

# All Else Being Constant: An Interview with Nguyễn Trinh Thi

I.



Nguyễn Trinh Thi  
*Everyday's the Seventies* (still)  
2018

To say *Everyday's the Seventies* (2018), *Eleven Men* (2016), and *Vietnam the Movie* (2015) are works about Vietnam would not be incorrect. In fact, they all are works about Vietnam. But after watching these films, and thinking about them, it came to me that these films are not just about Vietnam. They are also about you looking at and thinking about Vietnam, through other people's eyes, with other people as well. And through that looking, these films are an invitation to us to think about what we, as audiences, are actually looking at, and how do we do so.

The points of view and voices in these films are all different, and they all left a distinct imprint on me. With *Vietnam the Movie*, it is montage of commentaries delivered by many protagonists in various films on Vietnam. In *Eleven Men*, it is how the narrative told through a single female protagonist embodied by Nhu Quynh becomes multiplied and overlaid through her acting career. And in *Everyday's the Seventies*, there are these triangulating positions between newsreels, Tsui Hak's/ Từ Khắc's *A Better Tomorrow III: Love & Death in Saigon*, and Paul's narrative. And behind all of that, is also your own camera wielding presence and experience of being there with your collaborators.

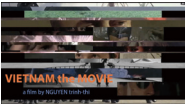
Can you share a bit on how these different perspectives and positions occur to you? How have they developed over time?



Nguyễn Trinh Thi  
*Eleven Men* (still)  
2016

*One thing to clarify first: in the middle channel (the cinema channel), there were clips from many films all played by Tony Leung Kafaï (including The Lover as the first clip), not only A Better Tomorrow III: Love & Death in Saigon. In this way, the strategy was a bit like Eleven Men with Nhu Quynh throughout. Some films I used had Tony Leung in it, but not relating to Vietnam.*

*Before answering your questions in a more direct way, perhaps I would just mention that in general, in my filmmaking, I am interested in processes of reflecting / reflections; the peripheral vision of things; and the shifting the camera lens from the foreground to the background, or paying attention to the outside of the frames. I am also interested in combining chance and choice, decision making with indeterminacy. In these films, I like to think that I have "collaborated" with existing*



Nguyễn Trinh Thi  
*Vietnam the Movie* (still)  
2015

*materials. I try to preserve their “lives” while also trying to bring to life some of their unrealized potentials.*

*Typically, after “digesting” the materials I have gathered for each project, I would come up with a structure, or a rule for the film by which I and the materials will have to follow, thereby allowing for a lot of unexpected things, or chances, to happen. For example, in Vietnam the Movie, the rule was that I can only use scenes in movies where a character mentioned the word “Vietnam.” This rule thereby eliminated much of my own direction, or any intentions I might have for the narrative of such a film. The selection of scenes that I could use at the end was somewhat outside of my own planning. It made me think of where I should go next in order to “use” this selection. This changing in direction has always been interesting for me in the filmmaking process. I was quite unsure what I was trying to say regarding Vietnam. But I have to find a way by which the materials themselves will suggest something.*



Nguyễn Trinh Thi  
*Vietnam the Movie* (still)  
2015

As we conversed through our screens, Tony Leung Kafari inevitably came up as a topic of discussion. I admitted that I prefer Tony Leung Kafari to Tony Leung Chiuwai, even though Kafari may seem lesser known internationally. But there is something raw, rugged, and refined about him and the way he approaches his characters. There is something un-nameable about him. To my slight surprise and immense glee, Trinh Thi agrees.

When the Rooftop Institute, co-founded by artists Law Yuk Mui and Yim Sui Fong invited Trinh Thi for a residency in Hong Kong in 2018, Trinh Thi started collecting footage and films from Hong Kong as preparation. This was also a follow up gesture to *Vietnam The Movie*, which were made up of mostly American and European films. During her time in Hong Kong, Trinh Thi researched on films in the Hong Kong Film Archive and through local Hong Kong friends, where she came across a number of films on Vietnamese boat people in Hong Kong, and films on the two sides of the cold war. Tony Leung Kafari appeared in a number of films about Vietnam, including the 1992 film *The Lover*, adapted from the 1984 novel *L'Amant*, where he played a Chinese man living in South of Vietnam in early 20th century. Through Yuk Mui and Sui Fong, Trinh Thi also met Paul, a record store owner who came to Hong Kong from Vietnam. The stories and narratives of Paul and Tony Leung Kafari's characters may well be converging, and they may well be parallels. They were set in different time periods, but as experiences they did take place at the same time period of 1970s-90s. One could associate these stories with each other, and as such read across the different channels in *Everyday's the Seventies*.

