

***Indochine* and the Politics of Gender**

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Abstract

Although filmic discourses on the Vietnam War have been associated with American filmmakers and producers, the last internationally celebrated film release on the subject was French. Fittingly, *Indochine* (1992) dealt with the French presence in Vietnam and the Vietnamese people's struggle to free themselves from their colonizers. With the benefit of hindsight, the filmmakers were able to present their film as a critique on the apologetic limitations of US productions, as well as on the hypocrisy of American inattentiveness toward France's predicament only to be followed by the US attempt to succeed the French as Vietnam's subsequent colonizing power. The film's political agenda, however, is ruptured via its use of female protagonists to represent the two warring nations. Where and how this rupture occurs can be better understood using discourses on gender.

Keywords

Vietnam War films; Vietminh; French occupation; gender and nation; spectatorship; masquerade

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The Vietnam Film Genre

The existence of a Vietnam War movie genre has been traced to the official withdrawal of the United States from the war of colonization in that country. Film historian Robert Sklar observed that in earlier film-era wars (World Wars I and II and the Korean conflict), "[American] motion picture companies cooperated with the government in producing a variety of films [...] that explained, dramatized, and aided war aims" (1994: 335). Rare pro-war films (such as the John Wayne vehicle *The Green Berets* [1968]), anti-war documentaries, and "echoes and shadows" of the conflict reflected in genre and exploitation movies were the only possible means for the Vietnam issue to be tackled in American films, but "after the Communist victory [in 1975], it became possible to look back" (Sklar, 1994: 337). It is the manner of this looking back that occasions this paper's consideration of the French production of *Indochine* (1992),¹ as well as its insertion into a matrix of ideologically problematic US film practice that makes the Régis Wargnier film appear innovative, at least initially, in comparison. After assessing how the film fares vis-à-vis US filmic discourses on the Vietnam War, this paper will then look more closely at how the politics of gender are worked out in the film, especially within the context of colonial and post-colonial relations.

The Vietnam film genre, to begin with, is itself a matter of careful periodizing and qualifying, as the above account demonstrates. Writing from the perspective of the present, Michael Selig explains that, although the so-called Vietnam movies share an "appropriation of the language and iconography of a particular historical moment (usually from the '60s and early '70s) and the

subordination of that moment to ‘traditional paradigms’ which are decidedly not exclusive to the so-called Vietnam film genre,” the use of such a type of imagery “merely masks the attempts to reestablish a traditional cultural and political identity” following the US defeat’s “[creation of] a cultural crisis among the American people” (1993: 2). Wagnier himself, in *Indochine: Un film de Régis Wagnier*, declared as much when he maintained that his objective was to

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undertake a more responsible retelling of the nature of the colonial conflict (“*au milieu de l’Histoire et de voir comment l’Histoire infléchit ces destins*”) with his recollection “*des grands films romanesques, américains pour la plupart*” (1992: 82).² Significantly, the film won a raft of institutional prizes in France (Césars for performances and technical achievements), Europe (Goya for Best European Film), and the US, including the National Board of Review, Golden Globe, and Oscar for Best Foreign Film (“Awards for *Indochine* [1992],” Internet Movie Database), plus *Time* magazine citations as one of the best films of the year as well as of the decade. Yet most individual US critics have professed only moderate appreciation, if not outright dissatisfaction, toward the film. Perhaps the most favorable review by a major American critic, outside of that of *Time* magazine’s Richard Corliss, had been that of Roger Ebert, who nevertheless concludes that the screenplay is “long and discursive and not very satisfying,” while the movie itself is “an ambitious, gorgeous, missed opportunity – too slow, too long, too composed” (Ebert, 1992: n.p.).

The reluctance on the part of American film critics to acknowledge another Western nation’s take on the Vietnam War could stem in part from an unarticulated yet understandable pride in the US’s own store of Vietnam War films, one of the many peaks in what observers have described as a post-Classical Hollywood Golden Age in American Cinema.³ After the aforementioned embarrassment of *The Green Berets* and allegorical explorations in exploitation projects, American filmmakers deduced that the US pullout from Vietnam could now allow them to produce critical discourses on the war without seeming anti-American.

Perhaps the most celebrated instances of these productions would be those of two Oscar best-film winners with opposed ideological readings, Michael Cimino’s allegedly illiberal *The Deer Hunter* from 1978 and Oliver Stone’s better-received *Platoon* from 1986. The depiction of American soldiers as innocent victims peaked during the year of *The Deer Hunter*’s release, as evident in such titles as Sidney J. Furie’s *The Boys in Company C* and in Ted Post’s *Go Tell the Spartans*; even Ted Kotcheff’s 1982 entry, *First Blood*, the

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original Rambo film, observed this liberal-humanist dictum of portraying US soldiers’ trauma without demonizing the Viet Cong. Other titles that might clinch the argument for 1978 as a watershed year in Vietnam War film discourse (argued effectively in Desser, 1991: 81-102) is another Oscar prizewinner, Hal Ashby’s Jane Fonda-starrer *Coming Home*, and Karel Reisz’s *Who’ll Stop the Rain*, the adaptation of Robert Stone’s novel *Dog Soldiers*; plus Francis Ford Coppola’s much-delayed *Apocalypse Now*, finally released the year after. Even Ted Post’s *Good Guys Wear Black*, a Chuck Norris potboiler, has the lead character state that the Vietnam adventure “was a war that never should have begun, and a country we never should have entered

[...]. Thousands of victims died without really understanding why, mainly because the reasons for the war were beyond any rules of logic” (“Memorable Quotes from *Good Guys Wear Black* [1978],” Internet Movie Database).

Enter *Indochine*

In terms of the aforementioned liberal perspective, *Indochine*’s narrative raises not only the issue of the usefulness of such an approach, but more important, the question of how gender had been configured on separate levels – that of cultural texts, cinema in particular, and that of historical practice, from both sides of the conflict. There is of course the danger, in the latter category, of using Vietnam as a synecdoche of the Other, on the one hand; and on the other hand, of conflating the US and France into the West. One admittedly simplistic way of resolving this predicament would be to further qualify the Vietnam-as-Other approach as the East, which was the manner in which the war was consistently regarded in cultural texts, and delineating whenever possible which “West” between the two colonial adventurers is being referred to, whether France or the US.

