Vietnamese Cinema
The Power of the Past

Vietnamese cinema is young but has already produced films of historical and aesthetic value. These films are examined against the backdrop of national history and culture, both folk and fine art. Poetry, music, and dance are found to be prime influences, and the response of human beings to crisis a principal theme.

We know our poetic films are not only better, but more popular.
—Tran Dac, Vice Director, Vietnam Feature Film Studio

In 1985 the Hawai’i International Film Festival showed Dang Nhat Minh’s When the Tenth Month Comes (1984), the first Vietnamese feature to be shown at a U.S. film festival. A great success with both the critics and the public, it was nominated for the East-West Center Award for the film that best promotes understanding among the peoples of Asia, the Pacific, and the United States, and received a special honorable mention from the jury. The Vietnam Cinema Department sent the Festival staff a lacquer painting and let us know through our intermediaries on the U.S. Committee for Scientific Cooperation with Vietnam—Professors Judith Ladinsky and Stephen O’Harrow—that they were pleased with the experience. The next year, we were sent an earlier, less interesting film, Vu Dai Village in Those Days (1982).

The HIFF Selection Committee felt it would be valuable to have some personal contact with the Vietnam Cinema Department and to view a large selection of features and documentaries for possible future screening. With the help of that department, the U.S. Committee, and the Vietnamese embassy in Bangkok, I was granted a visa to visit Hanoi from July 7 to 13, 1987.

Stepping from the plane into Vietnam seemed to me like a dream. Images of that country and its people have imbedded themselves deeply into our American minds and joined themselves with a mix of strong emotions. Here then were the men in their green pith helmets and uniforms and the women in their black pants suits and white conical hats, all moving gracefully in three dimensions and in a curious quiet. The grace and silence remain among my strongest impressions.

Two young men from the Cinema Department—Nguyen Van Tinh and Duong Manh Hien—picked me up and whisked me into a car. Throughout
the week, they would handle all arrangements and red tape with expertise and me with interest and friendliness.

Driving through the countryside into Hanoi, I remarked on all the people in the fields. "The life of the peasants is very hard," said Mr. Tinh. In the city, our car was immediately surrounded by cyclists moving at an easy and regular pace. Their gracefulness reminded me of schools of fish. They were interrupted now and then by a faster scooter, and both would give way before the few autos and the many lumbering trucks. "We say the streets are full of people, and nobody knows where they are all going!"

Hanoi was built as a French provincial city with wide, tree-lined avenues dividing the society into separate neighborhoods: the governmental and diplomatic quarter, residential areas of different levels of comfort, markets, opera house, and the old city. The buildings look run-down, but are handsome and well built. Modern constructions have replaced bombed sections.

The whole city is filled with a special quiet bustle, people bringing in large bundles of vegetables on carrying poles, manufacturing items on the sidewalk, cooking and taking tea in conversing groups. The free-enterprise markets are full of goods and people, but there is no jostling among the slim bodies, and talk is all low tones.

The country is poor, as my hosts kept pointing out ("undeveloped and backward," insisted one official). In the old city, water is drawn from cisterns in the sidewalks. But people look healthy and strong, and they are working very hard. I was reminded of Europe after World War II.

The people's attitude was dignified and self-possessed. I was usually the only foreigner in the street, but aroused little curiosity. If I caught someone's eye, he or she looked away. It was considered improper—and could even be illegal—to fraternize with foreigners. But when a proper occasion presented itself, like buying a book or painting, people were happy to talk. I was addressed in French and Russian, but there was only friendly interest when they learned I was American. The older people seemed happy to speak French (nostalgia? euphony?); English seemed to be considered a more utilitarian language.

One of the few times people in the streets broke out of their reserve toward me was when I returned from the market carrying some baskets I had bought. They stared and pointed and spoke to me happily. One man put his hands over his head like a boxer and shouted, "Bravo! Bravo!" "Those are grandmother's baskets," Mr. Tinh explained. "Only the old people use them now. You see, we are all trying to be modern. You are modern, and so you are going back to the old things."

