages with visual culture in an increasingly globalized world. As I have demonstrated with this essay, analyzing “low” culture means that we must also trace the political economy within which such products circulate, as evidenced by the historic changes that have occurred in Viet Nam and the various means by which the state accommodates global capitalism. In terms of textual analyses, it is important to consider constructions of both masculinity and femininity as well as the dual registers of gender and sexuality at play within Viet Nam’s cinema. While the criticism on Vietnamese films heretofore has been formative, I believe it is not enough to analyze the cinema solely in terms of a post-*Doi Moi* historicization of Vietnamese movies, the figure of woman, or as authentic filmic documentations from Viet Nam.²² What is striking about the films that are currently being produced by a young generation of mostly male Vietnamese directors is an evident preoccupation with mobility, hybridity, fluidity, and change, as they are manifested through the mutable Vietnamese body. In fact, comedic narratives about pregnant men, bodily transformations, and gender switching are increasingly popular and in concert with governmental discourses

about identity, sexuality, and gender.²³ To comprehensively account for these images, the promiscuous relay of looks contained within the films, and the unruly ways in which they circulate, the practice of transnational film feminism allows us to make those critical connections between the film industry and the state. At the same time, it enables us to map out the conditions of production for a changing body of filmic works and activate different ways of seeing Viet Nam.

Notes

1. On *Doi Moi*, see George Irvin, “Vietnam: Assessing the Achievements of *Doi Moi*,” *Journal of Development Studies*, vol. 31, no. 5 (1995): 725–750 and Peter Boothroyd and Pham Xuan Nam, eds., *Socioeconomic Renovation in Viet Nam: The Origin, Evolution and Impact of Doi Moi* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2000).
2. For an insightful discussion on these images, see Hue-Tam Ho Tai, “Faces of Remembering and Forgetting,” in Hue-Tam Ho Tai (ed.), *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
3. Aihwa Ong’s notion of “flexible strategies” is useful in my discussion of the Vietnamese state. She uses the term to describe transnational Chinese migrants in explaining the ways that they negotiate with the politics of the homeland within and outside of the diaspora. “Flexible strategies” is an apt phrase for describing how the Vietnamese government conducts itself. To ensure its own survival within the new order, the state has been defined by great mutability and gives “new valence to such strategies of maneuvering and positioning” (19). Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).
4. For more on the debates on commercial cinema in Viet Nam, see article at <http://www.kfccinema.com/index.php?archive=1130636061&subaction=list-archive&go=archives>.
5. Popular websites for cinephiles in Viet Nam reference two major sites: <http://www.phim24g.net/Users/Home.aspx> and <http://www.moviesboom.com/>.
6. While the entire series of *Friends* can be purchased at vendor stalls on the street, one cannot find the kind of films routinely promoted as exemplars of the country’s “high” cultural forms, like Dang Nhat Minh’s *Woman on the Perfume River* (1987) or Nguyen Thanh Van’s critically acclaimed *Lives of Sand* (1993). Circulated instead at international film festivals and on U.S. university campuses, such films are permanently housed at the Viet Nam Film Institute in Ha Noi, where one can watch a two-hour film at \$15.00/hour, an exorbitant price for most Vietnamese. In 2005, the Film Archives quoted this price to me.

