

## Anonymous Letter

Hey T.,

I'm really sorry for not answering earlier, I've been sick and out of the online zone.

Firstly, thanks a lot for your letter, I was really hoping that you'd write it and it won't be how it is often: People make promises out of nicety and then it's forgotten.

My story about Vietnam might be rather strange or long and boring, but I hope it will explain a thing or two.

First off, I never had anything to do with Vietnam personally or directly, neither did any of my family or friends. As is known now, there was a certain amount of Soviet involvement into this conflict and it ran as far as the personnel on the ground. Some people even probably shot some Americans. Strange story but I'm not part of it in any case.

My involvement with the country and culture came initially from video games. But my interest in the Vietnam-related video games was through American cinema. You know, the usual: *Apocalypse Now*, *Full Metal Jacket* and the rest. There was a strange sense of fascination behind all this stuff and it wasn't really attached to Vietnam in particular at the beginning. Then there was this computer game titled *Vietcong* and it was basically a first-person shooter, in which one is playing an American "special operations" officer. You go around and shoot people. It was very strange as a game because it had this pull of being intimidating and rather scary at times. Then, of course, most of its atmosphere was borrowed from all these iconic American movies about war. And the ball started rolling for me, I started to look at things related to Vietnam more and more.

Literature, cinema, memoirs, music, stuff like this. In the center of it was the magnificent and horrifying masterpiece *Dispatches* written by Michael Herr. In my opinion, it is essentially one of the best books, if not the best, on war and men. It is beautiful and horrible at the same time. There's a documentary titled *First Kill* that I found later on, which includes both Herr and some other testimonies. I didn't read the book when I found it because at the time it was difficult to get it in Russia and it wasn't translated. I didn't speak English well either. But this year I finally read it and it is amazing. What is amazing about it and why Vietnam?

What both the veteran fetish culture and mainly literature have opened up for me is the other side, the much darker side of humanity, perhaps mostly the male part of it. The vortex and abyss of beauty and fascinating, captivating violence and war, atrocities and powerful domination of people over other people—completely apolitical, purely human, universal—all the fear and excitement of being a perpetrator, all the beauty of a love story that is taking place among bombed out ruins and the scare, the *otherness* of Southeast Asia, its social and natural surroundings. I don't recommend you just flat out go and read Michael Herr because there's something there that exercises an unbelievable magnetic pull and forever changes the way you see things, or maybe this was just the last drop for me. But there's a short article [here](#) that conveys some things I'm trying to describe.

Vietnam, however, was special among many wars. The Second World War was a big narrative of good versus evil, although in my opinion things are far more complicated than that. Most of the colonial wars have been suppressed or concealed in one way or another and only start to surface nowadays. But the American-Vietnam War was something else. Its doors were completely wide open (and in my opinion perhaps its openness to the press helped to prolong it) and it was in an unbelievable way free of many bureaucratic constraints. Men did what they wanted and murder wasn't just it. Imagine that you're completely free to roam anywhere you want: You can get into any apartment, look around, sleep there, perhaps control and dominate people, perhaps go out into nature that is so mysteriously violent and exhausting. Under such conditions, you may start developing your personal philosophy around it. American soldiers did many things including stuffing Aces of Spades (cards) into the mouths



Stanley Kubrick, *Full Metal Jacket*, 1987, film still. Courtesy: the filmmaker, Natant Harrier Films.



Francis Ford Coppola, *Apocalypse Now*, 1979, film still. Courtesy: the filmmaker, Omni Zoetrope.



Francis Ford Coppola, *Apocalypse Now*, 1979, film still. Courtesy: the filmmaker, Omni Zoetrope.

of dead Viet Cong soldiers because they believed, for instance, that this would spook further Viet Cong resistance. They cut off their ears as trophies and many tried to smuggle it back home to the US. There are a lot of things that had to do with violence completely off the hooks and out of control. But there was also a feeling of brotherhood and understanding between soldiers, a certain place where they could determine themselves without all the preexisting societal patterns: rich, poor, fat, skinny, ugly, beautiful, funny etc. None of it matters, if you couldn't survive and care enough for your brothers.

This confusing landscape has sort of haunted my head with the thought repeated by Michael Herr in the documentary (linked above):

“If war was hell and only hell and there were no other colors in the palette, I don't think people would continue to make war.”

This topic is still something that I'm struggling with and it is difficult to put into words.

Little by little my interest in the American Vietnamese war started to become exhausted in a cultural sense; same stories, icons, etc. But the *otherness* of Vietnam itself stayed. So I read and read what I could to first find out about the history of the conflict, and then of other conflicts (before and after). I looked at all kinds of documentary photography and documentary films (I think Philip Jones Griffiths made a rather good book about victims of Agent Orange). And then the gap of this cultural legacy about the first Indochina War has interested me. Why didn't France keep so much legacy and memory of the war? And what did the Vietnamese actually think and feel through all these years? How did they survive? And thus, the *otherness* started to disappear little by little.

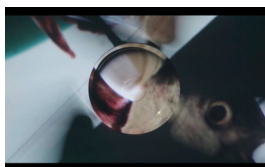
It's now probably eight years ago that I went with friends to Bali with a stop-over in Bangkok. We had twenty-four hours there and those were special. What I found out might not refer to Vietnam as much as I wish it to be, but still... What was shocking is this attitude of survival in the continuous entropy of an Asian megapolis, especially its slums. It's almost as if the attitude towards death is more mundane and everyday. The dangers are many and the feeling is of many people being ready to die or to fight for survival in extreme ways.

And it reminded me so much of the place where I grew up, of its ups and downs. This place is and was a kind of far away suburb in a large grey Russian city. At the time, there was a big regional market where one could buy and sell anything. It was a massive spot for trade of wares from Asia and the Middle East. Obviously, that included illegal things. As my city is close to the border of Kazakhstan, it's part of the big heroin trafficking route that goes out of Afghanistan and ends up here, in the privileged Western Europe.

The suburb was built as a housing project for young families and this was a massive mistake. But after that the Soviet Union collapsed, so there wasn't any money for anything else, not even the roads. So in my days, there were way too many teenagers and sort of complete chaos. My family is wonderful and was a sort of UFO that landed in the area. The contrast between the outside world and home was so bizarre. But the outside world was full of dangers and adventures. Most of them violent and either drug-or alcohol-related. Not all of my classmates survived school, as some of my teachers didn't either, and some ended up in horrible places. There were always exceptions, but the general rule was that you will probably live your life in the district. Out of that came the attitude of survival and as this was a very poor time, people really did anything to survive. But for those, who were willing to be perpetrators or had some little bit of power, this was paradise. Almost all the social norms were transcended and you were free of many social constraints. Albeit there were local rules but it was still more free, or seemed at least. And that entropy built on power and people trying to hold it together. Well, this I encountered in many other suburbs across Russia. Mine was different, of course, because I knew the people personally.



Thuy-Han Nguyen-Chi, *Synerisis, movement I*, 2018, film still. Courtesy: the artist.



Thuy-Han Nguyen-Chi, *Synerisis, movement VI*, 2019, film still. Courtesy: the artist.

So that's that.  
Thank you for all the authors and information, this helps.

B, a.