Throughout the week I had long, frank discussions with the staff of the Cinema Department and government officials, like the film director and vice minister of culture, Dr. Nguyen Dinh Quang. I was impressed by their directness and intensity. A man from the Foreign Ministry described one conversation as "speaking from the heart, not according to protocol."
I kept feeling a special dimension in our talk. I was reminded of an earlier, seemingly normal cocktail-party conversation with a woman during which I had received the same impression. I learned later that she was in constant, acute pain from arthritis. Vietnam is a house that has suffered a death in the family. One feels that through the long history of the country the people have suffered enormously, and this has "forged" their special character, as Dr. Dinh Quang put it.

The war is felt strongly in all their lives. When I said to Mr. Tinh that he had probably been too young to be a soldier, he told me the only reason he had not been sent was that his four older brothers were already in the war; two died in the Tet offensive of 1968, one in Kampuchea in 1979. One of the officials of the Cinema Department sobbed as we watched a documentary on the Christmas bombings of 1972. Luu Xuan Thu, director of the Central Studios of Documentary and Scientific Films, introduced one film to me with the words, "I lost three cameramen making this one."

Discussing the MIA issue, Dr. Dinh Quang said, "I lost my son on the Ho Chi Minh trail. He was killed by bombers. His friends gathered the remains and buried them in a field. The bombers hit the field again, and the soldiers gathered what was left and reburied it. This happened three more times, and after that there was nothing more. I don't know where the bones of my son are."

"I have had no life," Dr. Dinh Quang told me. "I went to war as a kid in 1945 and fought for thirty years. I'm using the little time I have left to try to rebuild my country so that it will be a better place for our children. This has been no life, but we have to act in a way that is worthy of the war (digne de la guerre)."

The people I met were certainly aware I was American. They were characteristically frank about the war (their remarks agreed with such standard works as Stanley Karnow's Vietnam: A History). As we rode along on his motor scooter, Mr. Tinh would let me know when we were passing a site that had been heavily bombed. At Vinafim, the import-export section of the Cinema Department, the staff told me that the buildings had been used to house an overflow of American bomber crews during the Christmas bombings. One pilot had returned as a tourist in 1986 to see the place again. They had enjoyed his visit.

But there was no sense of triumph or gloating. I had to ask if a particular monument was a war memorial. The people I met seemed to be striving toward an objective view of the war and of their future relations with America. They worried about whether Americans would put the war behind them or be ruled by anger and desires for revenge. To my embarrassment, they had all seen Rambo, which they found funny. I was happy to be able to tell them that Vietnam veterans associations had expressed disapproval of the film.

I was the first American many people had met, and they clearly had to take some mental steps toward me. An official at Vinafim said, "This is the first
time I have negotiated with an American, and I find it very interesting.” “You’re my first American,” one interpreter told me. “But I don’t think of you as an American. I think of you as a Russian or a German.”

But they did make the mental and emotional effort to make contact with me, and we developed genuinely warm feelings toward each other. Several asked me to return with my wife and children, to visit the south and see the opera, even to visit them at home. A Foreign Ministry official told Mr. Tinh, “If Dr. Charlot falls off your scooter, we’ll put you in jail.” As we were driving to the airport, Mr. Tinh asked me, “We didn’t treat you as an enemy, did we? We treated you as a friend?” I was touched more than I could tell them.

This interest and friendliness characterized my dealings with the Vietnam Cinema Department and its subsections, the Feature Film Studio, the Central Studios of Documentary and Scientific Films, the Vietnam Film Archives, and Vinafilm (films such as anthropological records are produced by sections with which I had no contact). We at the Hawai‘i Festival were interested in a more regular and extensive Vietnamese participation, and the Vietnamese wanted their films shown in the United States. They feel that they are misunderstood abroad and that their films might be useful in creating a more accurate and positive image of their country. They feel also very isolated as artists and would like to be more a part of the world cinema scene. I found them hungry for feedback from a foreigner like me; they took two hours out of their business day to hear my reactions to the films they had shown me.

