Vietnamese cinema has only recently become known outside of the East Bloc countries.\(^1\) The first public showing of a Vietnamese feature film in the United States was that of *When the Tenth Month Comes* at the 1985 Hawai'i International Film Festival in Honolulu.\(^2\) At the 1987 Festival, a consortium of American film institutions was formed with Nguyen Thu, General Director of the Vietnam Cinema Department, to organize the Vietnam Film Project — the first attempt to introduce an entire new film industry to America.\(^3\) The purpose of this article is to provide a brief description of Vietnamese cinema along with an appreciation of its major characteristics and themes. I base my views on my two visits to the Vietnam Cinema Department in Hanoi — for one week in 1987 and two in 1988 — on behalf of the Hawai'i International Film Festival. During those visits, I was able to view a large number of documentaries and feature films and to discuss Vietnamese cinema with a number of department staff members. I was able to obtain more interviews during the visits of Vietnamese to the Hawai'i International Film Festival in Honolulu.\(^4\) This article cannot claim to be an

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\(^1\) In 1983, selections of Vietnamese films were shown at the Mostra International del Cine Nuevo at Pesaro and in Algiers. In 1984, a selection was shown at a conference in Spain to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam war. The American cinematographer Haskell Wester and the Vietnamese director Bui Dinh Hac attended this conference. That same year, a week-long series of Vietnamese films was shown in Paris. A few Vietnamese films have also been screened at the Festival of Three Continents at Nantes.

\(^2\) This was followed by *Once Upon a Time in Vu Dai Village* the next year. In 1987, *Fairy Tale for 17-Year Olds* was shown along with the documentary *1/50th of a Second in a Lifetime*. Through connections made at the festival, the former film was shown widely in the United States and then at Sao Paolo and the Berlin Film Festival. A showing of *When the Tenth Month Comes* was also arranged at the 1988 Hong Kong International Film Festival.

\(^3\) Members of the consortium included Nguyen Thu, Geoffrey D. Gilmore of the UCLA Film and Television Archive, L. Somi Roy of the Asia Society, Victor Kobayashi of the University of Hawai'i Summer Session, Emily Laskin of the American Film Institute, Stephen O'Harrow of the U.S. Committee for Scientific Cooperation with Vietnam, and myself. The project began with the screening of five films at the 1988 Hawai'i International Film Festival and the participation of two film makers and a film critic from Vietnam. The panel discussions with Vietnamese and American film makers at that festival were, to my knowledge, the first public bilateral discussions of the war to be held in the United States. An American tour of those five selected films and others is now in progress, including an estimated thirty-five sites.

A number of international contacts for Vietnamese cinema were made through the Festival as well. For a major example, Neil Gibson and Leslie Gould founded the Campaign for Vietnam Cinema in England, which has shipped more than a container load of equipment to Vietnam, has organized in 1990 a Season of Vietnamese Films at the National Film Theatre in London, and has arranged for the sale of five features and two documentaries to Channel 4. Gibson's documentary *Vietnam Cinema* (1960) is an important historical record.

\(^4\) I would make special mention of Vice Minister of Culture Nguyen Dinh Quang (both visits and 1988 festival), the General Director of the Vietnam Cinema Department Nguyen Thu (second visit and 1987 festival), the Deputy General Director Bui Dinh Hac (second visit and 1988 festival), and the directors Nguyen Xuan Son (1987 festival) and Dang Nhat Minh (1988 festival), who spent two months in Hawai'i as Filmmaker-in-Residence at the Institute of Culture and Communication, East-West Center. Also very helpful were Nguyen Van Tinh, Pham Ngoc Diep, and Duong Manh Hien, who cared for me in Hanoi.
adequate introduction to the history of Vietnamese cinema, a task I hope will be undertaken with the aid of my informants and the sources I list as completely as possible. I am able to provide a sketch of Vietnamese cinema at the end of the 1980s, a particularly important period for the industry as well as for the nation. The people I met were at the cutting edge of Vietnamese glasnost, using their prestigious positions as artists to win greater freedom of expression and to support a nation-wide rethinking of history and society. That process continues today, and the trends I describe towards


I have since received letters with news from Vietnam and have had the opportunity of updating my information in long conversations with Neil Gibson at the 1990 Hawai'i International Film Festival, after he had spent six months in Hanoi. I am grateful also for the observations of the non-Vietnamese with whom I discussed Vietnamese films. Due to communication difficulties with Vietnam, my information is still incomplete on a number of points and references and I was unable to double-check others.

openness and critical independence have reportedly intensified over the last years. My article reflects generally the view that the Vietnamese gave me of themselves and their work, a view supported by the films they showed me and the general impressions I received.

For many of the Vietnamese I met, I was "their first American". I had never been to Vietnam, but the country was naturally filled with emotional associations for me. Almost immediately, my hosts and I began to communicate with unusual directness and intensity. I felt they were people who had experienced so much that they no longer had time for pretence and manoeuvring. They on their side were anxious for me to be perfectly frank with them because they had so few opportunities to hear foreign evaluations of their work. By the end of my first visit, we had formed friendships that have continued despite the distance between us. We had also established a stimulating intellectual relationship. At the end of my first visit to Hanoi, my hosts asked me to speak to the Cinema Department about their work; the entire presentation with discussion took over two hours. Since then, we have exchanged writings and mutual criticisms, which we have been free to accept or reject. For instance, the director Dang Nhat Minh told me that my view of the alienation theme in _The Lamp in the Dream_ is excessively Western; I countered that he did not see the full originality of that work.

An adequate evaluation of Vietnamese cinema will need to be based on a larger program of research. This article is a first look by a Westerner, an American, who was provided with a special opportunity to experience Vietnamese cinema at a key moment in its history.

_The Vietnam Cinema Department_

Cinema was introduced to Vietnam in 1910 by the French colonists, and films from France, the United States, and Hong Kong were distributed mostly in the urban areas. Documentary footage of Vietnam was taken by various individuals and organizations, and a number of feature films were made starting in the 1920s with local French and Chinese capital. Some Vietnamese made short films with a nationalist thrust, but Vietnamese film historians currently trace their cinema back to a newsreel of Ho Chi Minh's declaration of independence on 2 September 1945, filmed by a French amateur (incorporated into the 1975 documentary _Independence Day 1945_). A number of documentaries were subsequently produced, some of which were screened abroad. The State Enterprise for Photography and Motion Picture was established on 15 March 1953, by a decree signed by Ho Chi Minh. Several short documentaries were released that year, followed in 1954 by the major, five-reel _Dien Bien Phu._ The first feature film,

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5 This film was the product of a Vietnamese team that included the work of the camera-man Nguyen Thu, now the General Director of the Vietnam Cinema Department. A separate film was made by the distinguished Russian director Roman Karmen, _Vietnam on the Road to Victory_, working with the script writer Nguyen Dinh Thi and the director Pham Van Khoa. On the prior history of cinema in Vietnam, see Bao and Ngoc "L’Itinéraire": 3 ff. I am unable to discuss pre-1975 South Vietnamese films. The majority of these were reportedly entertainment movies, often including music. Dang Nhat Minh told me that the one artistic film he knew was _Xin Chon Noi Nay Lam Que Huong_. After 1975, the South Vietnamese industry was reorganized by Northerners, and a number of North Vietnamese directed movies at the Ho Chi Minh City studio, such as Hai Ninh with _First Love_ and Hong Sen with _The Abandoned Field_. All but a few of the post-1975 films I have seen were produced in North Vietnam.
On the Same River, was released in 1959. Production was naturally sparse during the war years, but now averages twenty feature films a year.

The Vietnam Cinema Department was founded in 1956 and placed under the Ministry of Culture. Its main institutions are the two feature film studios in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City and the Documentary and Scientific Films Studio in Hanoi. Recently, a third feature film studio has been founded under Hoan Tich Chi. The department manages also an animated cartoon studio, technical enterprises, film distribution, and import and export. Its Vietnam Cinema School was merged with the Hanoi College of Dramatic Art and Cinema at the University of Hanoi, also under the Ministry of Culture. The Vietnam Film Archives are also placed under that Ministry. Three other film units are outside the Ministry.6

The department has undergone a number of changes over the years. I will describe its procedures, as I observed them in Hanoi. The salient problem is its lack of funds.7 Vietnam is one of the five poorest countries in the world, and staffers have been told by foreign film makers that they are labouring under perhaps the worst conditions anywhere. The department is housed in some converted brick buildings. Equipment is antiquated and scarce. At one point, sound mixing was being done in a car. This naturally limits the types of films that can be made. Battle footage, for instance, is big-budget. For one movie, since airplane models were too expensive, camera-men were sent out to film real air battles! The greater part of a feature film budget is spent on materials, which must be paid in precious foreign currency.8 So little film stock is available that the shooting ratio can be as low as one to two-and-a-half, although it rises occasionally to six or seven. The overuse of the zoom lens in some movies may

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6For details see Diem, “30 Years”: 33–41.
7In the late 1980s, a typical budget approximated forty million dong; the exchange rate with the U.S. dollar varied from 380 dong to 4000 (monetary reform has since stabilized the situation). The necessary money is loaned from a bank and must be repaid from funds generated by selling the film to the distributor, who now has the right to refuse to accept a film. Recent competition from television has depleted financing, resulting in even lower budgets and shorter shooting schedules. The earlier distributing agency has now been divided into Fafim for internal distribution and Vinafilm for external. External distribution has until recently been limited mainly to East Bloc countries.
8All purchases were apparently being made from East Bloc countries. The film, all 35 mm., was usually the East German (Orwo NT55 Firma negative, Orwo PF2 Firma stock), although the Vietnamese would have preferred the more expensive Kodak. Orwo black and white is passable, but the colour film has proved so unstable that the department cancelled its plans to start filming most features in colour (they wanted to make colourful, historical films for the international market). The Campaign for Vietnam Cinema has now provided a 35 mm. hot processing negative machine that can handle Fuji and Kodak, but because of the expense of those stocks, the first purchases are reportedly being made of the West German Agfa.

German, Soviet, and American cameras are used (Arriflex 2-B is mentioned), but they are practically antique. Some lenses have lost their sharpness in depth-of-field focus, and filters are few. A great deal of time is lost adjusting lights that are too old and too few. The indoor studio in Hanoi is an old, dusty, barn-like structure without heat or air-conditioning. Little work is done in video because of the lack of equipment, but more video and television work is projected. The latest work of the director Dang Nhat Minh was in video. Recent donations of equipment by the Campaign for Vietnam Cinema should improve the situation markedly.