Hence, in order to advance the comparisons between distinct genres (Vietnam-War films vis-à-vis European art cinema that *Indochine* represents) and disparate geopolitical contexts (Vietnam

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vis-à-vis French Indochina), it would be necessary to situate oneself in a late-modern system, wherein styles and boundaries can still be recognized, but where these do not have to be confined to their temporal origins. Within this framework, a seemingly localized mode such as Vietnam-War film production could break out of the confines of its generic requisites to allow apparently alien samples to engage with one another in dialogical fashion. In specific terms, to take two celebrated American examples, Robert Altman’s *MASH* (1970) and Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* movies (1979, *Redux* version in 2001) can still be (and are) considered Vietnam-War films, in spite of Altman’s use of the Korean War as his film’s setting and Coppola’s deployment of New Wave-derived art-film psychedelia to complement the more standard war-film mayhem. These were preceded by the then-much-deplored jungle and blood-island exploitation films of an earlier decade that also served as markers of the existence of an overseas tropics-set conflict. In much the same way, *Indochine*, by virtue of its having arrived after the 1980s, when the US’s Vietnam-War film cycle had contracted, can also be counted as one more entry in the continuing elaboration of the genre – one that partakes of the “alien” elements of the two aforementioned examples, *MASH*’s non-Vietnam (actually pre-Vietnam) setting and *Apocalypse Now*’s art-film stylistics.

In fact, *Indochine*’s initial distinction from the Hollywood Vietnam War film project is its farther periodization – the post-World War II era of French colonial administration being challenged by the southward advance of Communist liberation fighters. Eliane Davries, a single middle-aged woman, adopts Camille, a “princess of Annam,” after the latter’s parents die in a plane crash; along with Camille, Eliane agrees to oversee Camille’s parents’ plantation. Eliane conducts herself according to strict rules of civil and secular propriety, raising Camille (who never speaks Vietnamese, even toward the end of the narrative) as she would a European child (Fig. 1), but also arranging to eventually turn over the plantation to her as well as marry her off to a similarly wealthy

native merchant family. Discreetly, Eliane conducts a passionate affair with a French naval officer, Jean-Baptiste, but lets go of the dalliance when the

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latter insists on his freedom. Unaware of the affair, Camille also falls in love with Jean-Baptiste, prompting Eliane to forbid him from seeing her and rushing Camille's wedding arrangements with Tanh, who has also been rebelling against his parents' (and his country's) excessive authoritarianism. Camille and Tanh decide to break up and run away from their respective families, and Camille treks all the way to the far-flung destination that Eliane had arranged for Jean-Baptiste. To get near him she agrees to be sold into slavery, but in his rescuing her she shoots and kills his naval superior, and the two become fugitives who take advantage of the disguises worn by roving theatrical troupes. The couple are separately caught and Jean-Baptiste is found dead (officially ruled a suicide) on a day-pass at Eliane's house to see his and Camille's son Etienne, while Camille suffers six years in prison, from which she emerges as a hard-line Vietminh cadre. The war ends with the 1954 Geneva Conference which Camille attends and to which Eliane brings Etienne, but the two never get to see Camille.



Fig. 1. Catherine Deneuve as Eliane Davries and Linh Dan Pham as her adoptive daughter, Camille. Régis Wargnier (dir. and co-screenwriter) (1992), *Indochine*, Sony Pictures Entertainment.

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The use of female protagonists to represent the two warring countries may be the film's most significant contribution to the Vietnam-film generic tradition.⁴ Even by standard "positive images" requisites, the figures of Camille and Eliane hold up admirably, particularly in relation to the male characters in the film. Paradoxically, the larger generic framework, that of (European) art-epic production, also ensures that the men do not suffer from lack of sympathy either. Tanh gallantly agrees to allow Camille to seek her true love and later assists the two of them by recommending them to a Communist-sympathetic theater troupe; expelled from a Paris university

for protesting a massacre (described in the film as occurring in Yên Bái but possibly referring to Vĩnh Yên), he declares to his mother, “The French have taught me freedom and equality; I’ll fight them with those.” Jean-Baptiste is of course the fiery and desirable object of passion shared by mother and daughter, who undergoes a domesticizing transformation when he renounces his freedom for the sake of Camille. The most extreme instance of the movie’s insistent humanism is that of the character of Eliane’s unrequited suitor Guy Asselin, a ruthless counter-insurgency expert who resorts to torture and employs mercenary rebel-hunters, but who offsets such damaging traits by foregrounding a keen wit, his devotion to Eliane and his job, and his fall from grace with the authorities (upon which he remarks, with conscious ironic self-reference, “The innocents are kicked out, the guilty will go free”).

Complications

The problematic of this narrative strategy is twofold in nature, one building up from the other. To begin with, it would be difficult to accept as historical fact that women were the major political players in the Vietnam conflict, whether involving the French or the Americans. In giving prominence to the participation of its women characters, however, *Indochine* manages to extend viewership identification and sympathy with the real-life power players, the men. The role of women in political life derives from the concept of difference,

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and the nature of their participation originates with the function of their bodies. To the questions of how the city can maintain itself and ensure that it satisfies its citizens’ desires, Monique Canto relates that

woman-as-political-animal provides an answer. With woman, a place can be found in political theory for both procreation and the representation of desire – and hence also the satisfaction of desire. Procreation and representation are related questions, moreover; taken together, they indicate the difficulty of conceptualizing, within a given political framework, the possibility of reproduction: reproduction of the real in order to satisfy desire, and reproduction of human life so that the city may endure. (1985: 340)

At first glance, this assignation of political value to women on the basis of their bodily difference may seem at odds with the “narrative and visual reconstitution of a heroic male subject, a prerequisite for which is the devaluation and abuse of the feminine” in Vietnam-film texts (Selig, 1993: 3). Furthermore, it may not necessarily be possible, though Selig makes the positive assertion,

to account for the films’ consistent effacements of the issues of race, class, nationalism, and gender (their historical misrepresentations, we might say) by focusing on their all too conventional concern with the narrative and visual reconstitution of the male subject and their almost always violent repression of the feminine. (Selig, 1993: 3)

If one were to pursue this line of inspecting the physical valuation of women’s bodies in

Indochine, there would appear to be a rupturing of its benevolent-because-motherly colonialist capitulation: although it is Eliane who gets depicted as a repressed yet ultimately passionate matriarch, it is Camille who is undressed twice, without her even being sexualized in both scenes the way that Eliane charges her scenes with Jean-Baptiste with her desire for him. What this implies, using standard Orientalist lines of reason, is that the body of the Other can be gazed at with more clinical regard; within the terms of the film, the seemingly indulgent undressing of

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Camille may also perhaps have been intended to balance her character's eventual domination of the political narrative, in which it is Eliane's (and Guy's and Jean-Baptiste's) people who are forced to negotiate with hers.