*Most of the time, my films were results of a process of gradual changing and becoming. I do not usually have a master plan before hand at*



Nguyễn Trinh Thi  
*Everyday's the Seventies* (still)  
2018

*the beginning of a project, nor a script to follow. I usually let one thing suggest the other. In Everyday's the Seventies, I first wanted to extend Vietnam the Movie by collecting more Asian movies on Vietnam, especially as I knew I would have a few weeks in Hong Kong. In Hong Kong, I did a couple of things in parallel without planning to converge them together. One was to collect Asian and Hong Kong films relating to Vietnam. At the same time, I happened to come across Paul's story which I really liked. So, I came to interview Paul a few times at his record store and home without knowing what I would do with it. In Hong Kong, I just collected as much material as I could in relation with Vietnam. So of course, the story of boat people emerged. Later on, I looked for more representation of the same events and times in the AP Archives/media. Thinking about all the separate materials I collected, there were common threads. They are all related to several common things, times, histories, and memories. But somehow as much as they converge, they diverge.*

*I remember the first thing that made me want to explore the story of Paul's was that answering my question whether it was very hard for him living in Saigon during the war, he said it was the best time of his life. This prompted to me that there are always big gaps between official history and personal memories.*

I asked Trinh Thi whether the Hong Kong she saw through Paul and the rooftop team is much different from the Hong Kong she knew, or she thought she knew. She wrote back, "Yes of course the Hong Kong that I saw through Paul and the rooftop team for me is my personal Hong Kong, I much prefer it to any version that the media or cinema might have brought me."

## II.

I am curious about how your editing room is like—both physical and conceptually. Can you share a bit about your editing process? Is it a solo process, or is it one full of boisterous conversations with others?

*My editing room is very ordinary. Just a desk with a Mac desktop, a bunch of hard drives, and a pair of speakers. In general, I am quite a low-tech kind of person. I have not updated my editing software which is Final Cut 7, since over 10 years now. My editing room is just part of my living situation, at my home. Yes, it is a solo process definitely.*

What happens to your rushes? What do you think happens to rushes?

*I am not sure I understand your question. They stay in my hard drives, sometimes not very orderly.*

How do you imagine your audience react or respond to your films? If you were to eavesdrop on them, what kind of conversations do you imagine them having?

*I am always very happy when I hear the audience laugh while watching my films even when they're about serious matters. I would like to image them laughing and enjoying the films. I also hope that the films touch some parts of their own memories, either of their memories watching those original films or just their absurdities. I like to leave a lot of room in my works for people to think themselves.*

Apart from making your own films, being part of collectives such as DocLab and Nha San Collective has also been an integral part of your practice. Do you find these modes of working very different? If so, how?

*Yes, they are very different. In general, my practice is quite separate from being part of the collectives although the collectives are my communities.*

DocLab is also a place where you teach people who may or may not be in the art field filmmaking. How has this shaped the various aspects of your practice?

*I do not think it has shaped my practice. Also, I taught only for the first several years of DocLab and have stopped teaching for almost ten years now.*

*Practice for me really is a solitary activity, maybe comparable with what writers and poets go through. We can be influenced by all kinds of things, from communities, everyday life, society. We could connect with people whose thoughts we feel close to without having to meet. But at the end of the day, these influences and contexts become parts of a process of internalizing of the external, and they have to be combined with other processes you may not be aware of. Subconscious, intuition, perhaps. The process of creative making is difficult to analyse exhaustively. I am reluctant to name influences — I am afraid that I am wrong, that I already forgot things, things might have change, and there are things I may not even know about. I might end up not giving credit to things I do not even know. Maybe we only remember most recent things.*

