

Seeing Double: The Films of Hong-An Truong

[Viet Thanh Nguyen](#)

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1. For those whose image of Viet Nam comes only from the reel projected by Hollywood, the version of that country that appears in Hong-An Truong's films may seem alien territory. Truong's colonial-era Viet Nam didn't exist by that name, but was partitioned by the French into Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina, which, along with Cambodia and Laos, composed Indochina. The colonial past she explores so delicately is truly a distant colony, far removed both from the sweatshop that is the country's semi-capitalist present and from the brothel it was in the American era. One way for us to measure the difference between the later American style of domination and the earlier French one is with our eyes, for if the American military swaggered memorably through Southeast Asia in olive-green fatigues, French colonizers possessed a far more romantic sense of style. As part of their dowry to the Vietnamese, the French left behind not only fine coffee and crusty bread, but also cinema-worthy architecture and white colonial suits. While those effete trappings are no match for the strong-arm seductions of an American like Colonel Sanders--the only man left in Ho Chi Minh City still wearing a white suit today--they provide the French, and the world, with the sepia-toned illusions of a more civilized period of rule. Truong's films quietly but persistently demand that we look twice at these illusions.
 2. For her, as for Viet Nam, the crucial year is 1954, close enough to the line dividing the century between its black-and-white half and its second half in color. After the visual and stereophonic blitzkrieg of the United States' "Vietnam War," the period of French colonialism with its black-and-white artifacts and scratchy 78-rpm recordings of Edith Piaf felt like it belonged to a different century. Far removed from our present or the recent past of the American war, French colonialism is an age that was not recorded in color, and hence is one that we see differently, remember differently, *feel* differently. Filmed in black-and-white, the French artillery barrages seen in "Explosions in the Sky" seem like only so much archaic sound and fury. In fact

during this battle of Dien Bien Phu nearly 10,000 Viet Minh soldiers died, along with some 1,500 of the French forces (Duiker 455). Piaf's "Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien" might have been an obvious selection for the soundtrack, at least from the perspective of someone who was not Vietnamese, but Truong's choice also makes us hear the event differently, for the bilingual South Vietnamese version of "Sounds of Silence" that rocks the film is notably anachronistic. Based on the Simon and Garfunkel hit of 1966, this song earmarks these scenes as edited from a southern Vietnamese point of view, one that only comes into being because of Dien Bien Phu. The defining--and dividing--event of 1954, the catastrophic defeat of the French by Viet Minh forces at Dien Bien Phu, would lead to the cleavage of Viet Nam into North and South.

3. Truong subtly insists on seeing, and hearing, from the southern perspective through both of her films because this perspective is long neglected in the west, where French and Americans have paid more attention, and respect, to Northern Vietnamese or Communist perspectives on the Indochina wars. In postwar exile, South Vietnamese refugees discovered that they lost not only their country but their history, too, which was dismembered both by their Communist enemies and by their western hosts. One way these refugees managed to survive was by resorting to the tried and true method of losers everywhere: singing and listening to western-style pop tunes and soft rock ballads about longing and heartbreak, a genre epitomized in the diaspora by songs like "I'd Love You to Want Me" by Lobo and the bilingual cover of Nancy Sinatra's "Bang Bang," heard in Nguyen Tan Hoang's video, "Forever Linda!" Southern Vietnamese refugees carried those songs with them as the aural equivalent of the shirts on their backs, so that for decades "Black is Black" and "Hotel California" remained staples for hard-rocking cover bands at wedding banquets. Playing these songs for southern Vietnamese refugees was an act of defiant, recalcitrant nationalism, for after 1975 and the Communist takeover of South Viet Nam, this "yellow music," tainted by its affiliation with southern comprador decadence, was banned by the revolution in favor of "red music" and its paeans to political purity.¹ The cover of "Sounds of Silence" is not one of these yellow classics, but as an archival find the song is a delight, ironic as a soundtrack to the gunfire, but also laying down an emotional bridge for the Vietnamese in the diaspora who know it or one of its cousins, allowing them to cross, once again, to those smoky cabarets of a bygone Saigon.

4. Set to this melody, Truong's film also allows some of us

to experience the ecstatic pleasure found in watching big guns go boom. Truong can afford to treat French artillery as a show of fireworks, knowing that it must seem quaint compared to the "all-owning spectacle" that is the American edition of Viet Nam (Trinh 1991). Typified in the genre of the "Vietnam War" movie, this spectacle is Hollywood's version of shock and awe, projecting both American military might and American atrocities in full color. While the moral of these movies may be that war is hell, the subliminal message advertises for the antiheroic American self--tortured and flawed, yet utterly charismatic. But when Truong turns to the period before 1954 in "The Past is a Distant Colony," she enters a time when the French still possessed movie star qualities, albeit those of a more classic era. This suave French colonialism is glamorized in Régis Wargnier's vehicle for Catherine Deneuve, *Indochine*, a romance that works like Hollywood war movies, ostensibly condemning colonialism but always reminding us of how lovely life on a rubber plantation was, forced labor and all. Faced with these seductions of colonialism and the classic narratives of a cinema-industrial complex, Truong is unafraid to use stiff-arm tactics to hold off their charms. She sets her film to a funereal pace and composes a soundtrack of two women's voices murmuring in French and Vietnamese, most of which she refuses to translate for the viewer's ease. Truong also refuses to give in to the temptation of staging and spotlighting black-and-white or sepia-toned photographic images of colonial life, which one can find fashionably sentimentalized in the galleries of restaurants with names like Le Colonial or Indochine both in the United States and in Viet Nam. In these eateries, the painful past isn't papered over. It's merely hung on the walls themselves, a kind of soft-core exotica to stoke the customer's appetite for an other's culture.