The Vietnam Cinema Department is under the Ministry of Culture, that is, a government agency, but it is also firmly in the hands of artists. Vice Minister Dinh Quang is himself a film director and former head of the Vietnam Cinema School. The general director of the Cinema Department, Nguyen Thu, and his deputy, Bui Dinh Hac, are both film directors; the latter was one of the founders of Vietnamese cinema and an important documentary maker. Luu Xuan Thu, director of the documentary studio, was a well-known documentary cameraman and director and managed all documentary making during the war.

The department is clearly very new. The documentary section was founded in 1953 in the middle of the French war and used cameras that were mostly captured from the enemy. Cameramen were known for rushing unarmored into the center of a battle and then being paranoid about developing the film in their little bamboo and mud darkrooms with their chemicals kept in earthenware jars. Several cameramen lived on location for long periods of time, which enabled them to capture sudden happenings, like surprise air raids, that are usually missed. Convinced that the historic events they were living should be recorded, the government employed more than forty cameramen during the American war.

A large number of films, usually around 20 to 30 minutes long, were produced each year. Subjects included particular battles, communications, transport (e.g., the Ho Chi Minh trail), bombing, antiaircraft activity, life in oc-
cupied territories (including the cave complex near Saigon), activities in South Vietnamese villages, and the medical corps. Longer documentaries include two on the battle of Dienbienphu and one on the heavy bombing along the 17th parallel. These films offer an intimate and insider view of the Vietnamese side of the war and clarify activities and events that seemed inexplicable to foreigners at the time.

The footage is often extremely dramatic and could contribute to the world’s store of classic images of war and of the capacity of ordinary people to cope with it, such as a scene of women planting rice, while perhaps a mile behind them bombs are falling through thick black columns of rising dust and smoke.

The Cinema Department of Vietnam is using its large film archives along with interviews and museum materials to create a series of 20 half-hour segments under the tentative title, Vietnam—Building and Defending Our Country. The series will provide a sketch of Vietnamese history and culture and a narrative of the wars of the 20th century. The purpose of the series is not to be propagandistic, but aims at the highest international historical and artistic standards in expressing the Vietnamese point of view and the human impact of the war. The cooperation of foreign broadcasting systems and film archives is being sought.

The documentary studios also produce educational films and some unusually lyrical documentaries. 1/50th of a Second in a Lifetime (1984) takes as its subject the famous octogenarian photographer Vo An Ninh at work in the visually inspiring landscape of Vietnam. In photography as beautiful as that of its subject, the documentary enables the viewer to perceive the world around the artist as he does himself. It is one of the best films ever done of an artist in action.

Documentaries are clearly of unusual importance in Vietnamese cinema and exercise a strong influence on feature films, the first of which was released in 1959. Most directors started in documentaries, and in features such as Tran Vu’s We Will Meet Again (1974), the sections on a village music festival have a much higher quality than the melodramatic narrative.

During the war, three to six features were produced a year, usually kept around an hour long so they could be shown at the front during lulls in activity. Since the war, 18 to 20 features a year have been produced between the Hanoi studio and the one in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon). Movies are shown in theaters and clubs and as open-air entertainment in around two thousand villages. Forty to fifty prints will be made of a popular film.

Cinema is very much a popular art form in Vietnam. The waitresses at my hotel borrowed the English-language magazines I had been given by the Cinema Department and clucked over them together in a corner. But the population has high standards set by more than a millennium of exciting folk theater. Folk elements are found frequently in Vietnamese cinema. Le Duc Tien’s Bom—The Bumpkin (1987) is based on folk tales, jokes, songs, and motifs about a proverbial rustic booby. The boy on the water buffalo who frames the
same director's *A Quiet Little Town* (1986) is a motif of folk prints from Dong Ho village. The lonely teenager in Do Minh Tuan's *The Lamp in the Dream* (1987) dreams of a folk festival for children and parents. The villainess in *We Will Meet Again* owes much to the stock character of the mother-in-law in village opera. In fact, the Vietnamese fine arts have had a long, mutually fructifying relation with folk art; they drew upon the arts of the people to create and then perpetuate authentically national styles in opposition to Chinese and later Western influences. In return, the people have supported the fine arts and adapted many of their refinements and innovations.