Film making — as other enterprises in Vietnam — is complicated by the government’s policy of guaranteed employment. The shoot I witnessed was burdened by a work group of fifty people, when twenty-five would have sufficed. The superfluous ones simply got in the way and watched. Government policy — as well as more personal reasons — can encourage the department to spread its few funds as widely as possible rather than concentrating them on the very best film makers.
be due to the fact that it is one of the very few effects available. The high technical quality of Vietnamese films is remarkable in view of the limitations to be surmounted. Hai Ninh, Director of the Feature Film Studio in Hanoi, stated in an interview, "We can't make poor films because we're poor. We have to achieve international standards."

Salaries are low as they are throughout Vietnam. A major star can receive up to the equivalent of US$1,200.00 per picture. Tra Giang, the top female star in Vietnam, leaves work on the back of a friend's bicycle. Staff can but need not belong to the Vietnam Cinematography Association, which reportedly is most active in establishing relations with colleagues in East Bloc countries. The highest officials of the department are reportedly members of the Communist Party, but no pressure is apparently applied to others to join. One prominent director joined only after the current liberalization had begun. All those I have met, however, are fervent Vietnamese nationalists, whatever their criticisms of aspects of the current regime.

The number of theatres in Vietnam has grown from two hundred and forty-two theatres in 1983 to eight hundred halls and twelve hundred open-air venues, serviced by over 2,000 cinematographic units, the majority mobile. Low prices encourage attendance. "70% of the films screened are from abroad, mainly from the Socialist countries."9 For rare screenings of American films, tickets could fetch high prices on the black market. Recently strong competition has begun to be felt from television, especially official and unofficial (now illegal) VCR theatres at which pirated or illegally imported videotapes are often shown.10 The government has had little success in regulating the private and even public circulation and use of videotapes. A recent trend, reported by Neil Gibson, is to show them at small, dimly lit gia khat "refreshment cafes", which cater mainly to young couples.

**Government and Film Makers**

Film making in Vietnam is clearly a government enterprise, but the impact this exercises on the films themselves is variable and not easily defined. Government influence has not had the oppressive and retardative effect found before the recent, pre-crackdown period in the People's Republic of China.11 The major reason for this seems to be that all the directors of the pertinent government agencies are themselves artists. The Vice Minister in charge of culture and the arts is Dr. Nguyen Dinh Quang, theatre director, writer, and professor of drama. The top management of the Vietnam Cinema Department is composed without exception of film makers.

In fact, the film makers at lower levels seem to feel they are being protected by their bosses from possible outside interference. For example, Dang Nhat Minh's *When the Tenth Month Comes* was criticized for the scenes in which the village god appears to the heroine and in which the dead meet the living on the Day of Buddha's Forgiveness. Some government officials felt that he was making propaganda for religion. Minh argued that the scenes were perfectly understandable in the context; "If any woman says she sees her dead husband because of this film, I'll withdraw it."

Dinh Quang, chairman

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of the censorship board, approved the film with the words, "An artistic style that shows the metaphysical side of life is legal in Vietnam." Nevertheless, the scenes remain remarkable as products of a Communist film industry. I have heard that the actors did not believe at the time that the scenes would be allowed to be shown in public. In my discussions with some of the people involved, I felt that the word "metaphysical" was being used as a substitute for "religious" or "spiritual"; that is, an effort was being made by Minh's colleagues to render the scenes ideologically innocuous in order to save them because they were successful and expressive. But the motivation was probably deeper even than the aesthetic. Vietnamese folk religion is an important expression of nationalism, and the Vietnamese remain, whatever ideology they profess, innately religious. The scenes were authentically Vietnamese in content and therefore important for the development of a national cinema.

This quasi-independence of film makers is reinforced by the prestige accorded the arts in Vietnamese culture (many of the major politicians are published poets), by an anti-authoritarian streak in the Vietnamese personality, and by a certain humorous and personal approach. That is, there is concern not about the constitutional question — whether government interference is legal — but about the individual government official in charge of one's department. If he is good, his subordinates feel he is a help rather than a hindrance, even if he in fact possesses the power of interference. As Dang Nhat Minh once said, "Why are Americans worried about government control of our films? For me, who is the government? It's Mr. Thu!" Similarly, when Dinh Quang told me he had just directed a play satirizing Vietnamese society and I asked him whether he had submitted it to the censors, he said, "I was the censor. I was both judge and jury!"

The fact that the Vietnam Cinema Department is controlled by artists explains the aesthetic emphasis in the Vietnamese film industry. Directors are given artistic control of their films. Films are rated for their aesthetic quality on a five-point system that is operated independently of any other criteria. As a result, a director will receive a bonus for high aesthetic achievement even if his film is a financial failure. Moreover, he will receive preferential treatment for his next film. Dang Nhat Minh feels that this policy frees the artist's mind from worries about financial success or popularity. In fact, the aesthetic emphasis of the department seems to be shared by the audience; films that are highly rated aesthetically are often commercial successes as well. The Vice Director of the Vietnam Feature Film Studio in Hanoi, Tran Dań, told me, "We know that our poetic films are not only better, but more popular." The general taste may however be deteriorating with the importation of kung fu thrillers from Hong Kong.

This variable relation between government and artists can be seen in censorship. Descriptions of the procedures used vary, and I suspect that a good deal of informality and personal communication are involved.12 In general, one can say that until recently, scripts and projects had to receive prior approval from a board composed of representatives of the Ministry of Culture (Dinh Quang) and the department. This responsibility has now been given to the department as part of a general government movement to

12I was unable to obtain an exact definition of the credit line Bien Tap "Script Approval", an office of the Ministry of Culture (Neil Gibson, personal communication), or to discover the function of a woman I met who was checking a new print of a film that had already been released (possibly another make-work position).
decentralize itself and confer authority on the responsible parties. Approval to begin production is now given by Deputy General Director Bui Dinh Hac and the director of the studio involved. A final check is made and final approval given before sound is added; by then, of course, the studio has already made a major investment in the project. If there is a controversy about or objections to a film that has been released, the old board can be reconstituted to examine the question. For instance, after the release of Dang Nhat Minh’s The Young Woman on the Perfumed River in 1987, objections were raised to its sex scenes and to the fact that the foil of the faithless Communist official is a South Vietnamese Army veteran who marries the heroine, a former prostitute. Minh compromised by cutting one of the sex scenes, but saved the role of the veteran, which he considered more important. An indication of the department’s new authority was that it successfully supported Minh against certain officials in the Ministry of Culture.

There are obviously limits to what a Vietnamese film maker can do. I was told that no film would be allowed that attacked “the very principle” of the government. But contrary to what one might expect, the very strong criticisms of party officials seen in several films have not been a target of censorship. There is a long tradition of such anti-authoritarian criticism in Vietnamese culture, and no government official apparently wants to be seen as defending the bad characteristics attacked. Moreover, autocriticism is encouraged in socialist societies. As a result, Vietnamese movies can be as scathing about officialdom as any libertarian would require. The outer limits of such criticism were explored by Tran Van Thuy’s Hanoi Through Whose Eyes (1983) and Report on Humanness (1986), described below, which indeed provoked a negative response among government officials. But Nguyen Van Linh, the General Secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party, ordered the films to be released. They did a booming business and became two of the pioneering works of Vietnamese glasnost.13

Vietnamese film makers seem to feel that censorship is just another of the problems that any artist has to face. “No one makes films in a vacuum,” says Dang Nhat Minh. Film makers are given the opportunity to defend their work and argue their points and seem to have sufficient confidence in those making the final decisions. In fact some prefer to deal with a board than with a single studio head. American film makers are themselves limited, they argue, by financial considerations, which are in effect just another form of censorship. “We go before our board of censors,” Minh says. “You go before your board of financiers.” Although Vietnamese film makers could always use more freedom and support, they do not feel at this time that the involvement of their government in film making compromises their artistic integrity. Hai Ninh states, “We film makers need freedom and independence. My life is a trip on the road to that purpose.” Neil Gibson reports an ever increasing openness in the last three years.

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13The only film that I was told had been suppressed after completion is Hai Ninh’s Shipwreck Beach of 1984, which was withdrawn after its showing at that year’s national film festival. Reports vary widely on the reasons for this action. Apparently not a factor was the nudity in the film — more than in any other Vietnamese film to date and earlier by three years than Minh’s The Young Woman on the Perfumed River. When the film was first shown, one government official objected to the scene in which the very evil villain describes living in Vietnam as being in a prison; the official called this “a slap in the face of the government”. Others say the film was not released because of its aesthetic failings, a real possibility.
Nguyen Thu

The importance of personal influence in Vietnamese film making is illustrated by the role of the General Director of the department, Nguyen Thu.\textsuperscript{14} Thu brought considerable prestige and authority to his post as well as exceptional energy and decisiveness. He is able to cut through red tape and bring his forces into line to reach his goals — always difficult in as bureaucratic an environment as Vietnam. Moreover, Thu is extremely broad-minded. In my work with him on the Vietnam Cinema Project, I saw time and again how his thinking would expand immediately to the greatest potential of a possible decision.

Thu's subordinates give him the major credit for encouraging high standards and new directions. The director Nguyen Xuan Son told me that there was much resistance in a department meeting to his script for his first film, \textit{The Last Distance Between Us}, because it was "so sad". Thu signed off on the script with the words, "War is sad". Dang Nhat Minh went to Thu's sickbed with his first ideas for \textit{When the Tenth Month Comes} and was greatly encouraged by his enthusiasm for the project. Thu says, "I told him he absolutely \textit{had} to make that film!" Thu encourages a stronger dramatic sense in scripts. \textit{The Last Crime} now ends with a shoot-out between gangsters on a beach, whereas the original script had them being arrested by the police, in fact a more socially uplifting ending. "Can you imagine how flat that would have been?" Thu asked me.

Thu's major emphasis is, however, on the distinctive national character of Vietnamese cinema. "Why make something that exists already? If every artist did the same thing, why do it? I dislike films that borrow from other cinemas, that express unreal people." Authentic Vietnamese cinema arises from a study of society. For instance, the "metaphysical" scenes in \textit{When the Tenth Month Comes} are true to Vietnamese culture and personality. Moreover, that national character should be "in every scene". There are some rules of scene construction common to world artists, but the special Vietnamese art tradition — with its vivid expression of the humanity, philosophy, and feelings of the Vietnamese — should be made visible.