Some degree of reductionist danger might also be present herein, in that this reading might be too close for a text that operates both as a self-contained attempt at providing high-cultural pleasure *and* as an insertion into a highly involved mode of film practice. On the one hand, Hollywood and even mainstream American literary texts on the Vietnam War can hardly defend themselves from charges of feminizing the enemy in "reducing the Vietnamese to mere 'gooks' – something between a woman and an animal" (Lawson, 1991: 23; also see Selig, 1993: 7-8) and in exploiting "the fear of becoming a woman (of losing one's 'balls') [as] one of the indoctrinational weapons used by the military in preparing young men for battle" (Lawson, 1991: 22). On the other hand, the configuration of Eliane and Camille's sameness (their intersubjectivity, in psychoanalytic terms), overshadowed by their difference from men, is inflected not merely by the obvious category of gender but the even more crucially political one of class. To use an outmoded application of body discourse, Eliane and Camille can be seen to constitute the head or rational element in fictional interventions on the Vietnam War, in contrast with the hysterical young males of the standard Hollywood fare who may in this context be seen as obsessed with masculinity precisely because of their feminized function within the historical dramaturgy in their losing to (and thereby being symbolically raped by) the enemy.

This opens up a more troubling possibility concerning the use of gender in *Indochine*: are Eliane and Camille, in terms of their both being privileged members of their respective national bourgeoisies, masculinized in terms of their respective historical agencies? There would be ways of carefully contextualizing the question and advancing answers for each character – i.e., in their portrayal in formal terms (where they function as both mothers and lovers and are considered in those same terms by the male characters), in their narrative insertions (where class privilege renders them superior to the

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men around them), in their intertextual contributions (where they serve to "rectify" the feminization of the political players in Vietnam-film discourse yet function as a rationalizing alternative to the same tradition), and in their significations within historical accounts of the war. This last category may not necessarily encompass certain areas of the previous ones, but the nature of the discursive complications it presents makes it ideal for further pursuing the issues already raised thus far.

Nations and Boundaries

Indochine in this respect can be seen as falling within a development in 1990s global film practice of the internationalization of the Vietnam-film genre – i.e., it can be situated within a spate of works unified by their political specificity in the Vietnamese nation, including Hong Kong and Australian “boat people” texts and the French *L’Amant* (Jean-Jacques Annaud, dir.), released the same year as *Indochine* (Devine, 1995: 357-58),⁵ not to mention the phenomenon of films on Vietnam, notably Tran Anh Hung’s *Mùi du du xan* (The Scent of Green Papaya [1993]) and *Xích lô* (Cyclo [1995]), making an impact in American and European art-house circuits along with other Asian releases. Within such a globalized awareness, the roles that Camille and Eliane perform work not merely as dramatis personae, but as allegorical figures. In this respect, Camille’s sexuality is distinguished by its racialization through a “strategic, rather than merely tactical, deployment of a peculiar ‘silence’” described by Abdul JanMohamed as crucial to the construction of a Manichean allegory “which functions as the currency, the medium of exchange, for the entire colonialist discursive system. The exchange function of the allegory remains constant, while the generic attributes themselves can be substituted indefinitely (and even contradictorily) for one another” (JanMohamed, 1992: 103, 106).

The question not only of how Manichean *Indochine* is as an allegory, but whether it is Manichean in the first place,

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should not preempt the consideration at least of the two women characters as representations of their respective nations. Within this framework, the danger of appreciating them first of all as bodily entities within the body politic can be expressed in these terms: “When a society or political order speaks generically about ‘the body,’ it can deny the needs of bodies which do not fit the master plan” (Sennett, 1994: 23). In fact this can be seen in the way standard definitions of what constitutes a nation have sought to elide categories of race, language, and religion, relying on the significantly less-political category of geography though ultimately falling back on an even more charged requisite of “a soul, a spiritual principle” (Renan, 1990: 19). The underside – in fact, a consequence as well – of this desire for understanding one’s own nation and that of others is manifested in the fact that, in terms of Asian scholarship at least,

the negative image of the people subjugated by Western colonial powers, which dominated the colonial ideology, was drawn on the basis of cursory observations, sometimes with strong built-in prejudices, or misunderstandings and faulty methodologies [...]. Those who proclaimed the people of the area indolent, dull, treacherous, and childish were generally not scholars. They were monks, civil servants, planters, sailors, soldiers, popular travel writers, and tourists. (Alatas, 1977: 112)

In the formation of resistance to such gross misrepresentation, what has been described as the Janus-faced nature of nationalism has resulted in a quandary for the female subject: on the one hand, the emancipation of women has been represented in and from the West as one of the many promised benefits of modernity; on the other hand, resistance to the West has entailed with it a resistance to the project of modernity as well, and along with it the vaunted emancipation of women:

Wherever women continue to serve as boundary markers between different national, ethnic and religious collectivities, their emergence as full-fledged citizens will be jeopardized, and whatever rights they may have achieved during one stage of nation-building may be sacrificed

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on the altar of identity politics during another. (Kandiyoti, 1994: 382)

The collapse of the French colonial system in Indochina bisected not just France's colonial malaise, particularly in the subsequent emergence of Algerian resistance, but also the larger trend of a decline in Western supremacy in Asia through the 1970s (Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars, 1970: 3), except for the US and its strongholds, Korea and the Philippines. Predictably, the right-wing version of the story listed the following differences between, on the left, the sources of French defeat and, on the right, the causes of the Vietminh's success:

Poor intelligence
Underestimating the enemy
Lack of a positive political program
Vacillating politicians
Left-wing propaganda and sabotage
Defensive-minded attitude
Reluctance to get into the jungle
Undue reliance on air support

Communist mass-indoctrination
Singleness of purpose
United and continuous leadership
Ruthlessness
Good intelligence
Good planning
Support from Red [*sic*] China

(O'Ballance, 1964: 255)

The list evinces not just a willingness to provide more positive (and quantifiably greater) rationalization for the author's side, but also lays blame on the solidarity of Others – a fact that calls for eventual qualification in the wake of the now-known differences within the then-seemingly stable alliance comprising the former Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China, and North Vietnam. In fact, the French pullout from Vietnam can be more usefully expressed as “a welcome escape from an impossible situation” wherein “in this proxy confrontation between the superpowers France's colonial sovereignty was of secondary concern” (Jenkins, 1990: 162-63).