The Vietnamese are characteristically frank about the quality of many of their early feature productions; *30 Years of Vietnam's Cinema Art* (The Vietnam Film Archives, Hanoi, 1983) charges them with "Routine, formalism, lengthy commentary and monotonous imagery. . . ." The first feature that all mention as an undoubted success is Hong Sen's *The Abandoned Field* (1979). Since then progress has been rapid, especially with the emergence of the authentic cinema genius, Dang Nhat Minh.

Despite this rapid development, Vietnamese cinema still has the heroic, legendary quality of the age of the founders. The younger staffers look up to them in awe and strive to make their productions worthy of their efforts. Old and young work together with affection, mutual support, and a good deal of banter. A staffer will be ribbed when his rumored girlfriend appears on the screen. I got caught up in this network of teasing. Xuan Son, director of *Fairy Tale for 17-Year-Olds*, warns me not to fall off Mr. Tinh's scooter by showing me the scrape on his arm from a fall off his bike. Mr. Tinh counters that he would rather have one of the actresses riding with him. I suggest we seat her between us. Later, while we were watching a documentary on a village firecracker festival, I asked the French interpreter, Mrs. Pham Ngoc Diep, why the people weren't frightened standing so close to the giant explosives. "They got hardened by the American bombs," she cracked. "I thought it was a more traditional festival," I tossed back. She giggled.

Such camaraderie and humor must help the filmmakers as they work under conditions that would make an American independent blanch. The Hanoi feature film studio is a tight cluster of small, converted brick buildings. Sets are often improvised ("That's our reception room," I was told as we watched a boardroom scene. "We painted it."). Equipment is minimal. Scenes are rarely reshot because of lack of film. Subtitles appear briefly because buying the necessary chemicals requires foreign currency. The professional finish of Vietnamese films bears testimony to the extraordinary dedication and high standards of the technical crew.

Like independents, Vietnamese filmmakers turn necessities into virtues. Their location shooting is excellent—and benefits certainly also from their documentary experience.

Most Vietnamese films are shot in black and white, and the results are outstanding, ranging from clear and factual, as in Tran Vu's recent *The Brothers*, ...
to poetic and expressive, as in *When the Tenth Month Comes, Fairy Tale for 17-Year-Olds* (1986), and *1/50th of a Second in a Lifetime*. The night scenes remind me of lacquer painting, a Vietnamese specialty, with light areas gleaming against pitch black. The fact that a number of cameramen have achieved excellence shows that black-and-white photography has become an artistic as well as practical tradition and expresses a special sensibility. It is, indeed, a contribution to world cinema at this moment of renewed interest in black-and-white camerawork.

The very lack of retakes, Stephen O’Harrow has argued, lends an immediacy to the acting, one of the strong points of Vietnamese films. From the melodrama of the 1970s, actors have developed a truly cinematic style, relying on subtle facial expressions and posture: for instance, in *The Brothers*, the frozen smile of the modern daughter-in-law facing down her husband’s family and the inclined back and hunched shoulders of the veteran reacting against the worldliness of the Hanoi to which he returns. Scenes of intense emotion are admirably underplayed and gather their power from the movie as a whole.

Moreover, the Vietnamese are a photogenic people, with their high cheekbones and slim builds, and their natural grace gives their films a special visual delight. The Vietnamese audience responds to this quality; when the teenage heroine of *Fairy Tale for 17-Year-Olds* extended her hands palms upward in profile against a background of moonlit water, several members of the audience gasped, and one whispered in my ear, “She is a dancer.”

Directing also has undergone a rapid development from staginess to cinema. In earlier movies, the camera is often planted in front of a room where the actors move and recite the dialogue, which carries the burden of the exposition. Over the years, the words become fewer and less central, and the story begins to be carried by the images, like the young girl’s hands holding a military cap in *Fairy Tale* and the veterans in *The Brothers*, stranded at the busy and indifferent Saigon airport, clutching a box containing their friend’s bones, which they have recovered from his wartime grave.

These images can be more meaningful than any words. In *Tenth Month*, the dying father places his hand on the arm of the young soldier he thinks is his son returned from the war; the hand moves slowly down the soldier’s back, lingers on his revolver, and then falls to the bed. No interpretation can exhaust the emotional significance of the scene. Such filmmaking is truly visual art.