\textit{Education and Influences}

The first Vietnamese film makers "learned on the job, read books and practised their skills by making newsreels and documentaries".\textsuperscript{15} (The foundation of Vietnamese cinema in documentary work will be discussed below.) The Vietnam Cinema School was established in 1959 to train staff in all aspects of production. The school offered a three-year course for directors taught mostly by East Bloc artists such as Ajdai Ibraghimov, an Azerbaijancian from the Soviet Union (East Bloc artists have periodically

\textsuperscript{14}Born in Hanoi in 1934, Nguyen Thu started work as a camera-man in 1952, contributing footage to more than ten documentaries, including the first version of \textit{Dien Bien Phu} (1954). While working on that film, Thu lost a leg while moving in a mine field to get a better camera angle. From 1960 to 1964, he studied at the Faculty of Feature Films Direction of the All-Union-States Institute of Cinema in the USSR. After further work as a scriptwriter and director, he became in 1978 the Deputy General Director of the Vietnam Cinema Department and Director of the Feature Films Studio in Hanoi. In 1984, he became the General Director of the department and a member of the National Assembly (and member of the Culture and Education Commission of the VIIth and VIIIth Legislatures of the Assembly).

\textsuperscript{15}Diem, "30 Years": 21.
provided training and lectures in Vietnam). In the first graduating class of 1962 were the directors Tran Vu — whose excellent student work *The Golden Bird* is considered an early classic, Hai Ninh — now director of the Feature Film Studio in Hanoi, and Bach Diep, the most important woman director. In 1980, the cinematographic section of the school was joined to the School of Dramatic Art to form the Hanoi College of Dramatic Art and Cinema at the University of Hanoi. The school is well respected and is given much of the credit for the good work done by its graduates. Many artists and staff members have studied in East Bloc countries and China, and a few have studied in France. A further source of training has been collaboration with East Bloc film makers, notably with Roman Karmen on his documentary on Dien Bien Phu.

Nguyen Thu is actively seeking collaborative projects — either co-productions or the provision of services and facilities to foreign companies — which would provide further opportunities for training. Secofilm, “Service and Cooperation Film Company”, has been established under the direction of Luu Xuan Thu, former director of the Central Studios of Documentary and Scientific Films, to coordinate this enterprise (seco means “will have” so the name is an expression of hope). Three French films are currently in production, including a high budget film coordinated by the great director Pierre Schoendoerffer on the battle of Dien Bien Phu. A multinational production was in progress, and a British one is being planned.

Exposure to world cinema is uneven. Diem reports that by 1959 “hundreds of classical and modern films” were available from Socialist countries as well as “a few progressive films from capitalist”. Eisenstein is much admired as are such later Russian films as *The Cranes Are Flying*. Vietnamese in Europe have had the opportunity to view a wider range of films, and the French embassy in Hanoi has occasionally made available modern French productions. There seems to be some acquaintance with classic American films, such as *Citizen Kane* and Chaplin’s work. Francis Ford Coppola presented the department with a 35mm. copy of *Apocalypse Now*, which has been viewed by many. *Platoon* has been shown in video theatres and is generally appreciated. Many Vietnamese find *Coming Home* similar to Vietnamese films in its concentration on the effects of war, rather than on the war itself. *Rambo*, shown privately on video, is considered ridiculous. Dang Nhat Minh stated, “you can look at all the films in Vietnam, and you'll never see a ‘Rambo’. Jamais. Jamais.” Film makers would welcome more exposure to American films, a possibility now limited by the U.S. trade embargo on Vietnam. Among the now available videocassettes, *kung fu* and American adventure films seem particularly popular.

Some influence of foreign films can be noticed. Hai Ninh’s large facial closeups shot
from down up, as in *The 17th Parallel — Day and Night*, may derive from Eisenstein and his successors. Sections of *The Abandoned Field* reminded some American viewers of Russian films of the 1930s. Large masses of peasants charging up smoke-filled hills seem similarly inspired. A curiosity is the scene of this type in *When the Tenth Month Comes*, which represents the heroine’s unrealistic, media-influenced imagining of battle. An anonymous reader of this article suggested the existence of Chinese influence in the 1960s, but I did not see or hear of such. I would see influence from French films — particularly those of the 1950s — in the common 90-minute length (films tend to be longer in other Asian nations), the international style of narration, and the expressive black-and-white photography. Dang Nhat Minh writes that Alain Resnais made “the deepest impression” on him as a youth.21

The better Vietnamese films could not, however, be described as derivative. I found that directors consistently took an informed and critical stance toward non-Vietnamese films. Hai Ninh was asked by a Russian director if he had based the demonstration scene in *First Love on Strike*. Hai Ninh replied that he had not seen that particular film. Similarly, an Algerian asked Ninh whether he had graduated from a U.S. school. Ninh expressed his position very clearly: he does not take a xenophobic stance but adapts good elements from East and West; foreigners can, of course, recognize influences.

Vietnamese self-assurance in the face of foreign influences is in fact characteristic of the culture, a result of millennia of contact with both larger and smaller nations. Their solid appreciation of their own culture enables them to enjoy unproblematically their wide interests — both scholarly and creative — in others. Despite all their conflicts with China and France, the Vietnamese continue to feel a deep cultural sympathy with both and learn from them without losing their identity.

**Documentary and Scientific Films**

Documentaries are unusually important in Vietnamese cinema history and current practice. The decision to create a government film agency was based on the perceived need to record the momentous events of the war of independence, and the production of war documentaries has continued up to today.22 In sheer numbers, more documentaries are produced in Vietnam than any other type of film. Moreover, most of the directors of feature films — notably Pham Ky Nam, Hai Ninh, Hong Sen, and Dang Nhat Minh — began their careers in documentaries, and that work exercises a continuing influence.23 For instance, Hai Ninh made *City at Dawn*, the first department

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22For the history of the Central Studios of Documentary and Scientific Films, Hanoi, see Diem, “30 Years”: 34 ff. In 1985 Luu Xuan Thu was appointed director of the studio. Born in 1932, he began his career as an actor and became a famous cinematographer for both documentaries and feature films. He is still active as a director of documentaries. He has recently been appointed director of Secofilm, described above.
23Dang Nhat Minh, “So That Different Peoples May Come Together”, in *The East-West Center Presents the Hawaii International Film Festival, November 27–December 3, 1988* (Honolulu: The East-West Center, 1988): 40–43. Hong Sen began as a army camera-man and turned to features only after the war, using his experiences as a basis for *The Abandoned Field*. The development of feature films from documentaries parallels the earlier one of prose novels from journalism. In Vietnamese literature, prose was used mostly for government reports and short folk tales, while “novels” were in verse. Twentieth-century journalism influenced the creation of modern Vietnamese language and new genres, especially the prose novel, which could be romantic, but was more often realistic; e.g., Nguyen Khac Vien and Huu Ngoc, *Anthologie de la Littérature Vietnamienne*, Volume 3, *Deuxième Moitié du XIXe Siècle – 1945* (Hanoi: Éditions en Langues Etrangères), pp. 54 ff, 369.
documentary on Saigon in 1975, and immediately afterwards began his feature First Love, using some of the same locales and subjects: prostitutes, drug addicts, and night life. The romantic feature When the Birds Return follows two documentaries, including Dong Ho Painting Village, on the area in which the story is located. Indeed in many early features, such as Tran Vu's We Will Meet Again, the documentary-type sections are much more assured than the dramatic.

Documentaries are not considered merely informative, but are recognized as essential products of the general aesthetic quest of Vietnamese film makers. For instance, Diem writes: "The poetic touch in the national character was presented in every film even in the midst of the fighting"; The Electric Line to the Song Da Construction Site "was essentially a cinema poem, short, concise...."24 Completely without dialogue or commentary, the film is a beautifully photographed and involving one-reel documentary on the construction of an electric line by workers using mostly low-tech means. The contrast between their tools and methods and their results reveals much about development in third-world countries.25 Similarly carried by its beautiful photography is 1/50th of a Second in a Lifetime, a one-reel documentary on Vo An Ninh, Vietnam's most famous photographer. Other aspects of documentary making can be equally aesthetic. Nguyen Ai Quoc - Ho Chi Minh is a masterful, if hagiographic, narrative of Ho Chi Minh's life up to 1945, in which archival materials, photographs, interviews, and modern footage of the sites discussed are expertly integrated by one of Vietnam's major directors, Pham Ky Nam.26

The aesthetic interest of the Vietnamese documentary makers is evident in their numerous films on specifically artistic subjects. Particularly successful are those on traditional Vietnamese music. Two famous examples have been filmed of cheo village opera, an art form predating the tenth century: The Goddess Quan Am and Luu Binh and Duong Le. Cheo opera is extremely popular in North Vietnam among all sections of society - and of great interest to Western scholars, who have not yet been able to study it adequately. Filmed in colour with rather poor sound, the film communicates with appreciation and enthusiasm the excitement of the form: striking costumes, lively music, vivid characterization, and much humour and action. Love Duets of Bac Ninh, 1987, is about a traditional village song festival, the setting for the 1974 feature film We Will Meet Again. Young people, divided into male and female choirs, serenade

24Diem, "30 Years": 15 ff.
25Arriving at the Steps of the Bridge, on a Vietnamese-Soviet construction project, is influenced by Electric Line, but less successful. A number of documentaries are undoubtedly bland, if informative on the many interesting aspects of Vietnamese culture - such as Lacquer Painting, The Secret of the Statue of the Dau Pagoda, and The Conical Hat. A number of other works can be categorized as "newsreel documentaries", often with a heavy ideological slant. Ho Chi Minh City, May 1978 describes the city three years after the 1975 takeover, reporting on the efforts at social reform. The Class for Compassion's Sake describes efforts to care for disabled or homeless children in the city. The Day of Return (Ngay Ve), the first documentary to be made in Kampuchea after the invasion by the Vietnamese, combines moving interviews with Kampuchean displaced persons and victims of the Pol Pot regime with unfortunate footage of a staged victory parade and rally. I have described a number of documentaries in John Charlott's "Fairy Tale for 17-Year Olds", "Vietnamese Documentary Films", in The 1987 Hawaii International Film Festival, November 29-December 5, 1987 (Honolulu: The East-West Center, 1987), pp. 65 ff, 67-70.
26I have not seen the sequel, which carries the biography beyond 1945, but have been told it is equally successful.
each other with traditional songs, which often allude to places and events in the neighbourhood. The documentary provides a good deal of background information on the customs of the festival and on the songs, which are performed at the very sites mentioned. The viewer is thus able to appreciate the social, historical, and artistic dimensions of this extraordinary music.

The effort to place a subject in its historical, social, and also ideological setting is characteristic of Vietnamese documentaries and scientific films. For instance, The Red Cochineal describes the natural environment of the insect, its varied industrial uses along with their economics, and also the ethnic minorities that live in the area and exploit this resource. Similarly, The Forest of Cuc Phuong describes, along with the flora, fauna, and ethnic minorities, the archaeology and history of the forest, efforts to preserve it, and the possible uses of some of the plants. This concern to establish a context for a subject is especially evident in documentaries on historical subjects. Most often, as in Independence Day 1945, historical footage is supplemented by foreign materials, photographs, interviews, and so on, in order to place the object of discussion.