Moreover, as Benedict Anderson has commented, whatever transnational solidarity had transpired occurred primarily as “an understanding that linked colonial rulers from different national metropolises, whatever their internal rivalries and conflicts” (1991: 152-53). More significantly, Anderson maintains that the phenomenon

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of reverse racist discourse was never expressed in the literature of colonial resistance, proving his point by quoting the Constitution drawn up by Macario Sakay for the latter's rebel Philippine republic – a text that starts by declaring that no citizen “shall exalt any person above the rest because of his race or the color of his skin; fair, dark, rich, poor, educated and ignorant – all are

completely equal” (Anderson, 1991: 153-54).

Vietnam Connection

Applying this principle to Camille helps to delimit the character’s actual political progression from wealthy and Westernized native to unwavering freedom fighter who retains a strong measure of filial affection for her adoptive mother to the very end. The difference in spectatorship response to the film somehow betokens this less-than-radical desire for the Other to perform within the codes of Western honor and loyalty, notwithstanding the fact that, even in the film, it is the Western figure of Guy Asselin who spearheads, consciously and remorselessly, the violation of all the rules of conduct that he claims to stand for. Thus, just as much as the film was appreciated in the US for its acceptable, politically (though definitely not historically) correct re-gendering of the Vietnam narrative, the movie was also known to have turned its Camille performer, Linh Dan Pham, into a media star in what is perhaps officially the most openly anti-Communist Asian country, South Korea.⁶ Although primarily France-based (her starring role, Monica Teuber’s *Jamila* [1994], was in German, while her latest film, where she plays an immigrant concert pianist, is Jacques Audiard’s *De Battre mon coeur s’est arrêté* [2005], the well-received remake of James Toback’s *Fingers*), in the mid-1990s Linh appeared in a number of prestigious Korean productions. Among these were Seo Yun-mo’s 1994 film *Lai Daihan* (a derogatory term for a Korean-fathered illegitimate Vietnamese child), and the then-concurrent TV series on Korean soldiers’ experiences as US allies during the Vietnam War, *Meonameon Ssongba-gang* (The Distant Songba River [1993-94]),

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from the novel by Bak Yong Han.

In this sense, and through Linh, *Indochine* may have played a vital role in the emergence of the political discourse of the current Korean cultural wave. The critical self-examination of the occasionally controversial role played by Korean troops in Vietnam (Lee Kim, 2001: 622-35) preceded – in a sense, heralded – the more urgent, and internally more controversial, tackling of the issue of reunification with Communist North Korea, as if the breaking down of a relatively mild taboo (the Korean military’s overseas performance) enabled the culture to confront the more traumatic issue on the home-front.⁷ Here it becomes possible to see, in a strictly delimited sense, how conflicts arising from ethnicity (in this case the potential rejection of a pro-Vietnam text by a presumably anti-Communist viewership) are resolved through the creation of a separate but related internal conflict (Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry, 1987: 116-17); in particular terms, these would involve the affinities between *Indochine*’s liberal politics and the South Korean aspiration to handle the threat of North Korea in a manner that would be of mutual benefit to the two states and that would hopefully result in their reunification.

One final, admittedly minor, aspect of the triangulation among Vietnam, the US, and Korea involves the use of the derogatory term used by American troops to refer to the Viet Cong. The term “gook” was first used against Filipino revolutionaries during the Philippine resistance against American colonization (again, an instance of *déjà vu*: the US sought to replace a European occupation force, at that time of Spain, with its own). Possibly a corruption of the Tagalog word for

tutelary spirit, “gugu,” that might also account for the phrase “goo-goo eyes,” the use of “gook” was reinforced during the Korean War by the fact that it means “country” in Korean. From its derogatory application by US soldiers to refer to Koreans and Chinese, it was finally brought over to Vietnam, thus securing its status as the “[Orientalist] racial epithet emblematic in describing [...] the ubiquitous and invisible enemy” (Robert G. Lee [1999], qtd. in Pearson, 2004: n.p.).⁸ As the First-World country whose history is linked with the three Asian regional territories – in

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chronological order, the Philippines in Southeast Asia, Korea in East Asia, and Vietnam in Indochina – the US had consistently justified its interventions by identifying itself as each country’s savior. It purportedly set out to rescue the Philippines (and Cuba) from Spain, and subsequently liberated South Korea from the Communists. Its avowed project in Vietnam was similar to what it did for Korea, in that the Communists (also from the North) had to be prevented from taking over the country. Yet unlike in Korea, it did not allow for a territorial compromise; and as in the Philippines’ experience, the natives read its intention as a colonization attempt that called for nationalist resistance; for just as the Filipinos were looking forward to savoring their hard-won freedom from Spain, so were the Vietnamese eager to move forward after having expelled the French.

French Leave

This critique of the US’ role in Vietnam, while extraneous to the plot of *Indochine*, is nevertheless fundamental in terms of both its timing and its content, wherein the circumstance of its having been produced outside the US at a more recent moment enables it to perform this same critical function regarding the US’ defensive cinematic self-imaging. Crucial to the trajectory of the film’s international marketing strategy is the figure of France in the film. Undoubtedly the casting of Catherine Deneuve as Eliane Davries was intended to proceed from the play on her renown as the model of Marianne, the symbol of France (Fig. 2).⁹ Similarly relevant to the narrative would be her persona as a woman whose cool exterior conceals simmering, even dark, passions (notably in Luis Buñuel’s 1966 film *Belle de jour*, reissued in 1995). In *Indochine* the burden of her representational function is demonstrated not so much in the relative respect accorded her body (as opposed to the “humanizing” of her emotions) but in the astounding narrative curve Eliane undergoes, all the while retaining the very same function – that of mothering – with which she first appears in the film and proceeds

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to render the tale of the triangulated relations with her and her daughter’s lover. At the point where Camille rejects her vision of a happy-ever-after existence in the plantation and where she retrospectively realizes that Camille had planned to abandon her marital commitments, the plot flash-forwards to a now aged Eliane telling the story to a young man, about the age of her lover, Jean-Baptiste, but distinctly Vietnamese in features. It is Etienne, her grandson, Camille and Jean-Baptiste’s son, who at one point became entwined in his parents’ legendary exploits when Jean-Baptiste, captured and separated from Camille, had asked villagers to suckle his infant son; so, the legend goes, did the tale emerge of how all Vietnamese women, even those who no longer

lactated, or who were too young to do so at the time, or who had not even seen Jean-Baptiste and Etienne, claimed to have nursed the child.