5. Truong won't permit "The Past is a Distant Colony" to be dolled up in such a fashion. This can happen even to a film like *Apocalypse Now*, which I recently saw projected onto a downtown L.A. skyscraper for the entertainment of chic bar patrons who didn't spill a drop as Martin Sheen hacked Marlon Brando to death. Truong's film can challenge the bland palate of consumer culture because it is still fresh enough to be raw, provoking us through the filmmaker's signature strategy of selecting obscure film reels and duplicating their images side by side, as if mirrored. Obscure and evocative, elusive and allusive, these cinematic Rorschach blots compel reactions that might tell us more about ourselves than about the film. I see in the structure of the mirrored images a brilliant formal expression of the 1954 division of Viet Nam itself into North and South, a cleaving evident in the chiasmus

between the mirrored images. While it would be difficult to say that there were ever only two sides to any one issue for the Vietnamese, the overriding historical urgency after 1954 and the departure of the French was this sense for the Vietnamese of having to choose between one side or the other. Instead of representing heterogeneity and endless difference, as we see happening in Trinh T. Minh-ha's meta-documentary *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*, "The Past is a Distant Colony" opts for the visual metaphor of a duality that is not only elegant but threatening, signaling as it does the way that neutrality and the suspension of choice are restricted during war time to that thin demilitarized zone between the two opposing images.

6. If this duality is suitable for expressing the political cleavage between communism and capitalism as well as between North and South, it's also a visual reminder of the film's concern with the duality of gender, which it voices through women's speech. Soldiers, artists and politicians on both sides of the colonial divide use metaphors of gender and sex in their propaganda, but Truong firmly silences that language of power in favor of a Vietnamese nun speaking of suffering, in Vietnamese, and another woman speaking of her Indochinese life, in French. The French woman's account is suffused with sadness and sensuality, as she recounts a melancholy childhood and a failed love affair. Is she French or is she Vietnamese? Is she colonizer or colonized? Truong leaves her nationality ambiguous, suitable for the confusions and contradictions created by the *mission civilisatrice* and its lesson that all its colonized could count among their forebears "our ancestors, the Gauls," regardless of their race or obvious exclusion from French culture and citizenship. Perhaps these indigestible confusions and contradictions, part of the malnourished diet of colonized life, account for the other duality in the women's stories between Vietnamese Catholic sacrifice and French colonial ennui. Both are understandable responses to the trauma of being colonized, which saturates both women's voices and the visual images they speak over: little boys learning how to cross themselves; cheering people at what may be a political rally; Pham Van Dong, Ho Chi Minh's lieutenant, both as an older man and when he was young, pacing in what may be the courtyard of the Palace of Fontainebleau in 1946²; and glimpses of the exodus of over 800,000 northern Vietnamese refugees fleeing south on flimsy boats, most of them Catholics who feared persecution in a Communist north after 1954. Many of these refugees would flee yet again in 1975 at the end of yet another war, doubly displaced, doubly erased.

7. These stark snapshots from a distant colony lead up to a

string of advertisements about the good life of a faraway metropole, during the unreeling of which the women's voices are silenced, as if their voices cannot carry over the geographic and cultural chasm separating Indochina from France. Here we see the French version of the spectacular in all its grandeur, especially the architecture and boulevards of Paris, which served as the model for the French urban planners of Saigon, channeling the crowds, on foot or on streetcar, to cafes and shows, to see, perhaps, Josephine Baker, who once even performed as a "petite Tonkinoise."³ Despite their silent era patina, these metropolitan pleasures were no doubt as sensuous as our own, although any delight we feel in these images is reduced by the eerie absence of music. It's as if we were invited to sit down to a feast but not allowed to eat it, even as we could smell it. Our sensuous engagement is further curtailed when Truong cuts in testaments to the colony burning far in the distance: wounded soldiers, the wreckage of a bombing, and the heads of rebels decapitated by the French and ensconced in baskets. In what may be the climactic shot of "The Past is a Distant Colony," Truong pans silently over these heads and the unnervingly peaceful expression of the man in the center, in whose eyes we see the last moment of his own life, offered as a silent rebuke.

8. Truong wisely chooses neither to sentimentalize this image nor to demonize its makers. The matter-of-fact tone of her film perfectly suits the actual banality of the photograph, which was not suppressed by French authorities; indeed, French *colons* could purchase it on a postcard and send it to relatives and friends. This more innocent time in the history of media and of foreign domination would be over by the time of the American war in Viet Nam, when GIs realized they could only smuggle home Polaroid snapshots of atrocities. For some French recipients of this postcard it was undoubtedly little more than a conversation piece, but for others it must have left a retinal imprint. I like to imagine that some of them, after turning out the lights, would remain awake and unsettled, the anonymous man's unblinking gaze staring back at them in the darkness. Truong's film arrives like that postcard in our mailbox--a brief, insistent and disturbing reminder that not everyone saw French civilization with the same two eyes.

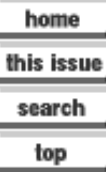
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*Department of English and Department of American
Studies and Ethnicity
University of Southern California
vnguyen@usc.edu*



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Notes

1. See Taylor for a discussion of yellow music in the postwar era (39-45, 120-22).
2. Ho Chi Minh and Pham Van Dong's trip to Fontainebleau, where they fruitlessly negotiated with the French government for recognition of Vietnamese independence, is discussed in Duiker (373-76).
3. Brent Hayes Edwards mentions Baker's performance briefly (162).

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Talk Back