This method can be illustrated by a sequence of films on the 1972 Christmas bombings of Hanoi and Haiphong. The earliest, The Evil and the Punishment, was being shown in Europe two weeks after the event and consists of almost raw footage of bombs and anti-aircraft shells exploding, planes falling in flames, American flyers being brought in through the darkness by soldiers and civilians, people being rescued from the rubble, foreign observers taking photographs, and so on. The horror of the event is communicated very directly. The later films on the same subject, Hanoi, an Epic Poem (produced by the Vietnam People’s Army Film Studio) and Unforgotten Days and Nights, enlarge the focus: they are portraits of the fullness of life of the city at that moment in its history. The historical background is given, various sectors of the city’s population are shown (including foreign visitors), the operations of the anti-aircraft units are described, the attack is narrated from its beginning to its results, and the foreign reaction is emphasized. Aesthetic devices are used, such as symbolism: shots of dead flowers are juxtaposed with those of dead people. As in many Vietnamese documentaries on the war, the point is emphasized that life must go on — every effort is made to continue the normalcy of living. Young students play classical music; babies are born during the bombing that has killed other babies; newspapers and books continue being published underground. Similarly, the work of reconstruction begins immediately as bulldozers start clearing the rubble.27

Some of the immediacy of the battle footage can be lost in this later contextualization. In fact, Vietnamese film makers generally prefer the shorter 1954 documentary Dien Bien Phu to the longer version made in 1964, Victory at Dien Bien Phu, as “closer

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27An interesting aspect of this effort at completeness is the attention paid in war documentaries to all those involved in the war effort, especially those whose work is usually unnoticed. For instance, Battleground along the Route describes the activities of those charged with keeping the supply routes open, from the dangerous work — such as exploding anti-personnel mines — to the ordinary but necessary, like tending gardens. The film can be compared to the French 1952 documentary Avec la Rafale (directed by Koval) about armoured trains. Keeping the routes open is a subject of segments of other French documentaries of the time. The possible influence on Vietnamese cinema of documentaries made by the French army on the Indochina war should be explored.
to the facts”. Nevertheless, the war documentaries considered most successful — such as *On the Crest of the Waves*, *Facing the Storm* and *The Citadel Vinh Linh* — are those that show the community as a whole simultaneously confronting the crisis of the war and making every effort to continue its functions.

This long background in documentaries explains perhaps why two of the most imaginative and daring modern Vietnamese films are in that genre. *Hanoi Through Whose Eyes* by Tran Van Thuy is in fact an editorial in the guise of a travelogue of Hanoi — the city that symbolizes more than any other the national identity. Thuy shows how people are forgetting the history of Hanoi because of their preoccupation with modern creature comforts. He uses his visits to the royal tombs to quote the sayings of kings and nobles about the necessity of treating the people well, thus admonishing the current revolutionary government in a particularly galling but unassailable way. *Report on Humaneness* is even more unusual. Members of the Documentary and Scientific Film Studio meet at a friend and colleague’s grave on the anniversary of his death. The film cuts back to his burial at the site. It cuts back again to the friend on his death bed, ordering them to make this film: “If you don’t, I’ll come back to take you with me.” Emboldened they set out into their contemporary society to ask the question, “What is humaneness?” Their fellow citizens are only too eager to provide answers. Thuy’s two films are among the most important pieces of evidence of the new openness of Vietnamese society, an openness being pioneered by Vietnamese film makers. In view of the place of documentaries in Vietnamese cinema history, it is characteristic that the way would be led by a documentary maker.

*Characteristics of Vietnamese Cinema*

I have already mentioned several characteristics of Vietnamese cinema, and a more extended discussion would be useful before examining feature films. This section should, however, be read in conjunction with the following one, in which the films I mention are placed in their historical context.

Vietnamese film makers and historians are frank about the propaganda purpose of many of their early works and blame it for the shortcomings of their results: “the formalist and simplistic manner”; “Routine, formalism, lengthy commentary and monotonous imagery...” When a bricklayer in *Report on Humaneness* asks the film crew why they make such boring documentaries, footage of heroic, happy peasants working on a community project is cut in. Hai Ninh stated:

> During the war, we concentrated on war films. Now we have turned to other subjects, comedy, sport, and so on. Recently our government and party recognized that the role of culture and cinema is very important, that they contribute to the building of the country as other fields do. So the most important task of films now is to express the humanity of man in society. Our newest films concentrate on humanity and moral character.

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28 *Return to Dien Bien Phu — The Hope* is the record of an anniversary celebration of the battle, which shows the current state of the site. The hope for peace is personified by the ethnic people of the region, who have suffered for centuries from living in such a border and battle zone. They can now enjoy peace and unity with their neighbours, as symbolized in their circular dance of welcome into which the visitors are drawn.

This echoes the remarks of many Vietnamese film makers that their works do not show the war as a subject in itself, but rather its impact on human beings. (On the other hand, scenes that might seem propagandist to Westerners may be perfectly realistic; for instance, the flag waving in the last scene of When the Tenth Month Comes is normal on the first day of school.) Such remarks should not be understood as denying the importance of nationalism in Vietnamese films, as seen from the remarks of Nguyen Thu, reported above. In fact, Diem lists among the three characteristics of Vietnamese feature films – along with film being a “Weapon of revolutionary struggle”, employing “the methods of creation of socialist realism”: “Each film has a national character, reflects the joys and sorrows, concerns and hopes, aspirations and will of the people, and the soul and way of life of the nation.”

The Vietnamese are an extremely nationalistic people, with a patriotism forged through millenia of resisting powerful neighbours. Vietnam is holy ground, and they have a sacred duty to protect it. This relation to the land is emphasized in The Abandoned Field, in which the male protagonist spends a good deal of time contemplating the beauty of the terrain around him, which the camera sees through his eyes – this is the land he is fighting for and these the emotions he brings to the struggle.

In their remarks, Nguyen Thu and Diem place the emphasis on content – as exemplified by the specifically Vietnamese cultural elements in When the Tenth Month Comes and Bom the Bumpkin. Indeed, a full appreciation of Vietnamese cinema is impossible without a close comparison with literature, both ancient and modern. But Vietnamese character is expressed also in certain elements of style.

Poetry is at the centre of Vietnamese culture and sensibilities, and cinema cannot be divorced from it. This poetic sense separates their creations clearly from conventional socialist realism. Poetry and musical lyrics are in fact often central elements in plots and scenes. The heroine of When the Tenth Month Comes breaks down while singing a role in a village opera that mirrors her own situation. The young girl in Fairy Tale for 17-Year Olds reveals her feelings while reciting a poem in class.

Symbols are unusually important in Vietnamese films. Traditional Vietnamese icons are used, such as the woman and her baby who turned to stone waiting for her husband — referred to in such films as City Under the Fist, Fairy Tale for 17-Year Olds, and Legend of a Mother. Film makers regularly create symbols as a means of expression. In Hong Sen’s The Abandoned Field, the liaison family lives in a hut on stilts in the delta. As the water rises, they must raise the level of the floor, leaving them less room between it and the ceiling. At the same time, the Americans are “escalating” the war and closing in on the couple. The helicopters that attack the family are seen from down up, their broad underextensions forming a sort of ceiling that lowers down upon the fleeing targets. (These exceptionally powerful scenes were inspired by the director’s own frightening experiences of helicopter attacks during the war; in filming the scenes, he cooperated closely with a pilot friend of his to create the exact effects he sought.)

Vietnamese tend to understand foreign films in symbolic terms. Dang Nhat Minh was struck by the scene in Peter Markle’s Bat 21, in which a downed American enters a peasant’s hut and takes food. The peasant returns and asks indignantly (unfortunately

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without subtitles), "What are you doing in my house?" In that situation and question, the whole meaning of the war seemed to be symbolized for Minh.

Similarly, quite realistic characters can be understood as exemplary. In war films, the suffering of women is depicted as the most powerful means of presenting that of the people as a whole (in fact, women occupy central roles in all the Vietnamese features I have seen, an indication of their recognized place in culture and society). In several films of the post-war situation, the prostitute is a key case for Vietnamese reconciliation and reconstruction. The problems of the veteran in Brothers and Relations reveal those of the society; as do those of the adolescent in The Lamp in the Dream.

Also poetic is the creation of multiple layers of meaning. For instance, in When the Tenth Month Comes, a woman, wanting to spare her sickly father-in-law, asks a village schoolteacher to write letters as if they came from her dead soldier husband. This complex event is seen in different ways throughout the film. There is the surface appearance: the understanding between the principals. There is misinterpretation: the villagers think the woman is carrying on an affair with the teacher. There is a deeper emotional level at which the teacher is indeed falling in love with her. Their story is placed in the context of the war, and that war in turn is placed in the context of the thousands of years of Vietnamese resistance. Similarly, in Fairy Tale for 17-Year Olds, a girl escapes into fantasies about a young soldier at the front, while her family and friends urge her to face reality. The soldier is killed, but his last letter expresses his gratitude for her love for him, the last beautiful thing in his life, and thus acutely real for him as for her. Multiple levels of meaning can be present in films in surprising and interesting ways. In The Last Distance Between Us, many of the statements and actions of the father have a double meaning because he is an underground agent.

Much Vietnamese poetry is lyric, indeed, love poetry, and this fact encourages the world-wide tendency to include romantic interest in movies. In the most "socialist realist" film I have seen, The River of Aspiration, a rather cursory, but potentially interesting, love interest was included. Eroticism, a major part of the traditional literature, has become the subject of controversy. Generally suppressed in socialist countries, it makes its presence felt under the surface of a number of films and in several — such as, Shipwreck Beach and The Young Woman on the Perfumed River — has become overt and an occasion for debating questions of realism and artistic freedom. Hai Ninh argues that in both films, nudity and sexuality were necessary to describe accurately and dramatically the life of prostitution that provides the impetus for the plots. Interestingly, lyric love poetry, long deemphasized as not socially constructive, is being reintroduced into the curriculum.

Related to this romanticism is the emphasis in Vietnamese films on tenderness. The American director Richard Sykes found the films he saw a combination of "sophistication and gentleness". A "war film" like The Abandoned Field seems to spend an inordinate amount of time showing the young parents playing with their baby and each other. Children play together at length in When Mother Is Away. The mother consoles her son in When Grandmother Is Away, as the young university student does the veteran in Brothers and Relations. The Vietnamese obviously derive a good deal of emotional satisfaction from watching people being nice to each other.

This tenderness is very much part of Vietnamese humour, which tends to teasing and jollity and is a frequent mood in conversation. All the characters of A Quiet Little Town have something to recommend them, no matter how much they can make
us laugh. Moreover, just as romance can become eroticism, Vietnamese humour can assume an almost surrealistic character, as in the butterfly scene in _The 17th Parallel_, discussed below.