Fig. 2. Catherine Deneuve as Marianne, symbol of France, as commemorated on postage stamp.

At the point where we first see Eliane and Etienne, however, their intimacy, the low-light situation, and the still-recent memory of Eliane's story of Jean-Baptiste (before even he and Camille became lovers) drive home the impression that Etienne is Jean-Baptiste's latter-day substitute. The second flash-forward, after Eliane relates how Jean-Baptiste was captured and had to enlist, as it were, the women of Vietnam to nourish his son, distinctly identifies the

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relation between Eliane and Etienne as grandmother and grandson respectively; the scene is succeeded by Eliane's acquisition of Etienne from Jean-Baptiste through local colonial and religious authorities, and how she insists on the Oriental practice of slandering an attractive child, in the presence of the bewildered white soldier and nun, in order not to arouse the jealousy of evil spirits. When she explains, "The evil spirits are listening," however, she casts a glance at them that suggests how she might not hesitate to include them in the category. The last appearance of Eliane and Etienne (whose names at this point suggest a sibling, if not twin-born, relation) is at the Geneva convention where Camille, unseen since her rejection of her mother and her mother's country, and destined never to be seen by either Eliane and Etienne or the film viewers, is negotiating for the Vietminh side. Eliane, who could not bring herself to see Camille, instructs Etienne to look for his mother; Etienne realizes the absurdity of his difference and alienation from his biological mother, and rejoins Eliane outdoors. When Eliane expresses regret that mother and son did not find each other, Etienne replies, "*Ma mère, c'est toi*," upon which Eliane feigns an accident with the heel of her shoe and turns away so Etienne would not see her expression (Fig. 3). The fact that in doing so she turns her back on the audience as well makes it impossible to see her face, and at the same time facilitates the audience's speculation of what she was feeling – grief? happiness? both or neither? – while the official loss of the French colony is being negotiated. Moreover, although the English-language subtitles render what may be literally translated as "My mother, that's you" into the flatter "You are my mother," the moment resonates painfully (for all the characters as well as with Other audiences) with an early scene establishing Eliane's character as a plantation master:

after she flogs a worker for attempting to escape and tells him how much it hurts her as a mother to punish her children, the peasant answers, “*Tu est mon père et ma mère*” (the parental terms get switched in the English subtitles: “You are my mother and my father”).

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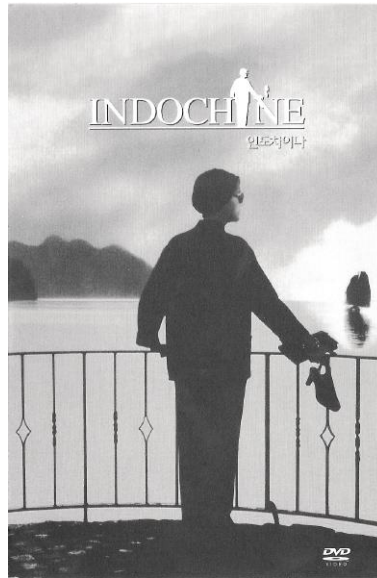


Fig. 3. Catherine Deneuve in the last shot, used as poster and DVD artwork. Régis Wargnier (dir. and co-screenwriter) (1992), *Indochine*, Sony Pictures Entertainment.

Gender as Masquerade

That Eliane and Etienne’s dramatic high point should be made synchronous with the 1954 conference brings in the added reading of how the French had retained a feeling of bitterness toward their expected ally, the US, along with a respect for the Vietminh, for a succession of reasons:

for Roosevelt’s initial opposition to the reassertion of French control in Indochina after World War II, for [the US’] subsequent grudging admission that the area lay in the French domain, for its lukewarm diplomatic support during the 1954 Geneva conference, and for its readiness to assume France’s place in Vietnam immediately after Geneva. (Sullivan, 1978: 56-57)

Thus the textual production of *Indochine* itself can be read as a nationalist rebuke to the gung-ho representations of the Vietnam conflict from Hollywood, but whether this was made at the expense of *Indochine*’s creators making what may be considered a reverse gung-ho presentation may be an issue that could only be settled in historical retrospect, once, say, other participants in the conflict (the Vietnamese first and foremost) come up with their sobering reassessments of what they believed had actually transpired.

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The act of making public what in Western culture is gendered as private (Canto, 1985: 349-50) – the story of Eliane and Camille – might perhaps provisionally explain why Eliane-as-France should be over-valorized in the multiplicity of her functions – as lover, sister, and grandmother; yet it is as mother, first to Camille (Vietnam) and then to Etienne (the part of Vietnam that France brought home), that her character serves to modify two related points that have been raised about mothering in feminist discourse. First is the claim that mothers identify more with their female infants than with their male ones, but nurture female infants less because of their ambivalence about growing up in a patriarchy (Hirsch, 1990: 182-83). Such a typology gets glossed over in *Indochine* because of the aforementioned agglomeration of other feminine functions ascribed to the Eliane character; further, if we concede that in Catherine Deneuve-as-France the fuller representation would include French men, then her inability to identify with Camille's cause is in danger of being conflated with her effectiveness as plantation manager. Her relationship to Etienne would seem to be less qualifiedly ambivalent, but it is the Etienne figure that is in question here, particularly in Jessica Benjamin's suggestion that the son's rejection of the mother would not necessarily constitute a refusal of her omnipotence as it would entail an attempt by the son to claim the phallus (1994: 140). What Etienne rejects would be the omnipotence of his biological mother, Camille; what he claims as the phallus would be, ironically, his refusal to reject his spiritual mother, Eliane.