7. I am referring to classic Vietnamese filmic texts, such as *Em Be Ha Noi* [*Girl from Ha Noi*] (1970), which relies on flashbacks to narrate a tragic past, most distinctly from a young girl's perspective. In fact, this film employs flashbacks within flashbacks as part of its complex narrative structure. Another important film is Dang Nhat Minh's *Co Gai Tren Song* [*Woman on the Perfume River*] (1984), which features flashbacks to emphasize the virtue of the prostitute-as-heroine. For an understanding of the ideological use of flashbacks in film, see Maureen Turim, *Flashbacks in Film: Memory and History* (New York and London: Routledge, 1989).
8. On the ways that MTV videos have a repetitive structure that is akin to dreams, see Marsha Kinder, "Music Video and the Spectator: Television, Ideology, and Dream," *Film Quarterly*, vol. 38, no. 1 (1984): 2–15. On how MTV videos appeal to a queer male visual aesthetic, see Steve Drukman, "The Gay Gaze, or Why I Want My MTV," in Paul Burston and Colin Richardson (eds.), *A Queer Romance: Lesbians, Gay Men, and Popular Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995). Drukman argues: "MTV thus grants freedom to the gay (re)visioning of Mulvey's gaze, a freedom unsanctioned in mainstream cinema" (89).
9. I find Anne Friedberg's work provocative in the ways that she traces the female consumer's gaze in relation to shopping, tourism, and the cinema. Though situated in late nineteenth- to early twentieth-century France, her formulations of the female gaze and its mobility are linked with my project here because of the ways that Viet Nam is in the process of modernizing in the urban space. Funded by various transnational corporations, the constructions of cineplexes and high-rise malls pockmark the cityscapes in Viet Nam's present moment, permanently transforming the kinds of relationships that people have in relation to each other and their sense of space in the urban city. See Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
10. Mulvey's phrasing is key in describing how women's bodies are spectacularized in this film. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (eds.), *Film Theory and Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 835.
11. I borrow this phrase from Linda Williams's essay on the genre of horror and female spectators. Linda Williams, "When the Woman Looks," in Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams (eds.), *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, (Los Angeles: American Film Institute, 1984).
12. In a recent article, I discuss the looking relations that circulate in Tony Bui's *Three Seasons*. See Lan Duong, "Manufacturing Authenticity: The Feminine Ideal in Tony Bui's *Three Seasons*," *Amerasia*, vol. 31, no. 2 (2005): 1–19.
13. Throughout this essay, I put quotes around the word, "Vietnam," to signify the ways that the West has constructed Viet Nam in its imaginary.

- Without the quotation marks and as two separate words, Viet Nam is used to denote the country in its contemporaneity.
14. On Tony Bui's *Three Seasons*, see my article. For a critique of Tran Anh Hung's work, particularly his use of women in film, see Carrie Tarr, "Tran Anh Hung as Diasporic Filmmaker," in Kathryn Robson and Jennifer Yee (eds.), *France and "Indochina": Cultural Representations* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2005).
 15. Analyzing Deepa Mehta's film, *Fire*, e.g., Gayatri Gopinath maps the contours of its impact in several contexts. Her analysis is instructive as it seeks to locate a queer female diasporic subjectivity in all of its travels. Reading across various fields of reception, Gopinath maintains that "multiple and contradictory meanings" are thus available to different viewerships but most especially, for a queer spectatorship (158). This remains a viable way to intervene in the fields of feminist studies, queer studies, and Asian American studies. She writes: "As images travel transnationally, they serve to provide a common visual vocabulary for queer spectators in disparate diasporic locations, one that reconciles not only the contradiction between queer images and heterosexual narrative, as White suggests, but also the contradiction between the space of the nation as implicitly heterosexual and the space of diaspora as foreign, inauthentic and indeed 'queer'" (113). I also find her point of examining popular culture for expressions of female desire useful, as it is within these sites that queer viewing strategies are possible and created (113). In this spirit, I wish to look for the sightings of female desire contained in *Long-Legged Girls*. This way of looking enables me to track the queer viewing strategies produced as a result of the film. Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005).
 16. As Erick Laurent asserts, "Masculinity [in Viet Nam] is confirmed by marriage and parenthood, rather than explicit heterosexual behavior. Therefore, affection between men, physical contact, and even sharing a bed are socially acceptable, and not usually connoted with sexuality" (192). Erick Laurent, "Sexuality and Human Rights: An Asian Perspective," *Journal of Homosexuality*, vol. 48, no. 3/4 (2005): 163–225.
 17. For more on sexuality in Viet Nam and MSMs, see Donn Colby, Nghia Huu Cao, and Serge Doussantousse, "Men Who Have Sex with Men and HIV in Vietnam: A Review," *AIDS Education Prevention*, vol. 16, no. 1 (2004): 45–54.
 18. I am influenced on this point by the work of Jigna Desai on the cultural politics of India diasporic filmmaking. Desai discusses the ways in which the diaspora has been figured as a false simulacrum in the homeland when, in fact, the two sites are mutually constitutive (20). Jigna Desai, *Beyond Bollywood: The Cultural Politics of South Asian Diasporic Film* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004).