Some purely visual aspects of Vietnamese cinema can be related to their long art tradition. Unusually handsome black-and-white camera work is widespread in both documentaries and feature films and argues for a basically aesthetic approach (colour is much less developed artistically). Night scenes can be remarkable, with whites glowing against a black background much as in lacquer work, a Vietnamese specialty. The sinuous lines and atmospheric effects of many outdoor scenes recall ink paintings on silk — as do many of the subjects chosen: the boy on a buffalo in _A Quiet Little Town_ is a motif of both high and folk art.

The very popular Vietnamese dance drama has left its mark on cinema; negatively in some melodrama and stock characters, and positively in an emphasis on body language and graceful and appropriate pacing. Camera movements (except for over-zooming) can be subtle and expressive. Music tends to be Western and overly lush; much more could be done with traditional native instruments.

The danger of the Vietnamese emphasis on emotions is of course that it can encourage overacting, a problem in many older Vietnamese movies and in some newer ones as well. I have in fact watched a director urging an actress to broaden her style (since sound is mixed later, a director can give continual instructions, as in silent movie making); and the People's Artist Tra Giang — a humorous and energetic woman — is too often called upon to mist over her eyes. But the acting in the better Vietnamese movies is remarkably understated and effective, and the emotional climaxes can be powerful. Moreover the acting style seems more Western than the Asian of the stereotype, which is a definite help for an occidental audience.

The cinema language is also generally international. From the earliest film I have seen, _The Golden Bird_, the better Vietnamese directors have been able to use that language in a quiet, subtle, and assured manner, in which all elements are carefully integrated and interrelated. For instance, in _When the Tenth Month Comes_, the heroine leaves the stage when she breaks down; the male opera singer turns to his right toward her to continue singing and is confused when she is not there. In the audience, the school teacher has been watching the opera with his quasi-girlfriend. He leaves to follow the heroine. His girlfriend turns to her right to speak to him and finds he has left. Because of the direction of the camera, the actor and the girlfriend have turned to opposite sides of the screen, creating a lovely visual effect. The sequence has, however, more than a visual interest. The quiet parallelism expresses the film's theme that contemporary experience is a repetition of the past, a later chapter in the long Vietnamese tradition of war and loss.

Similarly, in _The Abandoned Field_, a long shot shows the wife pushing off in the family dug-out to harvest flowers. Almost unnoticed, her husband drops a cloth into the boat as she leaves. Later, when she is attacked by a helicopter, she puts the cloth over her head as camouflage (a practice followed by the guerrillas in other scenes). That is, her having the cloth was a matter of life or death. The point is made very quietly, but it is one of many such that create the mood of the film: the family is living in constant danger and will in fact suffer tragedy. Such reminders render poignant the scenes of normal family life. The effort at maintaining a kind of normalcy despite the
war is, as stated above, a theme of Vietnamese movies. Dang Nhat Minh said that the Vietnam war was different from World War II, in which all normal life was suspended for four to six years. The Vietnam war lasted from 1945 to 1975, and the Vietnamese had to try as much as possible to carry on their lives.

The Western viewer must therefore be aware of specific cultural differences that may be masked by the apparent accessibility of the cinematic language. The husband and wife in *The Abandoned Field* seemed too saintly to some Hawai’i viewers. But the Vietnamese film maker Bui Dinh Hac mentioned in discussion that the wife had to suffer not only through the war but from the “brutality” of her husband; he slapped her once. Hitting someone on the head is in fact a major offence in Vietnam, but the American audience did not realize this. The wife was slapped because through her negligence, their baby had fallen into the water and almost drowned. The Vietnamese audience would consider this also a major failing. The film had, therefore, provided a much rounder characterization of the couple than the American audience perceived.

*Feature Films and Directors*

While visiting Vietnam, I was naturally shown films considered outstanding, so I cannot comment on the general quality of Vietnamese cinema. Nevertheless, levels were easily noticeable, and the weaknesses of middling films permit a more accurate appreciation of the better ones. For instance, *When Mother Is Away* has long scenes of the heroine’s five children disporting themselves, an obvious delight to the Vietnamese audience; these scenes helped me understand that the passages in *The Abandoned Field* of the liaison couple playing with their child were both especially appealing to the local audience and much more controlled than those in the former film.32

A number of films are stagey: the camera remains more or less fixed and the actors move before it, reciting their lines as if in a play. This practice is found especially in older films, such as sections of *We Will Meet Again*, but has continued in such films as *Once Upon a Time in Vu Dai Village* by the historically important director Pham Van Khoa.33 Many Vietnamese films, as ones from other Asian countries, tend to melodrama. *The Peal of the Orange Bell* treats the interesting topic of Agent Orange, but turns it into a collection of antiquated plot turns rendered with a slowness of action unusual in Vietnamese movies. Similarly, *The Last Crime* takes up the interesting theme of the social reintegration of the prostitutes and gangsters prominent in South Vietnamese society, but the heroine’s few facial expressions are all appeals to an easy pity.

The Vietnamese now criticize much of their early work as propagandist. The only such recent feature film I have seen is *The River of Aspiration*, the story of an honest

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32 Anonymous, “Vietnamese Feature Films”: 33. *When Mother Is Away* was a popular success, but was heavily criticized by the army, which protested that it would never let a mother of five children — or even two! — leave them alone to go on a mission. Such a mother would not be asked to serve except in a support capacity, and if she absolutely had to leave, her children would be placed in the care of others. The Vietnam Cinema Department replied that it was taking artistic license to tell a good story.

33 In that film, the director reportedly left his actors largely to their own devices. On Pham Van Khoa, see Dien, “30 Years”: 23, 26, 56, 58; Hoang Quy, “Veteran Film Director Pham Van Khoa: People’s Artist”, *Film Vietnam*, No. 2 (1984): 14 ff; Anonymous, “Vietnamese Feature Films”: 39, 73; on the film, O’Harrow, “Vu Dai”.
manager trying to raise production at an electric plant. The heavy-handed socialist realism and old-fashioned narrative style of the film may be due to its being the department's offering on the occasion of a party congress.

None of the above films is totally without interest. The Last Crime features the fine acting of Tran Quang as a menacing but attractive gangster. The children of When Mother Is Away seem unaware of the camera (Vietnamese films generally use children very well). In The River of Aspiration, a number of scenes are injected with humour; for instance, a workers' representative quotes Marxism to argue against working too hard.

Occasionally, what should be a merely workmanlike production rises to a higher level. When Grandmother Is Away was the directorial debut of Nguyen Anh Thai and intended as a low-budget film for children. The story is a clear temptation to sentimentality: tension in the family leads a grandmother to leave the apartment and make her living in the streets; her grandson, suffering greatly from her absence, tries to find her. The film is carried off without a trace of sentimentality, but with a good deal of realistic emotion. Modern family problems are described very frankly — an important theme in this very family-centred society — as are those of the urban poor in Hai-phong. The ending is not the grandmother's return, but the boy's accident as he catches a glimpse of her and jumps out of a bus window into the street. In the hospital he has a dream that leaves everything beautifully unresolved. When Grandmother Is Away is a small and unexpected masterpiece.

An unevenness can be found in the work of certain directors, such as that of the prolific, pioneering Tran Vu. His graduation project, The Golden Bird (1962), a short fiction film, is a masterful exercise in international cinema language expressing Vietnamese content. The narration is well-paced and concise; the photography is poetic and expressive; a wide but not showy array of camera angles, movements, and techniques is used; the acting is expressive and unstrained; the background music enhances the mood without distracting from it; and the emotional effects are realized. Details are used well throughout; the fact that the Frenchman and his Vietnamese underlings are not the peasants they are disguised to be is seen from the fact that they roll their cigarettes with paper instead of leaves. One putative peasant looks very funny with his dark glasses; another with the whiteness of his legs when he rolls up his pants. The story is told more in such images than in words. The Golden Bird is the creation of an artist educated and at ease in his art form. Apart from its expert documentary passages and a few good dramatic scenes, Tran Vu's later We Will Meet Again (1972) is a step backward. The camera is fixed before a room in which the melodramatic villain stomps and expostulates. A clump of embarrassed peasants trots along a marked path waving rakes and hoes, supposedly in insurrection. However, in his last film, Brothers and Relations (1986), Tran Vu recovers his earlier form. The story of a veteran returning to Hanoi to find an indifferent society is told with an economy and understatement that express only more effectively the strong personalities, emotions, and philosophical differences involved. Each scene is interesting in itself and contributes unfailingly to the whole. Brothers and Relations achieves a quiet perfection in its genre.

34Diem, "30 Years": 23, 24, 26, 55, 57 ff; Anonymous, "Vietnamese Feature Films": 11, 19, 31; Charlot, "Vietnam, The Strangers Meet": 47 ff.
Similarly uneven, but on a lower level, is the work of best known woman director, Bach Diep. Apart from its heavy over-use of the zoom lens, *Punishment* (1984) is an interesting character study of a South Vietnamese Army officer during the chaos of the 1975 fall of Hue. Despite some extraneous material, the basic story of his demoralization, his escape from society and the consequences of his action, and his final decision to return, is told clearly in terms of his relation to his family and fellow soldiers and to the North Vietnamese officers. The destruction of his career and family is a reflection or symptom of that of the South Vietnamese army and society, preparatory to its reconstruction on another basis. Unusually for Vietnamese films, the narration does not move sequentially in time, but — perhaps influenced by Dang Nhat Minh’s *City Under the Fist* — plays with chronology to reveal itself gradually. There are a number of nice touches: a young North Vietnamese soldier does a little imitation of a macho SVA officer to amuse a little boy. Bach Diep’s later *Legend of a Mother* (1987) is a retrogression to staginess and melodrama. This is particularly regrettable because the interesting story of a woman who adopted children during the war and returned them afterwards to their families did inspire some good scenes of Vietnamese women interacting among themselves and taking care of the very physical needs of infants. But the villainous men are ludicrously broad (one pours knockout powder into the whiskey he offers his secretary), and a dream sequence is crude enough to be funny. The two films are distant enough in style to make them unrecognizable as the work of a single director. Neil Gibson reports that Bach Diep’s latest film, *A Small Alley*, an examination of the personal consequences of poverty in contemporary Vietnam, is stylistically much more accomplished.

The director Hai Ninh has long been a pillar of Vietnamese cinema, entrusted with some of its major projects and now Director of the Feature Film Studio in Hanoi. He completed a number of productions during the war under difficult conditions. The bombings of Hanoi played havoc with the work on the sound track for *The 17th Parallel — Day and Night*, but gave him the idea for his film *The Girl of Hanoi*. His work illustrates some of the strengths and weaknesses of the industry. Hai Ninh has the Vietnamese capacity for self-criticism. He finds his early films often too slow, the movements and action too long. The propaganda content seems very high to him now, which makes them seem old-fashioned especially to the younger Vietnamese audience. “Nobody wants to listen to propaganda now,” one young person told me. Even Ninh’s latest film, *Shipwreck Beach*, is an argument in favour of the Vietnamese position on the boat people: they were deluded with false promises by criminals.