Hence in employing gender as a masquerade in much the same way that femininity operates in its phase of performing the masquerade even without being aware of it (Riviere, 1929: 35-44), *Indochine* conducts its critique of the imagining of Vietnam by the US without acknowledging the radical potential of the Vietnamese's anticolonialist project,¹⁰ much less admitting the masculinist nature and cause of the French involvement. This conclusion is overdetermined by the film's narrative closure, made clearer when we begin at the very end and read the text from this vantage point: the figure of Eliane, the (non-biological) mother of Etienne and (in Catherine Deneuve-as-Marianne) of France, remains, ambivalent in her response,

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but singular within the final frame. Just off-screen we have seen Etienne, a remnant of French Indochina (now Vietnam), a presence unacknowledged yet undeniable in any former colonizing center, whether in terms of post-colonial immigration, expropriated wealth, or cannibalized culture. And farther off, invisible for the purpose of this specific narrative summation, we are made aware of the now-independent and coequal absence of Camille, whose exclusion is sealed, in a sense, by Eliane's distance and Etienne's rejection.

Gender Exploit

Ironically, and cleverly as well, the means by which the film disavows Camille's radical progression is not so much the character's sudden and unexpected marginalization right at the point where she becomes politicized. The movie's centrist bias is foreshadowed in the contrast between Eliane and Jean-Baptiste, where the former maintains a steady course amid her multiple functions while the latter moves from one political extreme to its opposite, starting as a single-minded (yet guilt-ridden) implementer of necessarily one-sided colonial policy (defensively explaining to a colleague that "Nobody'll steal what's in my head, not even eternal Asia!"), before becoming a fugitive from the

French military and accepting, for Camille's sake, the assistance of Vietminh rebels. An even starker contrast materializes between Eliane and Guy Asselin, when the hard-boiled and heavy-handed colonial official informs her that Camille had been arrested and imprisoned at Poulo Condore prison (on Côn Sơn island). Eliane asks Guy to get Camille out, and the exchange that ensues between them is as follows:

GUY. Not only won't she get out, but she'll end up a Communist! Poulo Condore prison is the world's largest Communist-breeding ground. You go in a criminal, a prostitute, a nationalist, you come out a Marxist! And I hope that she does become a Communist! It's her only chance. Everyone else dies!

ELIANE. Now I know who you are: nothing! You're nothing but

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words [...]. You wonder why I never slept with you? I didn't want you as a lover! Women need more than words! (Wagnier, *Indochine* [1992])

Eliane's insistence on her personal prerogatives overrides Guy's recent radical awareness, and effectively silences him when she turns her back on him and walks away. When finally mother and daughter meet again, their first time in many years and their last time as well, Eliane predictably pleads with Camille to return to their life as plantation owners. But what is unexpected, and arguably implausible, is Camille's response: "I can't go backwards. I have no past. I've forgotten everything, otherwise I'd have died of sorrow." Once more the film finds a way to contain the character's disavowal of historical agency, by reducing the terms of her discourse to the personal: she asks about Etienne, breaks down, and says, "I don't want him to know what I've lived through [...]. Go to France, take him there. Your Indochine is no more, it's dead."

This scene would have been the opportunity for Camille to come into her own, when Eliane's role could gracefully transition to that of a postcolonial entity, always-already irrelevant to whatever future Vietnam decides to embark on. Yet the filmmakers opt instead to depict Camille at this point as a woman divested of her past (her memory) and her present (her rejection of Eliane and Etienne), and allow Eliane to retain her thematic preeminence by subsequently and permanently erasing the Camille character from the narrative.

In this regard, the movie's insistence on the personal in the face of the political constitutes an unfortunate step backward. It were as if the filmmakers had figured out a means to critique and improve on American movies on the Vietnam experience, but shied away from fostering an identification with the truly radical subject, the anticolonial revolutionaries. Transference is the strategy by which this capitulation is accomplished: gender discourse, indisputably an urgent contemporary concern, is made to replace radical politics instead of allowing each one to enrich the other. It is in this final, regrettable sense that gender is exploited as an excuse for the deployment of liberal pieties, where gender serves as a masquerade

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that facilitates *Indochine*'s indulgence in both epic-dramatic excess and a daringly open measure of colonial nostalgia, even as the movie's sumptuous images and tones are occasionally ruptured by the frenzy and din of Vietnam's then-ongoing nationalist upheaval.

After *Indochine*

Undeniably the narrative thread of the representation of Vietnam in the Western imaginary awaits a further and far more unsettling unspooling. In terms of historical materialism, one notable connection would be the recent economic emergence of Vietnam as the second fastest-growing economy in Asia (Bradsher, 2006: A1), forming a triumvirate with China and India and combining the two countries' Othernesses (China's socialist ideology and India's post-colonial status) on a developmental track that may yet serve as a concrete challenge to the West's capitalist/colonialist model – one more possible reading of how the feminized Orient may yet manage to trump the patriarchal West's long-standing global dominance. Within this paper's filmic concerns, since *Indochine*'s release, two developments may be provisionally “read” in its wake, one inter-textual and the other historical.¹¹

The first event would be the reissue of Coppola's 1979 film *Apocalypse Now* twenty-two years later, as *Apocalypse Now Redux*. *Apocalypse Now* was the first Vietnam War film to win the top international film prize, the Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival, even though it was originally screened as a work in progress.¹² Of the nearly fifty minutes added to the new version, the longest sequence, nearly a half hour, consisted of Capt. Benjamin L. Willard and his crew discovering a hidden French plantation on their way to terminate “with extreme prejudice” renegade Colonel Walter E. Kurtz (practically all the “*Redux* version only” cast members are in fact French – see “Full Cast and Crew for *Apocalypse Now* [1979],” Internet Movie Database). While having dinner with the plantation family, Captain Willard is harangued by the owners, who maintain that Americans like him should know better about attempting to

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colonize Vietnam (which they describe somewhat enigmatically as “the biggest nothing in history”) after the French had suffered their loss of the colony.¹³ Later he retires to the parlor for a tryst with the heiress, who tells him ominously, “The war will still be here tomorrow” (“Memorable Quotes from *Apocalypse Now* [1979],” Internet Movie Database).