### III.

*I was also interested in cinema and media representation and how they affect or create our collective memories.*

*With Everyday's the Seventies, fragments from different sounds and footage were put together to dramatize three points of view of the same story. Like in Rashomon. You could buy raw footages from AP archives, unedited shots, b-rolls of images and sounds. It was just surroundings and environment, unedited, noise outside of the camps. It does not tell you anything. The media, cinema, and music represent the same thing but in different ways. I much prefer personal memories to official history and media representation, they all use different strategies to fill in different gaps, and you can make different associations across them. In the end one is trying to make the work believable—you have to craft it—but also make those who are viewing realize it is a construction. With each viewing and listening one's attention shifts, bodies move, something different can be noticed.*



Nguyễn Trinh Thi  
*Everyday's the Seventies* (still)  
2018

The light and colour of the footage that you remixed are very varied. Apart from black and white footage, there is footage that are saturated with nostalgia, and others that are tinted cool green or even bluish. How does colour and light figure into your play and manipulation of time—real, cinematic, and narrative?

*Although I did not really work with, or manipulate, colour and light of the footage in a very intentional way, I think they are definitely very important. Colour and light are associated with each mode of representation—television, cinema, newsreel—which in turn also attached to our memories. Through colour and light, our memories can be activated, in a subconscious way. Through colour and light, we perceive time, and film is about time.*

A comparison between experiment and filmmaking was drawn— one ought to maintain some elements constant, as a control. That way one can observe changes in the other elements that do move. If everything happens to change all the time, it would be impossible to follow what is happening. To just follow one actor through their many roles over time is like keeping one thing constant; and in that way you can see the passage of time.

“Paul’s story could be Tony Leung Kafai’s film.”



Nguyễn Trinh Thi  
*Eleven Men* (still)  
2016

*Similarly, for Eleven Men I was looking for a structure that could unify such an array of films with Nhu Quynh. I tried not to impose any idea or messages beforehand but wanted to find a way so that the materials would reveal something to me. Kafka's story Eleven Sons had helped me reverse the gaze to the male partners of Nhu Quynh's in her films from her who now is also the voice of the film. In this way Eleven Men is about the history of Vietnam, the history of Vietnam cinema, and also the history of this actress.*

It brought a smile to my face when Nhu Quynh and her characters describe these men in the film: she seems to be, or perhaps she indeed is, wise and wide-eyed, an embodiment of both youth and a lifetime of experience. But what struck me with Nhu Quynh's partners in *Eleven Men* is that they seem to all die such senseless deaths. Trinh Thi agrees that these men's deaths become senseless through editing.

*But in Vietnam's socialist cinema, everything represented something. Each character has a clear role, a clear function, they stand on clear sides and ideologies. In the end they will die, and they die for something bigger than themselves. But because of the way Eleven Men was reconstructed, their deaths do become senseless. Sometimes I try to continue the deaths and construct scene such that they cross-kill the other, one partner would kill the other partner. Another kind of re-interpretation of history and narratives; a metaphor for the history of a country and of human beings in general.*

Even in *Everyday's the Seventies* there are commentaries on death, like when one of the shots of a character getting killed was first played forwards, and then backwards. This film ends with Tony Leung Kafai retelling the story of another man's death. That man was sitting on a toilet taking a dump; the exhaust fan came loose, fell on him and killed him. In the movie the court ruled that he died by ill-fate 死於不幸. Trinh Thi described that as death recorded by bureaucracy. Not only is history over written by bureaucracy, even our lives happen in the cracks of it.

“I did not plan anything for *Eleven Men*, but it was important to reverse the angle and perspective such that our gaze is not on her anymore, but we look at the men together with her. She became the voice, the narrator, the vision. Her voice and her story were not just about a woman talking about her men, but are more general and universal commentary on being human, addressing more fundamental relationship of kinship, with fellow citizens. There are many things I want to criticise of my country and my fellow citizens, but at the end of the day I still have love for them. It is not so simple. Not a simple romance.”