Hai Ninh’s movies are often melodramatic, with cardboard heroes and villains and devices like the drugging of the heroine’s drink to have sex with her. In *First Love*, an seemingly benevolent American adviser is in fact stealing Vietnamese children to send them as orphans to the U.S. where they will be trained as spies to be slipped later back into Vietnam. Hai Ninh regularly twists realism to make an ideological point. For instance, in *The Girl of Hanoi*, the young heroine climbs into a one-person bomb

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36Diem, “30 Years”: 23 ff, 26, 44, 56, 58 ff; Anonymous, “Vietnamese Feature Films”: 5, 9, 17, 35. During my second visit to Hanoi, Hai Ninh received Geoffrey Gilmore and me graciously at the studio and accorded us four interviews, which I have used in this article.
shelter, a few bombs fall, and she emerges *smiling*. In *First Love*, the scene of a protest demonstration begins well — with an aerial view of the plaza as citizens and police square off in a geometric pattern — but then degenerates as the *students* start shoving the *police* around. The unreality of this is revealed in the next scenes, which show the police chasing people through the city at night. At the end of *The 17th Parallel*, the villain has finally cornered the heroine, but he wants to hear her communist propaganda just one more time before he kills her. She reads a paper so eloquently that the South Vietnamese soldiers revolt, are joined by a crowd of women, and kill the villain.

The plots of Hai Ninh’s films often seem to go in circles rather than spirals. For instance, *The 17th Parallel* comprises two feature-length sections; the second starts off with the same characters in basically the same situation as the first. Even the main villain, whom we thought we saw killed, appears with a large scar on his face. As a result, Hai Ninh’s films often lack a sense of forward momentum.

For all these faults, his work has undeniable good points. He encourages the fine, often sensuous camera work that is characteristic of the best Vietnamese films, both features and documentaries. He can achieve striking images, such as some of the close-ups in *The 17th Parallel* and the almost surrealistic flotsam and jetsam of American artifacts in Saigon. He can narrate some sections through mainly visual means, such as several flashbacks in *First Love* and the heroine’s search for her family in the bombed ruins in *The Girl of Hanoi*. Some scenes are strikingly original, like that of revolutionaries conferring while sitting in round basket boats on a river in *The 17th Parallel*. In the same movie can be found one of the funniest and strangest scenes in all Vietnamese cinema. A South Vietnamese Army troop is receiving a tall, lanky CIA agent and his obligatory Vietnamese mistress. The troop makes a formal path before the agent by lining up double-file facing each other. Suddenly he turns to his right, raises his arms in an odd way and starts pacing away from the reception ceremony in long, slow, spidery steps. The Vietnamese officer at the other end of the line raises his arms and starts moving in the same way toward the American. They continue this strange dance toward each other, gradually sinking lower and lower on their haunches and lowering their arms forward until their slowly waving hands come together on the ground over a butterfly. The CIA officer was just using his cover as a lepidopterist.

One of Hai Ninh’s most interesting achievements is his depiction of Duy, the male protagonist in *First Love*. By no means a cardboard character, he is the subject of an almost existentialist analysis of alienation. When Duy loses his first love, he loses hope and then “life becomes irrational”. He cannot believe in the Americans, but cannot join the resistance. In his aimlessness and thus listlessness, he becomes the perfect victim of the corruption of war-time Saigon, where “life belongs to the prostitutes and the Americans”. Having left his place in society, he turns against it and his family. This theme of the need for a moral, hopeful purpose in life is major in Vietnamese cinema and also in their conception of the war. Hai Ninh’s works are in fact a key to our understanding of many of the themes treated in Vietnamese films, such as that of reconciliation. Hai Ninh can also be recognized as a pioneer in the opening of the

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37 A Vietnamese who lived through the bombings told me that fear and some panic were the normal reactions. In contrast, in Hai Ninh’s *The 17th Parallel*, the children are horrified rather than edified by the burning of an old villager who has worked for the resistance.
industry to new subjects. The nudity and sexuality in *Shipwreck Beach* were unprecedented. In *The Girl of Hanoi*, the child is told the story of the Vietnamese hero’s receiving the magic sword to smite the invaders and has a sort of vision of the event, told through animation; an anticipation of later expressions of the “metaphysical” in life.

In contrast to Hai Ninh’s productivity, Pham Ky Nam is famous for one feature film, *The Young Woman of Sao Beach* (1963), but it is one of the most interesting ever made in Vietnam.\(^{38}\) Despite occasional weak points — some melodrama and sentimentality, some overlong scenes, and soupy music — the film is bursting with originality. The lustrous black-and-white camera work is unusually expressive even for Vietnamese cinema, with interesting angles, camera movements, and lighting. In one night scene, a baby is being born while a battle is sounding outside; inside the room, the lone ceiling lamp is set swinging, causing a variety of light effects. Scenes of actual combat — rare in Vietnamese films — are handled expertly. The complicated and interesting narrative is told in very bold scenes. In one plot line, the heroine meets a South Vietnamese officer she once knew. He tries to rape her, but is interrupted by a French officer who enters the hut, sees the heroine’s anguished face, and — saying, “What a beautiful expression!” — photographs it. He then shoos the South Vietnamese out the door and rapes the heroine himself. The scenes of her post-trauma suffering, her husband’s reactions, and the effect the rape has on their relation to each other are described with unusual fullness. In a final, long, silent scene, the two reach a qualified understanding. The husband is soon killed in battle. Later in the movie, Viet Minh commandos attack the French officer. He has returned to his room, put a record on the machine, and is settling back to relax. They burst in, and the violent — and most interestingly photographed — struggle is carried on to *le jazz hot.*\(^{39}\) Created so early in Vietnamese film history, *The Young Woman of Sao Beach* must have had a very positive effect on its future development. Even today, an artist like Dang Nhat Minh can look back to it for inspiration and even validation.

Hong Sen is recognized as having produced the modern breakthrough film for Vietnamese cinema, *The Abandoned Field — Free Fire Zone.*\(^{40}\) Hong Sen’s other works are considered less successful. *Left Alone*, which I have not seen, has an original subject: a downed American flyer is offered refuge by a woman from an ethnic minority. The film’s exoticism has attracted foreign viewers, but the Vietnamese found it less interesting, and aesthetic objections were raised by other film artists. According to Neil Gibson, the climactic scene of the woman breastfeeding the American was judged to need re-shooting and the film has never been released generally in Vietnam. Hong Sen is now finishing a new production.

The greatest talent of the next generation of Vietnamese film makers is Dang Nhat

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\(^{39}\) Earlier, the officer has been shown looking at the photograph he took of the heroine while he listens to some piano playing. When the husband attacked the South Vietnamese officer, a needle stuck in the groove of the record being played. Curiously, a French army documentary of 1952, *Aviation de Chasse en Indochine* (directed by Kowal), uses jazzy piano playing as background music to a scene of the fighter plane approaching and attacking the target.

Minh, whose *When the Tenth Month Comes* is worthy to rank as a classic of world cinema.\(^{41}\) I have discussed that film elsewhere and will concentrate here on the films produced immediately before and after that work. *City Under the Fist* is the most experimental feature film made in Vietnam. Going much further than earlier flashback techniques used by Pham Ky Nam and others, the complicated story is told through a chronological kaleidoscope, the narrative jumping between at least four different periods through visual and thematic connections. Interjected are imaginary scenes expressing the protagonist’s fears or speculation as to what might have happened. All this complication has a definite expressive purpose: the film is describing the protagonist’s almost feverish rethinking process stimulated by an historic event; he is being forced to reshape his views of history, society, and his own past actions. Moreover, that event had provoked the same thought process in the government and the society as a whole; so the mental effort of the audience to follow the narrative is a personal recreation of their own experience as well as that of the protagonist and a reliving of the historical moment described.

The protagonist’s story is embedded in that historical event or — perhaps more accurately — in the now generally accepted interpretation of that event, which I will need to describe in detail. After 1975, the North Vietnamese went through a period of ideological enthusiasm. The government decided that, with the end of the war, they could move rapidly to restructure society in a scientific, socialist form. To do this, they banned folk practices, such as the song festival of Bac Ninh, and made efforts to purge untrustworthy people. In the general atmosphere of suspicion and repression, an individual could be judged not only on his or her own actions but on those of relatives as well (the correction of this bad practice continues today). The atmosphere of recrimination caused a good deal of unhappiness and unrest in the country.

This ideological movement was a product of the conservative wing of the Vietnamese communist party, which is generally identified with the high party official Truong Chinh. Truong Chinh was in turn identified with the faction of the party that leaned

\(^{41}\) Anonymous, “Vietnamese Feature Films”: 51, 61; John Charlot, *When the Tenth Month Comes...*, in *The Hawaii International Film Festival, November 26–December 8, 1985* (Honolulu: The East-West Center, 1985), p. 48; “Vietnam, The Strangers Meet”: 46 ff; Minh, “Phim Vietnam”, “In the Realm”, which contains an autobiography and filmography, which should be compared with the following information from different sources. Dang Nhat Minh’s documentaries (director and script writer) include *On the Trails of Geologists [Theo Chan Nguo Dia Chat]*, 1968; *Ha Bac — My Native Land [Ha Bac — Que Huong]*, 1969; *The Faces of May [Thang 5 Nuong Quong Mai]*, 1975; *Nguyen Trai — Great Vietnamese Poet of the 18th Century [Nguyen Trai]*, 1980; *Hanoi — City of Flying Dragons [Hanoi — Thanh Pho Rong Bay]* (video), 1986. Feature Films: *Nhung, a Young Woman of Saigon [Chi Nhung]*, 1970; *Stars on the Sea [Nhung Ngoi Sao Bien]*, 1973; *A Rainy Day at the End of the Year [Ngay Mua Cuoi Nam]*, 1978; *City Under the Fist [Thi Xa Trong Tan Tay]*, 1982; *When the Tenth Month Comes [Bao Gio Cho Den Thang 10]*, 1984; *The Young Woman on the Perfumed River [Co Gai Tren Song]*, 1987; [the following item is from Minh’s 1990 filmography] *A Man Alone [Chi Mot Nuoi Con Song]* (video), 1989. On the three before the last item, Minh was scriptwriter as well as director; I have no further information on *A Man Alone*.