The second event appears to fulfill the heiress' prediction, this time on a different aspect of French colonial experience, once again tied in with American affairs. After France withdrew from Indochina in 1954, it had to contend with an even fiercer struggle for independence from the *Front de Libération Nationale* (National Liberation Front – FLN) of Algeria, then as now a highly politicized Islamic population; among the FLN's luminaries at that time was revolutionary theorist Frantz Fanon, whose underground articles appeared in his posthumously published collection *Toward the African Revolution* (1964). All accounts of the Algerian-French conflict acknowledge that it was far more ferocious and debilitating, especially for the French, than the Indochina experience; the filmic account of the war, the late Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* (1965), remains a more unqualified achievement than *Indochine*, with one critical assessment describing it as “a great incendiary epic [...about an] event that triggered a seismic wave of anticolonial

movements across the Third World, serving [...] as a more practical lesson in the violent means deemed necessary to win” (Matthews, 2004: 6).

One would be merely echoing current widespread conventional opinion in pointing out how the US, in meddling with a number of Islamic peoples, has once again failed to learn, or more likely, opted to ignore, the French example. And where Algeria had proved to be more traumatic for France than Vietnam had been, one can only look back and anticipate with further dread what consequences await the US’ ongoing military adventures.

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at the Kimdaejung Convention Center in Gwangju, Korea. I owe thanks to the gracious and patient editorial staff of the *Asian Journal of Women’s Studies*, specifically Chang Pilwha, Mala Khullar, Jieun Roh, and Kim Na Youn. I also wish to thank Hallym University professors Mark Curry and Ivan Canadas for their helpful comments, and acknowledge the assistance of two students from my spring and fall semesters of 2006, namely Yu Taeyun and Ham Jongsuk respectively, for their unstinting and indispensable resourcefulness and good cheer. Finally, I wish to profess my admiration and appreciation for the strength and support of two of my role models, Maurine Haver (New York City) and Ellen Paglinauan (Manila).

Notes

1. All mention of *Indochine* in this paper refer to the Columbia/Tristar Studios identical laserdisc and DVD releases, with English translations as provided in the video’s subtitles.

2. The French passages may be translated as follows: “within the course of History, to see how History determines [human] destiny” for the parenthetical remark, followed by [Régis Wagnier’s recollection] “of the great film stories, especially the American ones.” I am not in a position to determine whether any perceivable irony in each of these statements was deliberate or not.

3. Film scholar Raymond J. Haberski, Jr. (2001: 122-43) goes as far as claiming that the period, roughly the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, was as much a Golden Age for film criticism as it was for film production. That the period, also known as the New American Cinema, coincided with the intensification of the US’s involvement in the Vietnam War and ended in 1975 with American defeat and the release of the first summer blockbuster, Steven Spielberg’s *Jaws*, is now commonplace enough to be considered standard knowledge; see Godfrey Cheshire, “*Apocalypse Again*” (2001), on which more later.

4. Alison Murray’s comparative review of *Chocolat*, *Utremer*, and *Indochine* (2002)

describes the Vietnamese national narrative in *Indochine* as inscribed in the major women characters' bodies.

5. Among the films cited by Devine (1995: 357-58) are Ann Hui's *Tou bun no hoi* (Boat People [1982]), Stephen Wallace's *Turtle Beach* (1992), and Jean-Jacques Annaud's *L'Amant* (The Lover [1992]).

6. I am grateful to Professor Kim Shin Dong of Hallym University

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for confirming this insight, unavailable as of this writing in English- and French-language print and internet information sources (including Linh Dan Pham's entry at the Internet Movie Database, <<http://us.imdb.com/name/nm0199006/>>). I acknowledge as well Messrs. Park Shin-ku, Won Myung Ho, Moon Jeong Woo, and Kim Jong-il for assisting my Korean-website searches. Intriguingly, in Linh's recently announced project with Régis Wargnier, *Pars vite et reviens tard* (Have Mercy on Us All [2007]), apparently a modern-day thriller, she also plays a character named Camille.

7. At least one study, Lee Hyangjin's *Contemporary Korean Cinema*, argues that

Korean films from both sides subtly adopt the rhetoric of "one nation," justifying the necessity to reunify the country. This rhetoric, in a way, reflects the genuine aspiration of the Korean people to restore their cultural homogeneity and solidarity, which they believe, transcends the current ideological confrontation. The idea of "one nation" is deeply valued by the public on both sides, as it appears to be grounded in their firm sense of ethnic homogeneity. (2000: 4)

An attempt to relate the current Korean film wave to historical trauma is made in Kim and David (2005).

8. William Manchester's account of Douglas MacArthur's father's experience during the Philippine-American War describes an alliterative opposition "between the 'goddamns,' as GIs of that era called themselves, and the 'gugus,' their word for natives, a precursor of 'gooks'" (1983: 42; ascribed to Leech, 1959: 405, and Lee and Henschel, 1952: 20; also see Miller's "Epilogue: The 'Gook' and 'Gugu' Analogy" in *Benevolent Assimilation*, 1982: 268-76). One further connection among Koreans, Vietnamese, and Filipinos is a practice routinely condemned in the West: that of dog-meat consumption. Although ascribed (perhaps erroneously in certain specific instances) to Chinese influence, and existent in some parts of China, dog-eating is more commonly associated in the West with the three "gook" nationalities.

9. This insight was pointed out in a generally unappreciative review of the film by Vincent Canby in the *New York Times* (1992: n.p.), which nevertheless opened with the statement, "Catherine Deneuve reigns in *Indochine*." A more recent, and real-life, French female figure would be Ségolène Royal, the Socialist Party nominee regarded as a strong contender to become France's first woman President, who was described by a political scientist as "a little like Marianne" in

giving “the impression of being a wonder woman – a strong politician, a good mother, but also the woman every man wants to marry. Even when she makes mistakes, she’s getting away with it because she says she’s human [...]” (Sciolino, 2006: n.p.).

10. Kim Worthy’s review in *Cineaste* criticized the movie for deploying the “simplistic dichotomies [that] often mark narratives of

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colonization, particularly those produced by the imperialist colonizer” (1993: 38).

11. I must confess to a fear of exceeding my grasp, as well as unduly distending the boundaries of this paper, if I were to include a third event, so complex in its intertextuality and casually perverse in its formal, temporal, and sexual premises that it demands an article all its own. In the Cannes Film Festival-set bravura opening sequence of Brian DePalma’s *Femme Fatale* (2002), Régis Wargnier appears as himself during the premiere of his next Catherine Deneuve-starrer, *Est-Ouest* (East-West [1999]). His date gets seduced by another woman, which sets off the metaphysical-thriller plot mechanism of *Femme Fatale*. What would Wargnier, a specialist in conventional epic humanist cinema, have to do with this theme? The key, as I see it, lies in Deneuve who, though absent during the premiere, enjoys (so to speak) queer-icon status, to the point where the US’ most successful lesbian publication, *Curve*, had originally named itself after her (Belge, 2006: n.p.).

