



Darkroom

Nguyen Tran Hoang

When the Tenth Month Comes

When the Tenth Month Comes (Bao Giờ Cho Đến Tháng Mười),¹ directed by the remarkable but mostly unknown Vietnamese director Đặng Nhật Minh, tells the story of a young wife and mother, Duyên and is set at some time shortly after the re-unification of Vietnam in 1975. The newly widowed Duyên is unable to impart the unbearable truth to her old, sickly father-in-law that he has lost another son to another battle by preserving the illusion that he is still alive. This pretence expands dangerously with the help of the village school-teacher and aspiring poet, Khang, who is asked by Duyên to construct a series of letters from her soldier husband that can be later shared happily with the father and extended family. Đặng Nhật Minh positions Duyên's loss and separation as a kind of terrible nationalistic destiny for the Vietnamese people, a predicament shared through families, generations and ancestors and over thousands of years, also at war and resistance.

There is a flashback scene early in the film that has Khang swimming in the river after earlier rescuing an unstable Duyên from drowning. He is now retrieving his own scattered poems and other floating papers, letters and documents from the water that are now and at risk of a sodden, stained and pulpy destruction. Water, this conduit of life, is the enemy of pen and paper. It is through Khang's accidental retrieval of an official paper belonging to Duyên that allows him to share her terrible secret of bereavement.

Letters and Words

Letters serve the purpose of reuniting loved ones by erasing the limits of space and time, their words and contents have the power even to resurrect the dead. Hand goes to pen and paper, hand folds paper, signed, sealed and delivered, opened and read. This is the most simple of technology, medium and actions. A piece of paper, read and reread, the words can etch in to your memory, but once that paper is destroyed it is as if those words never existed, the evidence is gone.

It is entirely conceivable that this activity of reading leads to destruction. The letter can sit continually in your shirt's pocket, folded and unfolded until the fibres of the paper are dislodged along the creases. There is some danger, because not every letter reaches its destination and its circulation can be easily mishandled, a point made explicit in the *When the Tenth Month Comes*. It is a lesson that Khang painfully learns. Words and letters can be poetic and truthful but also ambiguous, malleable, misunderstood, and incriminating when falling in to the wrong sets of hands. Khang's final remedy for the safe emancipation of his own words and poetry, is to make a kite from them for Duyên to fly, the heavens are a much safer space than the terrain of mortals.

¹ *When the Tenth Month Comes (Bao Giờ Cho Đến Tháng Mười)* DVD, Directed by Đặng Nhật Minh, Discovery Communications, 2001.

Technology

With the evolution of the moving image, the mediums of film, video and DVD allow different potentials for generation, reproduction and subsequent circulation amongst an audience. Photographic film is certainly the clumsiest, most expensive and wilful medium. Cameras, lighting, sound recording equipment along with a range of technical and creative personnel are all required. A photographic print is reproduced only with specialised equipment in a variety of optical, chemical and mechanical interventions. Projection again, requires another machine, process and space. It is an obvious equation, the more prints of a film and the greater the frequency of its projection, the greater likelihood of it being seen in any cinema. The film print has its own fragile materiality, easily scratched when watched and a susceptibility to the elements of air, fire and water².

Video becomes an easier medium, the video-cassette and the VCR brought cinema into the 1980's home, and an expanding catalogue of genres that stacked video library shelves. As with film, video-cassettes also had their own vulnerability that related to their viewing, Rewinding, fast-forward and pausing caused stress as the magnetic tape tightened and loosened and drum-heads whirred in cheap machines. Sound began to muffle, images started to lose their crispness, shaking, moving, streaking and ghosting, eventually becoming worthless as entertainment. Duplication of cassettes could also happen in the home, but each time a shift occurred in the generation that compounded these flaws in the medium. Each reproduction generated loss.

DVD, digital technology and the internet has increased this archive of material exponentially and reproduction is now seamless. The past is continually rediscovered as more material is transferred and uploaded in to the domain, data transferred at increasing volumes and speeds. Culture can be re-floated from the silt at the bottom of the river of history, the obscure is made visible.