Minh was born in 1938 in Hanoi, the son of a prominent doctor. He studied at the lycée at Hue and, when his parents joined the resistance, in the forests of Tuyen Quang Province, graduating in 1954. He studied later at the Institute of Russian Language and Literature, Moscow, graduating in 1959. He worked as a Russian translator at the Vietnam Cinema Department until he was asked to direct a documentary. He received six months training in Bulgaria in 1976 and eight months in Paris in 1985. He has published award-winning short stories and film criticism. He was elected General Secretary of the Vietnam Cinematography Association in 1989.
towards the Chinese as opposed to the Russians. Further complicating factors were the deteriorating relations with the People's Republic of China and tensions within Vietnam between the ethnic Vietnamese and the ethnic Chinese minority, many of whom had to leave the country as boat people. The final shock came with the Chinese invasion across the northern border "to teach the Vietnamese a lesson". A connection was made between the invasion, the local Chinese considered disloyal or at least divided in their loyalties, and the earlier repressive atmosphere, now blamed on Chinese influence. Interestingly, a very similar sequence of events had occurred after the defeat of the French. In 1955–56, the Vietnamese began an ideological land reform so severe that it provoked a peasant revolt that was savagely repressed. The government later issued an apology and blamed Truong Chinh and Chinese advisers.  

Some historians, including Vietnamese, disagree with the above interpretation of events. My only concern here is how it is used in City Under the Fist. Told sequentially, the story is about a young man who abandons his fiancée because her family has come under suspicion and he does not want to jeopardise his career in journalism. The suspicion has been cast on the family by a local Chinese who is actually a spy and tries to recruit the protagonist to Maoism. At the invasion, the journalist is sent north to inspect the ruins of a town destroyed by the Chinese, the town in which he used to visit his fiancée. There he rethinks his past and confronts the external and internal negative influence of Chinese-style ideology. He realizes that out of fear and ambition, he has acted in a way that is unworthy of a human being. His suspected fiancée is now married to a heroic Vietnamese army officer. Told cinematically, the story is a marvel of visual poetry, photographed with a peculiar texture and following the leaps of the protagonist's mind as he works his way with anguish towards a new way of thinking. The director writes, "The film is an act of repentance for many Vietnamese who for a long time allowed a simplistic ideological orthodoxy to destroy their feelings."  

Similarly, a scholar from China stated in 1987, "After the excesses of the Cultural Revolution, we don't ask so much about the ideology of an idea or a policy, but whether it's human or inhuman."

This search for the authentically human is a characteristic of Vietnamese cinema today and a theme of Minh's latest film, The Young Woman on the Perfumed River, based on a true story: a prostitute helped a revolutionary who then tried to ignore her after the country was reunited and he was appointed to a government post. The film was controversial because of its sex scenes and its contrast of the official to a faithful South Vietnamese Army veteran. The social criticism of the film is sharp, for instance, about the suppression of journal articles by government officials. One journalist decides to quit because she doesn't want to continue writing the "phoney" articles her editors demand. The film is thus important evidence of Vietnamese glasnost. The use of a prostitute as personifying the problems of reconciliation and social reconstruction in the country is found in a number of movies and will be discussed below. The film is Dang Nhat Minh's first in colour, and he clearly enjoyed some of the effects he was able to produce. His creative use of symbolism is also evident, for instance, in the shot of the prostitute's tiny boat being towed away by a large armoured military river vessel. The film does not, however, have the artistic unity so characteristic of Minh's two

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earlier films. Visually, it is divided between the lush, moody, romantic photography of the first third — the life of the prostitute on the river — and the very flat, at times overlit photography of the later sections. Similarly, in his narration, Minh seems to waver between a reportorial style and a romantic, pictorial one. The acting of the two principals tends to the melodramatic and sentimental, and some of the background music is clumsy. Minh seems to have been stretching his work in new directions in this film, directions that will undoubtedly find a more skilful expression in later works.

Dang Nhat Minh’s contemporary, Nguyen Xuan Son made his debut with the remarkable feature film, *The Last Distance Between Us* (1981). The title refers to the need for reconciliation between former enemies in the North and South. In a 1988 interview, Xuan Son told me, “The greatest distance is that between people. In my film, I wanted to say that we had to settle the distance between former Saigon soldiers and ourselves. That distance is very large.” The story describes the life of a low-level, undercover resistance worker living among his neighbours in the South: an older, alcoholic veteran of the South Vietnamese army and the widow of a veteran. As they live together, they become ever closer and more sympathetic to each other. The life of the revolutionary is told in a very practical, undramatic way. He has small jobs but big worries. He is torn between his duties as an agent and as an only parent to his young daughter. When his comrades suspect the veteran of informing on him, he says he will vouch for him, because he feels sorry that the veteran’s life seems so futile. When he feels the police closing in, he hints to the widow that she might have to take care of his child. The arrest scene is masterfully understated, one of the best pieces of editing I have ever seen. The revolutionary looks a second longer than usual at the widow as he goes out the door. The people become so real, so ordinary, that the brief scene of the widow being tortured by the police is shocking.

A strong point of the film is the casting — the actors seem to be living their roles rather than playing them. The father’s role is filled by a very ordinary-looking Saigon stage actor. For the veteran, Xuan Son chose a former Saigon documentary maker who had studied in Japan. “I could see vividly the feelings I wanted existing in his soul. When I asked him to play the role, he was surprised and suggested I look at his films. But I told him, ‘I don’t want your films. I want you.’” The camera work is as quiet but careful as the other aspects of the movie. The effects seem more beautiful because they call no attention to themselves. Few films are so convincing.

Son’s later film, *Fairy Tale for 17-Year Olds*, is quite different. Perhaps under the influence of *When the Tenth Month Comes*, it emphasizes overtly poetic camera work to express the romantic fantasies of a young girl. Despite its strong points, which I have described in an earlier article, it does not always achieve a unity between its depiction of different dimensions of reality and suffers from some overacting. Xuan Son seemed to be stretching his art in new directions in the film and was remarkably successful in passages.

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44Nguyen Xuan Son was born in 1938 and studied directing at the Vietnam Cinema School from 1965 to 1968, where he then worked there as a lecturer until 1972. From 1972 to 1979, he studied feature film direction at the All-Union-States Institute of Cinema in Moscow. Besides the two films discussed, Nguyen Xuan Son has directed *A Blunder*, 1983; *Looking for the Land*, 1984; and *The River Mouth* (documentary), 1985. Anonymous, “Vietnamese Feature Films”: 69.

The older directors of the Vietnam Cinema Department are very proud of their younger colleagues and give them a good deal of encouragement and, more important, the opportunity to work. Since the reduction of production money, however, one case of a senior director using his position to obtain preference has been reported.

A most impressive young director is Le Duc Tien, whose second film, A Quiet Little Town, is a very original comedy. With an unusually deft and witty script, the movie satirizes officious party functionaries, the bureaucratization of life, and small-town pretensions, provincialisms, and ambitions. A curious plot twist at the end permits the audience to test itself on its own class prejudices or “feudalism”, as it is called in Vietnamese Marxist terms. The movie, however, goes beyond the normal expectations of the genre. It creates a very accurate and affectionate — though unromanticized — picture of a small, provincial town. An unusually large number and variety of characters are portrayed with seeming effortlessness, and in the end, each retains his sympathy and dignity. The very funny jokes are separated by quiet actions and views, so that the mood is tempered into a gentle, almost elegiac vision. The narrative is framed and punctuated by a boy riding a water buffalo, a common view in the countryside, a motif in folk art, and a happy childhood memory of many. The director seems to be evoking the roots of the culture as a criticism of and a refuge from many of the problems of contemporary society.

Le Duc Tien’s next movie, Bom the Bumpkin, is the first to base itself on folk stories, songs, jokes, and motifs, much as Dang Nhat Minh’s When the Tenth Month Comes based itself on the poetic tradition. The film is the product of a conscious effort to develop a distinctive, national cinema and reveals the affection contemporary Vietnamese feel for their cultural past and the inspiration they draw from it. The national content includes the self-portrait of the Vietnamese. Hai Ninh states,

In Bom, we are making fun of ourselves. We are using irony and humour about our own character. We are more frank and open now about our good and bad sides.

The film makers wanted to show people how they should live in this society.

The film is also a big-budget historical pageant, filmed in colour, and using classical dance troupes and many of the most successful actors in the industry. The project was, in all likelihood, a film to test the international market. The colourful costumes establish a festive, dreamlike mood, supported by stylized movements and gestures based on folk opera (the camera work is sometimes a little flat for such a film). The clusters of dramatized stories concern Bom’s proverbial stupidity, the credulity that makes him an easy mark (he is sold a flock of wild geese in a field), and the way he misunderstands all the instructions intended to form him into a cultured scholar. These story clusters are framed by fantasy sequences based on a folk song about Bom: he is offered increasingly greater riches by a landlord in trade for his fan, but is too much the poor booby to accept them. By the end of the film, the characters have acquired an endearing reality, and the recurring motif a curious depth.

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46 Le Duc Tien was born in 1949. From 1967 to 1972, he worked as a war reporter for the military studio and from 1975 to 1979 studied film directing at the Soviet University of Cinema. Le Duc Tien’s professors were A. Xtoppi and N. Ozerop. In 1982, he was assistant director on The Case of the Aimless Bullet and in 1983 on The Mistake. In 1985, he directed The Sound of the Peace Bomb. Charlot “Vietnam, The Strangers Meet”: 48 ff.
Do Minh Tuan is the youngest director whose work I have seen. He graduated from the University of Hanoi in philology and then from the Cinema School. The Lamp in the Dream is his debut film. In it, he tells the story of a young teenager, Trung, who is a product and a manifestation of the postwar society of Vietnam. In a private 1988 paper on the film, the director writes, “Fourier[.] said: from women and children we can understand a nation.” For Trung, the war is a childhood memory coloured with celebrations of victory. He is typically Vietnamese, living in poverty, but open to his society and moment in history and easily caught up in his “dream world”. The society he lives in is a troubled one, marked by separations and losses in the war. To these are added modern problems. His parents are long divorced, and his father has disappeared. His stepfather was brutal, and Trung needed to be protected by his older brother. Now Trung is living alone in a room. His mother comes to visit him, but — in an unusual scene for the Vietnamese — he refuses to open the door through which she is entreating him. The boy’s older brother is involved in petty crime (typically stealing bicycles), and their relation has become ambivalent. Trung has worked at a little restaurant, but quits because he has had enough. His job at a lacquer factory comes to an end when his hand is burned in an accident. He is gradually being alienated from his family and society and is suffering the emotional consequences of loneliness and anxiety, which are threatening to deform his character. At one point, he uses his slingshot to break his stepfather’s ceramic pots. He gives himself his own birthday party, putting up a sign, “Birthday Party for Mr. Trung”. He dreams of a happy folk holiday for children and elders. “This is a Society full of paradox, misery, but full of charity,” the director writes. Trung’s teacher — who has felt his sadness in one of his class essays — and schoolmates notice his distress and make efforts to help him. The teacher’s boyfriend tries to befriend the boy. An old calligrapher encourages his interest in art and promises to do a hanging scroll for him with the words “A light that never dies”. “The important thing,” he tells Trung, “is to be moral, to be able to live with yourself.”