Similarly, the newer films set the camera in motion. Either subtly or emphatically, it enters into the movement of a scene, becoming a creative part of the gracefulness of the ensemble. Directors seem to have a special sensitivity to pace—the swelling, ebbing, and flowing of *Tenth Month* and the staccato, changing rhythms of *Village Under the Fist* (1982) by Dang Nhat Minh; the deliberate, ruminative progression of *The Brothers* by Tran Vu.

This sense of pace seems very much part of Vietnamese culture, from the bicycles in the street to the central place of poetry. Poetry—which includes music, song, and dance drama—was the most widely practiced as well as the
most original Vietnamese artistic form, being rivaled only in modern times by
the novel. With its six tones, spoken Vietnamese is already close to song; its
“hard tone” is said to express objectivity and clear ideas, its “equal tone” the
emotional side of life.

Poetry is practiced on every level of society, from villagers in song contests
to generals, politicians, and, formerly, the emperor. As an accomplishment of
a Confucian gentleman, it was accorded more prestige than military skill and
became an important means of expression for political and social views and for
individual and national identity.

In poetry one finds the sadly perennial themes of Vietnam’s history, themes
central to its cinema. An 18th-century poetess laments the absence of her war-
rior husband, the lack of news and letters from the front, and the burden of
caring alone for their daughter and his mother; the very situation of When the
Tenth Month Comes. The god of the village temple who comforts the wife in
that movie is similar to the god who inspired the troops against the Mongol
invaders centuries before.

In the early 19th century, a poet mourned the dead who could not be buried
in the family tomb:

They have fallen, a mass of flesh and blood,
Along unknown river banks to be lost forever.

After an American bombing,

The wind buried the old man’s body along with the grass and trees.

The horror of the recent war is that its devastation seems so permanent.
Whereas an overgrown village could once signify destruction, a poet now
must ask,

Has the grass begun pushing up again on that land of ours?

Vietnamese poetry is characteristically tender and lyrical, celebrating quiet
living and adolescent love. Soldiers in the American war were so young they
outgrew their uniforms before they could wear them out. In poems as in Fairy
Tale, they are pictured dreaming lovely and naïve dreams of sunlight and
roses, teasing the little birds enchanted by the camouflage on their helmets.
Their teenage yearnings become all looks and glances; a boy dreams about a
girl he saw briefly and then learns she has been killed.

The Vietnamese see themselves as basically poetic: sensitive, open, vulner-
able to beauty, and hungry for affection. This poetic character renders them
personal, private, even individualistic, anxious to cultivate “the beautiful
things in life” in tranquility.

War rips them away from the life they love. It forces them to become public
and regimented; to cultivate hardness, animosity, and force. A 19th-century
French description of the Vietnamese states, "he is horrified by war, but holds death in contempt." In the 15th century, a poet complained,

How many times now have I sharpened my sword in the moonlight.

Similarly, Ho Chi Minh wrote,

Today's verse needs to be tipped with steel!

But the Vietnamese cannot put aside a sensitivity developed over the whole history of their nation. *30 Years of Vietnam's Cinema Art* states of documentaries that "The poetic touch in the national character was presented in every film even in the midst of the fighting." Ho Chi Minh writes of being transferred from one prison to another:

Even with legs and arms tightly shackled,
I hear everywhere the birds singing and breathe in the perfume of the flowers.
While I breathe and hear, can anyone forbid me this happiness
That makes the road less sad and the traveler less isolated?

The conflict between the Vietnamese character and historical situation is both emotional and mental. In literature, films, and conversation, Vietnamese are trying to integrate their vast and tragic experience of war and its consequences into their thinking and living, into their images of their lives and their selves.

In poetry, a centuries-old symbol is that of mountains and rivers: they represent the love between a man and a woman, the love of nature, and the love of country. Romantic love can stand for national struggle. The buried lover becomes part of the land the poet loves. He himself is covered by the earth against the bombings. The model held up to the young girl in *Fairy Tale* is the legendary wife who waited for her husband until she turned into a statue of stone as solid as her fidelity.