'We Must Now Follow Two Different Currents in the River of Life'³

There is already a complex chronology at work within the narrative of *When The Tenth Month Comes*, demonstrated by flashbacks that give shape to past events, while thousand-year old ghosts meet with villagers to help soothe the pain of the present. The film is now retrieved as artefact, (relic?) and resurrected. In 2010, we can now view the film (a DVD), made in 1984 from communist (formerly North) Vietnam that indeed looks even older. Russian trucks, Honda motorbikes, Chinese radios, faded photographs, uniforms and costumes all seem antique and bear little resemblance to a version of 1984 of convertibles, blondes and blade runners. The tones of black and white film⁴ stock filter life's colour to nostalgia, an analogue crackle hums, a scar that has survived through translation to the digital. In the years since reunification and before *đổi mới*⁵, (1975 and 86) little culture, in the way of art, music and film leaked from this famous and then, dieterminedly isolated country, culture's purpose was nationalistic and propagandistic. This time however corresponds to an exodus of refugees, hundreds of thousands to millions, some escaped by boat from Vietnam's shores, risking life and uncertainty. The shock waves of civil war had caused yet another cycle of separation.

As the son of refugees, a member of the '1.5 generation'⁶ and as part of the extended Vietnamese diaspora now scattered around the globe, Hoang has understood Vietnam as the country and place of his birth but more powerfully and successfully, as an idea formed through imagination, recollection and reconstruction, these are the nostalgic yearnings of a generation in exile. This community has been very successful in producing entertainment *by* and *for* the diaspora and amidst the colour and lighting of song

² The humid climate of Vietnam is especially detrimental to film stock.

³ Duyên is informed by the apparition of her dead husband that their separation is now complete, in *When the Tenth Month Comes (Bao Giờ Cho Đến Tháng Mười)* DVD, Directed by Đặng Nhật Minh, Discovery Communications, 2001.

⁴ In the post re-unification Vietnamese film industry, the use of black and white was as much a practical choice rather than an aesthetic one. The colour film stock available was thought too volatile and unstable. This is discussed in John Charlot, "Vietnamese Cinema: First Views." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (March 1991), pp. 33-62.

⁵ "đổi mới" translates to "innovate" or "change to the new". It is a term that had its origins in the economic reforms in Vietnam of 1986, necessary after the collapse of the Soviet Union and "perestroika". It announced Vietnam's engagement with the global free market after the isolation following the fall of Saigon in 1975. The repercussions upon artistic culture were great and for a full discussion of this effect see Nora Taylor, *The Artist and the State: The Politics of Painting and National Identity in Hà Nội, Việt Nam 1925- 1955* (Phd. Dissertation, Cornell University, 1997), 217.

⁶ The 1.5 generation is a term that describes the generation that was born in Vietnam but grew up in Australia.

and dance spectacles of a *Paris by Night*⁷ videos a form of cultural resistance and longing was embedded. This resistance is for a Vietnam of memory that exists before 1975, that date where everything first began or truly finished. This place is made concrete in the imagination but impossible to return.

Writing in his book *Postproduction*⁸, the French curator and writer, Nicholas Bourriaud enables and elaborates the concept of *détournement*, earlier established by Guy Debord, to explain the volume of artwork that has its genesis in already existing artwork. The concept allows our vast body of cultural material and media, rather than clay or paint or film, to become the raw material for creativity through later reconfiguration, while the explosion of data that the internet has allowed has exhausted the motivation for originality. Bourriaud likens the actions, vocabulary, skills and language of the contemporary artist specifically to the music dj through a repertoire of sampling, cutting, changing speed, overlaying and recontextualisation.

In the case of *Darkroom*, the *détournement* of *When the Tenth Month Comes* arrives gently as a timeline of technology is compressed and therefore so is time and years, analogue to digital, back and forth in repetition. Images transfer from one generation to another again, losing visibility and potency, words and music disappear, all that is left is a staggered score of simple, unspoken and peaceful actions. *Darkroom* presents a wish for incoherence, a gesture of reconciliation between those generations separated by time and space.

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⁷ *Paris by Night* is the long running series of music and dance productions produced by the expatriate production house Thuy Nga Productions. For a full discussion of the important role that media played in the formation of identity and politics in the Vietnamese diasporic community see Stuart Cunningham and Tina Nguyen, "The Popular Media of the Vietnamese Diaspora" in *Floating Lives: The Media and Asian Diasporas*, eds. Stuart Cunningham and John Sinclair, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001) and Ashley Carruthers, "Saigon From the Diaspora," *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, 29 (2008) 68-86.

⁸ See Nicholas Bourriaud, *PostProduction, Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World*. (New York: Lukas & Sternberg) 2007.