But the negative forces in society work against Trung. His older brother’s stealing gets Trung in trouble with the police. The father of the schoolmate who wants to help him objects to her seeing such a disreputable boy. The old calligrapher dies before he can finish the scroll. Trung is progressively thrown back on himself as, one after another, the normal social attachments cannot provide adequate support. But although thrown back on his isolation and suffering, he comes also to his own resources. There is indeed a lamp in the surrounding darkness, a point of light by which he can read; a play on the saying, “When a man reads a book, his eyes are bright for a thousand years”. The film ends with an image of Trung alone, but mounted on a horse, certainly a symbolic, not a realistic image. Placed between the wounding and the supportive forces of society, between temptations to crime and encouragement to morality, Trung is realizing himself as an independent person, responsible for his own journey through life.

The complicated story is told with the utmost delicacy and tact and with compassion for all concerned. Little touches describe the characters perfectly. The girl in Trung’s class takes the lead in helping him because “I’m a monitor.” Her father puts on his army uniform when he has something serious to discuss with the family. The Lamp in the Dream and When Grandmother Is Away, with their respectful and original
analys of the problems of young people, compare favourably with such films as Luis Buñuel’s Los Olvidados and François Truffaut’s The 400 Blows.

Themes of Vietnamese Cinema

The justice of the Vietnamese cause in the wars against the French and the Americans is taken so for granted that no time is spent offering the kinds of reasons for involvement so prominent in American pro-war films like The Green Berets.47 Significantly, such reasons are provided in films on Vietnam’s involvement in Kampuchea, as in the documentary The Day of Return.

Mourning is naturally a major theme in Vietnamese cinema. It is central in When the Tenth Month Comes and Fairy Tale for 17-Year Olds. The framework of The Last Distance Between Us is the return of the grown-up daughter to visit the graves of her parents. Mourning is also an important plot element in other stories; the final section of Brothers and Relations involves the search for the remains of a relative who has fallen in the war. Such films can be compared profitably to American works on the same subject. In fact, after a screening of When the Tenth Month Comes on Kaua’i, an American woman rose to say that she had suffered terribly in the war and that Minh’s film was the only one she had ever seen that expressed what she had undergone. Minh was flabbergasted.

Like all civil wars, the Vietnam conflict left many resentments, and members of groups considered hostile or disloyal — former South Vietnamese government and army personnel, Roman Catholics, ethnic Chinese, and so on — have suffered in varying degrees. Vietnamese cinema, however, has emphasized the need for reconciliation, as seen in The Last Distance Between Us. At the end of Hai Ninh’s documentary, City at Dawn, the voice-over states: “The Vietnamese family is now reunited.” Hai Ninh discussed the problem in an interview:

After liberation, we needed to create the harmony of a single people in a united country. We needed unification of soul as well as of politics. To do this, we have to get down to human nature — charity, generosity — to unify ourselves on the basis of equality.

Reconciliation extends even to American soldiers. They are shown acting humanely in Legend of a Mother, and their portrayal in The Abandoned Field, for all its faults, attempts to give them sympathetic traits: camaraderie and family affection.

A common symbol of this problem of reconciliation is the prostitute, who during the war symbolized the corruption of the South Vietnamese regime and American influence. After the war, many were sent into reeducation camps and then offered menial jobs. Their reception by society was generally non-supportive, and even negative.

47 The Green Berets seems to have exercised an important influence on later films. Its training sessions are echoed in Full Metal Jacket, and the famous “birth” scene in Platoon of soldiers deplaning in Vietnam seems to have been taken directly from the parallel scene in The Green Berets. Dang Nhat Minh viewed a large number of American films on the war while he was Filmmaker-in-Residence at the East-West Center; his diplomatic response when asked to evaluate a film he disliked was, “It’s better than The Green Berets.”

Important and unrecognized has been the influence on American films of Pierre Schoendoerffer’s La 317° Section [Platoon 317] (1965) and The Anderson Platoon (1967). Schoendoerffer is now coordinating a feature film on Dien Bien Phu to be filmed in Vietnam. He was the French army documentary camera-man for that battle and was captured at the fall of the fortress.
as described in *The Last Crime* and *The Young Woman on the Perfumed River*. In Hai Ninh's *Shipwreck Beach*, the conventional boyfriend rejects his fiancée when he discovers her past. Speaking of the film, Hai Ninh says:

There were lots of prostitutes after the war. People didn't want to compromise themselves. But the prostitutes were victims of the war like any other. They had to be helped to normalize their lives. Revolutionaries should have charity for such people, should give them confidence and hope. So stories of prostitutes have a broader reference. On the one hand, they committed mistakes because of the historical and social situation they were in, so they were like others who committed crimes during the war. On the other hand, society can be judged by the way they are helped and reintegrated.

Criticism of society and government is in fact wide-spread in Vietnamese films, ranging from making fun of party zealots who figure as minor characters to films in which criticism is the central theme. Human failings of officials can be targeted — such as vanity and bureaucratic bossiness — but also large social trends and whole government policy directions, albeit past ones, as in *City Under the Fist*. An important basis for criticism seems to be a traditional view of social relations. In *The Last Crime*, the young woman became a prostitute after her mother's divorce. Family tensions — caused by the father's concentration on his government job and desire to get ahead — begin to destroy the family in *When Grandmother Is Away*. Parental problems are the initial cause of the young boy's alienation in *The Lamp in the Dream*. Significantly, the director of that film stated that he was using the boy as a symbol of society. The fact that Vietnamese film makers take children so seriously — *When Grandmother Is Away* was in fact made as a children's film! — may be one reason why they use them so well.

An even deeper theme than social and family relations is a general humanism, an emphasis on being authentically human rather than a deformation from whatever cause; for instance, ideological excess and fear in *City Under the Fist*. The ending of *A Quiet Little Town* shows a young married couple standing on the high point of an arched bridge, while the older functionaries, party officials, doctors, and so on, run in place toward them, unable to rid themselves of their old ideas and attitudes and become simply human. Tran Van Thuy's *Report on Humaneness* uses this theme overtly as a criticism of government and society. Humanism implies morality, a sense of hope and purpose in life, without which all is futility and vanity. As the father in *The Last Distance Between Us* tells the alcoholic veteran, "It is easy to die; it is hard to do something."

The importance of these themes for Vietnamese society can be seen from their central place in literature as well as cinema. They have also — just as do the aesthetics of Vietnamese films — a universal significance and appeal.

*Vietnamese Films Discussed in this Article*

As much information is provided as available.

*The Abandoned Field — Free Fire Zone* [*Canh dong hoang*], 1979, dir. Nguyen Hong Sen.

*Arriving at the Steps of the Bridge* [*Den Voi Nhung Nhip Cau*], 1983.
Battleground along the Route, 1970 (this may possibly be The Road Battle, 1971, dir. Nguyen Kha).
Bom the Bumpkin [Thang Bom], 1987, dir. Le Duc Tien.
Brothers and Relations [Ahn va em], 1986, dir. Tran Vu and Nguyen Huu Luyen.
City Under the Fist [Thi Xa Trong Tam Tay], 1982, dir. Dang Nhat Minh.
The Class for Compassion’s Sake.
The Conical Hat [Nom Que].
The Day of Return [Ngay Ve], 1979.
Dong Ho Painting Village [Lang Tranh Dong Ho].
The Electric Line to the Song Da Construction Site [Duong Day Len Song Da], 1981, dir. Le Manh Thich.
The Forest of Cuc Phuong.
The Goddess Quan Am [Quan Am Thi Kinh].
The Golden Bird [Con Chun Vanh Khuyen], 1962, dir. Tran Vu.
Hanoi Through Whose Eyes [Hanoi — Trong Mat Ai], 1983, dir. Tran Van Thuy.
Lacquer Painting [Son Mai], 1982, dir. Luong Duc.
The Lamp in the Dream [Ngon Den Trong Mo], 1987, dir. Do Minh Tuan.
The Last Crime [Toi Loi Cuoi Cung], 1979, dir. Tran Phuong.
The Last Distance Between Us [Khoang Cach Con Lai], 1981, dir. Nguyen Xuan Son.
Left Alone [Con Lai Mot Minh], 1984, dir. Hong Sen.
Legend of a Mother [Chuyen Thoai Ve Nguai Me], 1987, dir. Bach Diep.
Luu Binh and Duong Le [Luu Binh Duong Le], 1987, dir. Pham Thu.
Nguyen Ai Quoc — Ho Chi Minh, dir. Pham Ky Nam.
On the Crest of the Waves, Facing the Storm [Dau Song Ngong Gio], 1967, dir. Ngoc Quynh.
On the Same River, 1959, dir. Nguyen Hong Nghi and Pham Hieu Dan.
1/50th of a Second in a Lifetime [Mot Phan Nam Muoi Giay Cuoc Doij], 1984, dir. Dao Trong Khanh.
The Peal of the Orange Bell [Hoi Chuong Mau Da Cam], 1983, dir. Nguyen Ngoc Trung.
A Quiet Little Town [Thi Tran Yen Tinh], 1986, dir. Le Duc Tien.
The Red Cochineal [Canh Kien Do], 1987, dir. Vu Le My.
Report on Humaneness [Chuyen Tu Te], 1986, Tran Van Thuy.
Return to Dien Bien Phu — The Hope.
The River of Aspiration [Dong Song Khat Vong], 1986, dir. Nguyen Ngoc Trung.
The 17th Parallel — Day and Night [Vi Tuyen 17 Ngay Va Dem], 1972, dir. Hai Ninh.
Shipwreck Beach [Bai bien doi nguoi], 1983, dir. Hai Ninh.
Unforgotten Days and Nights.
Victory at Dien Bien Phu [Chien Than Dien Bien Phu], 1964, dir. Tran Viet.
We Will Meet Again, 1974, dir. Tran Vu.
When Mother Is Away [Khi Me Vang Nha], 1979, dir. Nguyen Khanh Du.
When the Birds Return, 1984, dir. Khanh Du and Anh Thai.
When the Tenth Month Comes [Bao gio cho den thang muoi], 1984, dir. Dang Nhat Minh.
The Young Woman of Sao Beach [Chi Tu Hau Bai Sao], 1963, dir. Pham Ky Nam.
The Young Woman on the Perfumed River [Co Gai Tren Song], 1987, dir. Dang Nhat Minh.