

Dear Han,

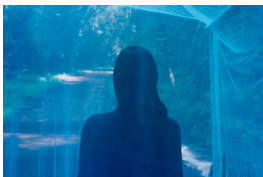
Vu Tran was born in Saigon, Vietnam, and raised in the United States. He is a fiction writer, a criticism columnist for the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, and a professor at the University of Chicago, where he directs the undergraduate programme in creative writing. Tran's first novel, *Dragonfish*, was labeled a 'notable book' in the New York Times and received a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship.



Thuy-Han Nguyen-Chi, *The In/Extinguishable Fire*, 2019, film still. Courtesy: the artist.



Thuy-Han Nguyen-Chi, *The In/Extinguishable Fire*, 2019, film still. Courtesy: the artist.



Thuy-Han Nguyen-Chi, *Syncretis*, 2017, film still. Courtesy: the artist; photograph: Hoang-Son Doan.

As you know very well, no topic frustrates and challenges me more than the topic of my parents. I find this to be true for so many of my closest friends, and in so many different ways. Even when we've been lucky enough to have parents who love and have taken care of us, even when we love them too and appreciate what they've done for us, we can struggle continually with our feelings for one or both of them, with an intensity and confusion that no one else can arouse. So often there is this space in their identity that is unknowable to us, which is of course true of most if not all the people in our lives, and yet with parents this unknowability—this unbreachable distance—can feel like a failure or an unfairness, since who else should we be more naturally connected to than the two people who made us, who saw us through the most vulnerable and formative stages of our life, who know us so primally?

I was thinking of all this while I watched *The In/Extinguishable Fire*, because among its many confrontations, it strikes me as an attempt to bridge that unbreachable distance, even as it acknowledges the improbability and perhaps impossibility of such an act. As the father draws on paper and illustrates the aerodynamics of flying objects—the science of his professional and intellectual life—he is in effect illustrating himself for his daughter, perhaps in the only way he knows how. But we can only see his hands and arms, never his face. He is an incomplete picture of himself, no doubt the incomplete person he has often been to his daughter. The only other part of him we get is his voice, speaking Vietnamese, gradually disembodied from his person and from the action itself as he starts recounting his life before the daughter came along: his professional and ideological journeys, his transit from one country to another, the triumphs and setbacks, the awakenings and disillusionments, the horrors of war that shaped so many of these experiences. But are these historical and biographical facts, however accurate, a sufficient reflection of who he truly is? What do they actually reveal, and what do they still withhold? The daughter's voice intrudes upon the father's voice, reciting his same words on top of him speaking them, as though tasting his voice in her own mouth and translating his words into a more legible voice, her own, so that she might speak for him in an attempt to interpret him. So much in *The In/Extinguishable Fire* reenacts or gestures at this attempt, which is fundamentally an attempt at connection between two seemingly disparate things: Germany and Vietnam, German and Vietnamese, past and present, war and peace, history and personal experience, science and feeling, father and daughter. But again, it is only ever an attempt, a cinematic imagining and demonstration of that attempt, not its fulfillment. The imagery throughout—of impure water, distorted mirrors, broken glass—seems to dramatize obstructed or fragmented vision, which perhaps is how so many of us are doomed to see our parents.

But why does this cause us such distress? I suspect that this imperfect understanding of our parents mirrors our own imperfect understanding of ourselves. We obsess over them because we are self-obsessed. The unknowable nature of a friend or a lover can cause a similar distress, but with a parent it inherently feels self-reflexive. No matter how differently we might live our life and see the world, no matter how adamantly we might reject what they represent, we can't help suspecting that who we are, in part and in some fundamental way, is a consequence of who our parents are.

I had an English professor in college, a mentor of mine, who used to say that great literature always asks the question, "*Who am I?*" I would say all art engages in this inquiry, even when it is not apparently or remotely autobiographical. As artists (though this is also true of non-artists), we express who we are by presenting how we see the world: what we love or fear, what we believe or don't believe in, what we understand or don't understand, what we seek, what we've found. And it occurs to me that, besides ourselves, the figure in our life that most embodies this inquiry into the self is the parent. Even for orphans or adoptees who never knew their parents, the phantom figure of the person who gave them life haunts them, shapes how they

define themselves. And perhaps, because of this fact, all art is haunted by our parents, either consciously or subconsciously, either on the surface or in the bones of the work.

The In/Extinguishable Fire returns again and again to scenes from Ingmar Bergman's *Persona*, which for you and me both is a touchstone in our artistic pursuits. One of its most memorable passages is spoken by a doctor to Liv Ullmann's character, an actress who has stopped speaking altogether. The doctor says to her:

"I do understand, you know. The hopeless dream of being. Not doing, just being. Aware and watchful every second. And at the same time the abyss between what you are for others and what you are for yourself. The feeling of dizziness and the continual burning need to be unmasked. At last to be seen through, reduced, perhaps extinguished."

There is so much to be said about these words, which are merely the first few sentences of her speech. To me, it is a presentation of the ego, driven by exhaustion and desperation. So much of the conflict in our lives arises and thrives in that distance between how we see ourselves and how others see us, since the two things feel unavoidably at odds, diminishing our ability to be honest, consistent, and understanding with others as well as with ourselves. But is to be "unmasked" a revealing of a genuine self, or is it more a shedding of a constructed self that we have performed for others? Do we ever truly have a stable understanding of who we are, that only we ourselves are privy to? And is being "seen through, reduced, perhaps extinguished" a relinquishment or an embrace of the ego?

And then there is this question, the most pressing for me: how much of who we truly are is actually who we are for others? Because when I consider the notion of self-knowledge, I can't help reminding myself that the first inkling of the self, for so many of us, was initiated by the person[s] who gave us birth and nurtured us into consciousness. In almost everything they said and did, they were whispering to us, *You are my child and I am your mother, your father, and you exist because of who you are to me and who I am to you.* And from this moment comes every other moment of our lives where we are looking back at them and at ourselves, both accepting and denying this initial truth they offered us, and continually asking, *Where did I come from and where am I going?*

Sincerely,
Vu



Ingmar Bergman, *Persona*, 1966, film still. Courtesy: Ingmar Bergman, AB Svensk Filmindustri, The Ingmar Bergman Foundation.