Such poetic thinking has obviously influenced Vietnamese cinema in its use of symbols and sequencing of images. The dreams in *Fairy Tale* flow with their own poetic logic; in *Village Under the Fist*, the hero's thinking jumps erratically through time as it is triggered by visual associations.

Indeed, Vietnamese films often use poetry and song as central means of expression and narrative elements. The village music festival of *We Will Meet Again* provides the film's title and an image of a life of blessed peace. The popular songs of *Fairy Tale* express the film's themes as they would be sung by teenagers. The cassette tape recorder and popular Western music of the upwardly mobile family in *The Brothers* are evidence of the glitzy life they want to build for themselves. As the heroine of the *Tenth Month* sings the female lead in a village opera, the aria of lament for the husband gone to the war releases within her the emotion of her real situation: her husband is dead, and
she is pretending he is still alive to spare the feelings of his aged father. In all these cases, the poetry of song leads the viewer into the deeper levels of the film's meaning.

This poetic, multilayered structure is characteristic of the best Vietnamese cinema. In *Fairy Tale*, the emotional tension of the Vietnamese people is personified by a 17-year-old girl who escapes the implications of the war through a romantic fantasy about a young soldier at the front. Her father and friends urge her to face reality, but they themselves are involved in dreams and anxieties about husbands and relatives at the front from whom they have not heard in years. And does not love, the girl argues, lead us to "the beautiful things in life"? As the long war ends, an official letter informs the family of the young man's death, and a letter of his arrives for the girl, which reveals that he entered into her fantasy and that it became for him the last beautiful thing in his life. A schoolfriend who loves the girl hopes that she will now free herself from dreams to return his love in the real world. She faces this age-old Vietnamese dilemma as he in his turn leaves for the China front, a dilemma for which the film offers no easy solution.

As the Vietnamese strive to solve the mental and emotional problems raised by the war, certain points and themes recur in their artworks and conversation and seem to be conceived schematically as layers of meaning.

First, there is the surface appearance of a situation, an appearance that may seem to be perfectly straightforward. In the *Tenth Month*, the villagers are all convinced that the married heroine is flirting unfaithfully with the village schoolteacher. In fact, her husband is dead, and the schoolteacher, at her request, is writing letters that she can represent to her father-in-law as coming from her son.

However, the heroine herself is unaware of the deeper emotional level of the situation: the schoolteacher is falling in love with her, and his letters are becoming a sincere expression of his devotion. Similarly, in *Fairy Tale*, the emotional reality of the young people's fantasy is opposed to the realism of their elders.

But the above two levels must be placed within their historical context: the terrible war in which all are involved and which lends a special importance and poignancy to everything that happens. The little moments of life that would otherwise pass unnoticed become urgent and precious; one's experience of them, intense. The war also provides a vantage point from which events and actions can be judged: are they "worthy of the war," worthy of the suffering and sacrifice?

Finally, even the French and American wars must be placed in the context of Vietnamese history. For more than two thousand years, men have gone to war and women have waited for them at home. The village god in the *Tenth Month* died fighting the Mongols. The schoolfriend in *Fairy Tale* must leave for the China front.

To arrest one's thinking at the surface of life—to try to forget the war as do the aspiring yuppies of *The Brothers*—is to fail to see one's situation in its en-
tirety. It is also to scorn those who have suffered—like the brother who has been given up for dead and returns to find himself an anachronism and an inconvenience, an unwelcome reminder of a past to be covered over with comforts. Most important, it is to deny one’s very Vietnamese identity, which has been “forged” through that long history of tragic analogies.

In facing these problems with all the artistic resources at its command, Vietnamese cinema proclaims its identity, becoming an authentic expression of its moment in history and a precious means of our understanding.

Even more, it becomes a challenge to us in our own thinking about the war in Vietnam. We have at last moved beyond denying that war and have found the courage to mourn our dead and comfort our wounded. Now the hardest task of all awaits us: to realize that the Vietnamese were not beyond the perimeter of our humanity, to recognize why we sit together in this house of grief.