19. Frank Proschan contends: "Vietnamese legal codes were typically influenced by then-contemporary Chinese codes, but when in 1740 the Ching Dynasty in China elaborated, "for the first time in Chinese history, punishment for sodomy between consenting adults" (Ng 1989, 76, cf. Meijer 1985), the Vietnamese did not follow suit, once again omitting any such prohibitions in the Nguyen Code that was promulgated soon after" (screen 1). During French colonialism, neither homosexuality nor homosexual behaviors were actually prohibited. This is still the case today. More recently, though, the government of Viet Nam has enacted frequent crackdowns against gay bars and other meeting places for gay men, especially since the state's pronouncement that homosexuality is a "social evil" in 2002.
20. Kaplan and Grewal posit that a transnational feminist practice must establish central links in the "understanding of postmodernity, global economic structures, problems of nationalism, issues of race and imperialism, critiques of global feminism and emergent patriarchies" (358). Caren Kaplan and Inderpal Grewal, "Transnational Feminist Cultural Studies: Beyond the Marxism/Poststructuralism/Feminism Divides," in Norma Alarcón, Caren Kaplan, and Minoq Moallem (eds.), *Between Woman and Nation: Nationalisms, Transnational Feminisms, and the State* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).
21. Western feminists, such as Arlene Eisen, Kathleen Barry, and Mary Ann Tétrault, have recently focused their attention on the conditions of women in Viet Nam. In their collective works, the recounting of the women's movement is predicated upon resistance and revolution and read in terms of the state versions of it, thus reifying by rehearsing this narrative in their respective works. Underlying such texts is a dependence upon a stable construction of history and a denial of Vietnamese women's agency in today's context. Kathleen Barry, ed., *Vietnam's Women in Transition* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996); Arlene Eisen, ed., *Women and Revolution in Viet Nam* (London: Zed Books, 1984); Mary Ann Tétrault, "Women and Revolution in Vietnam," in Kathleen Barry (ed.), *Vietnam's Women in Transition* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996).
22. Essays by Kathryn McMahon and Dana Healy both focus upon the gender politics of recent Vietnamese films but in ways that elide the representation of masculinity and the relations between genders on film. Kathryn McMahon, "Gender, Paradoxical Space, and Critical Spectatorship: The Works of Dang Nhat Minh," in S. Sarjer and E. N. De (eds.), *Trans-Status Subjects: Gender In the Globalization of South and Southeast Asia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); Dana Healy, "Laments of Warriors' Wives: Re-Gendering the War in Vietnamese Cinema," *South East Asia Research*, vol. 14, no. 2 (2006): 231-259. I would like to note that Mark Bradley's and Gina Marchetti's articles are particularly useful and informative. However, by classifying Vietnamese films under the rubric of "revisionist" filmmaking and within the genre of melodrama,

- respectively, their methodological approaches to these films neglect how the films can purport to say otherwise, since the grouping of films under Western systems of classifications neglects the critical strategies that come before and after these films. This presentist mode of looking at Vietnamese films underlines the inaccessibility of Vietnamese films that have only recently circulated in the United States along film festival routes. Mark Bradley, "Contests of Memory: Remembering and Forgetting the War in Contemporary Vietnamese Cinema," in Hue-Tam Ho Tai (ed.), *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Gina Marchetti, "Excess and Understatement: War, Romance, and the Melodrama in Contemporary Vietnamese Cinema," *Genders* 10 (1991): 47-74.
23. The issue of transgenders and identity is currently being debated in the state. Although it is too early to tell whether the law will pass, a recently drafted decree would allow transgendered people to assume another identity once they undergo a sex operation. Of course, this is in keeping with the rigidity of gender norms, since the government disallows gays and lesbians the same prerogative. Within the realms of popular entertainment, the first transsexual singer was permitted to release her musical CD. See respective articles at the following websites: <http://vietq.wordpress.com/2006/10/10/viet> and <http://www.vietnamartbooks.com/articles/article.html?id=1399>.

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