12. Although *Apocalypse Now* dealt overtly with the Vietnam War, other US-produced previous Cannes Grand Prix winners were already referencing the conflict: the late Robert Altman’s *MASH* (1970), although ostensibly set during the Korean War, situated its sensibility squarely in the counter-cultural 1960s through the nihilism and morbid humor of the screenplay of former Hollywood blacklist victim Ring Lardner, Jr.; while Travis Bickle, the lead character in Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* (1976), although based on the story of a man who had attempted to assassinate an American presidential candidate, is introduced as a mentally unbalanced Vietnam War veteran – inspiring in turn a real-life mentally unbalanced individual, John Hinckley, Jr., who would nearly succeed in assassinating an actual American President. Francis Ford Coppola was not a newcomer to the Cannes Film Festival either – his film *The Conversation* (1974) had earlier also won the Grand Prix.

13. In the *Independent Weekly*, film critic Godfrey Cheshire states that “What these colonial holdouts seem to be saying is that Americans will lose the war because they don’t have the strong, gut-level reasons for holding onto Vietnam that they, the French, still feel” (2001: n.p.). The logical uncertainty of this reading stems from its implication that any colonizing country with “gut-level” attachment to its colony will succeed in “holding onto” its territory, contrasted with the historical reality that, at this point in *Apocalypse Now Redux*’s narrative, the French had already actually lost the war that the Americans were then striving to win. In any case, even if we grant, as

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Cheshire argues, that this had been right-wing scriptwriter John Milius' intended slant all along, the precedence of *Indochine*'s impact – of the French criticizing the US' role in Vietnam by referring to their own experience as precursor – remains.

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— (dir.) (1978), *Good Guys Wear Black*, screenwriters Bruce Cohn and Mark Medoff, perf. Chuck Norris, Anne Archer, James Franciscus, Lloyd Haynes, Dana Andrews, HBO DVD (2000).

Reisz, Karel (dir.) (1978), *Who'll Stop the Rain*, screenwriters Judith Rascoe and Robert Stone, perf. Nick Nolte, Tuesday Weld, Michael Moriarty, Anthony Zerbe, Richard Masur, Ray Sharkey, Gail Strickland, MGM/UA DVD (2001).

Scorsese, Martin (dir.) (1976), *Taxi Driver*, screenwriter Paul Schrader, perf. Robert De Niro, Cybill Shepherd, Peter Boyle, Jodie Foster, Harvey Keitel, Leonard Harris, Sony DVD (1999).

Seo Yun-mo (dir.) (1994), *Lai Daihan* (Illegitimate Vietnamese Child), screenwriter Lee Kyeong-soo, perf. Lee Chang Hun, Linh Dan Pham, Kim Su Ahn, unavailable on video, Korea, 1994; information derived from a Café Naver web page, 8 Nov. 2005
<http://cafe.naver.com/antiviolence.cafe?iframe_url=/ArticleRead.nhn%3Farticleid=9>.

Spielberg, Steven (dir.) (1975), *Jaws*, screenwriters Peter Benchley and Carl Gottlieb, perf. Roy Scheider, Robert Shaw, Richard Dreyfuss, Lorraine Gray, Murray Hamilton, Carl Gottlieb, Universal DVD (2000).

Teuber, Monica (dir.) (1994), *Jamila*, screenwriters Christopher McGee

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and Ruth Rothmann, perf. Linh Dan Pham, Nicolai Kinski, F. Murray Abraham, Jason Connery, Yuri Kuznetsov, Bakhyt Dzhanibekov, unavailable on video, Germany.

Tran Anh Hung (dir. and screenwriter) (1993), *Mùi du du xhan* (The Scent of Green Papaya), perf.

Trần Nu Yên-Khê, Man San Lu, Trương Thị Lộc, Nguyễn Anh Hoa, Vương Hòa Hôi, Ngọc Trung Tran, Columbia/Tristar DVD (2001).

— (dir. and co-screenwriter) (1995), *Xích lô* (Cyclo), co-screenwriter N. T. Binh, perf. Le Van Loc, Tony Leung Chiu Wai, Trần Nu Yên-Khê, Nhu Quỳnh Nguyễn, Hoàng Phúc Nguyễn, Ngô Vũ Quang Hải, New Yorker DVD (2004).

Wallace, Stephen (dir.) (1992), *Turtle Beach*, screenwriter Ann Turner, perf. Greta Scacchi, Joan Chen, Jack Thompson, Art Malik, Norman Kaye, Columbia/Tristar VHS (1992).

Wargnier, Régis (dir. and co-screenwriter) (1999), *Est-Ouest* (East-West), co-screenwriters Roustam Ibraguimbekov, Sergei Bodrov, and Louis Gardel, perf. Sandrine Bonnaire, Oleg Menshikov, Catherine Deneuve, Sergei Bodrov, Jr., Sony DVD (2000).

— (dir. and co-screenwriter) (1992), *Indochine*, co-screenwriters Erik Orsenna, Louis Gardel, and Catherine Cohen, perf. Catherine Deneuve, Vincent Perez, Linh Dan Pham, Jean Yanne, Dominique Blanc, Henri Marteau, Carlo Brandt, Gérard Lartigau, Hubert Saint Macary, Andrzej Seweryn, Mai Chau, Eric Nguyễn, Jean-Baptiste Huynh, Columbia/Tristar DVD (2000).

— (dir.) (2007), *Pars vite et reviens tard* (Have Mercy on Us All), screenwriters Ariane Fert, Ariane Marrin, Julien Rappeneau, and Lawrence Shore, perf. José García, Marie Gillain, Lucas Belvaux, Olivier Gourmet, Nicolas Cazalé, Linh Dan Pham, Michel Serrault, announced on the Internet Movie Database, 10 Dec. 2006
<<http://us.imdb.com/title/tt0446707/>>.

Wayne, John and Ray Kellogg (dirs.) (1968), *The Green Berets*, screenwriters James Lee Barrett and Col. Kenneth B. Facey, perf. John Wayne, David Janssen, Jim Hutton, Aldo Ray, Raymond St. Jacques, Bruce Cabot, Jack Soo, George Takei, Warner DVD (1997).

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