



Adrià Julià's Theatre of Eclipse

By Juli Carson

The word [eclipse]...summons up the old image - Chinese, Indian, Arab, Iranian, Japanese - of a dragon swallowing the sun, which is eclipsed by the moon. In French the reflexive verb s'eclipser, literally, to eclipse oneself, hovers between the usual meaning, to slip away, escape, and the figurative connotation, to disappear because of the brightness of another. Even obsession will never fix this word - it's always giving people the slip.

– Jean Genet, *Prisoners of Love*

To what do we return? And what do we repress (and thereby produce) along the way? These are the questions of history, culture, and, in a fundamental way, *home*. Specific to Vietnam's history—but common to other Asian, Middle Eastern, and African countries—colonial occupation spurred a postcolonial nostalgia for a pure, authentic past that never existed. Paradoxically, the result was the “reaffirmation” of a traditional canon that wasn't in fact indigenous, which is to say, a cultural origin that was never actually *there*. This quagmire of return evokes the same paradox of the eclipse—an operation whereby blocking a given light source simultaneously puts that source into relief. This too is the story of Diep Nguyen, a Vietnamese immigrant who, after 30 years of living in Southern California, returned to his native village in North Vietnam to build a home in the Neo-Colonial Southern California Tract style. It is a story that Adrià Julià “documents” in his film project *Truc Trang Walls*.

But I need to begin again. As Trinh T. Minh-ha notes, “There is no such thing as documentary. This assertion – as old and as fundamental as the antagonism between names and reality – needs incessantly to be restated, despite the very visible existence of a documentary tradition.”¹ First, the facts of Diep Nguyen's story, relayed by Julià:

Born in North Vietnam, in the small town of Truc Trang, close to the city of Haiphong, Diep Nguyen was forced to migrate to the South, to Saigon, after losing everything in the war against France. While living in Saigon, he was drafted to

*fight for the pro-American South Vietnamese army, although he was influenced by the revolutionary, independent, anti-imperialist ideas of the North. After the war, seeing as he had become part of the vanquished enemy, he had no choice but to flee to the country that had subdued him, the United States.*²

This is the Diaspora of countless Vietnamese refugees. After the August Revolution of 1945, whereupon Ho Chi Minh recited Vietnam's Declaration of Independence from Japanese occupation to a million people, many were forced to flee the French to South Vietnam during the War of Resistance from 1945-54, only later to flee from the North Vietnamese to America after Vietnam's unification in 1975. A realist depiction of this exodus would entail a didactic narrative, one transparently relaying Diep Nguyen's personal story in light of these historical events. When Minh-ha addressed the postwar Diaspora of Vietnamese women in her film *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam*, she squarely rejected the realist form, a refusal that provoked traditionalist film critic Vincent Canby to remark: “This is the kind of personal documentary in which the film maker's love of film making upstages the information instead of illuminating or supplementing it.”³ Canby overlooked the idea that a woman's “truth” might reside *within* the means of her representation, not outside it—ignoring, despite the film's title, an important clue. When North Vietnamese women were asked of their marital status, the readymade response was often “Surname Viet, Given Name Nam,” a performative oath of loyalty to the state and to Ho Chi Minh (also known as “Uncle”). This connection between one's personal identity and the state is not just ideological. In the case of Vietnam, it is also primordial. As Patricia M. Pelley notes, the root of the Vietnamese vernacular expression for “state” is based on the word for “house” (nhà) and even “spouse,”⁴ hence the paradoxical notion of the Marxist, Vietnamese *family-state*. And, by extension, it is the notion of a national family-drama, one in which each person plays his/her readymade social role within the confines of the familial hierarchy, that underscores the (repressed) fluidity between interior domestic spaces and exterior social spaces.

Truc Trang Walls is one such family drama. And yet, if Julià's film documents Diep Nguyen's return to his native village to

build a house, it presents this familial *mise-en-scène* in the form of a dream state. Indeed, like all dreams, the *facts* of the story are laid bare everywhere but are present in an eclipsed form. In the space of a realist narrative that has given us the slip, a rebus of partial images surfaces, directing us to another *mise-en-scène*: the impossibility of *being* outside one's representation produces the uncanny act of *playing* one's self.

Composed roughly in three parts, Julià's film opens with a continuous pan around a house under construction. The camera records partial elements: a palm tree, a rope, a worker's hands, a face, a rooftop, a bucket. The sound of a cement mixer, which sounds remarkably like a film projector, overwhelms any coherent dialogue. A real event is occurring in time and space, one that the camera “documents” but which we never see in full view. And yet if the workers, whom we have never seen before, seem so *familiar*, it is likely due to the “soviet” poses they strike for the camera, ones evocative of socialist realist poster art. A move to the interior of the house initiates the second section. Men continue to work on one side of the room while, on the other side, women gather and talk amongst themselves. Suddenly, the women begin to argue. One charges another. The action appears at once menacing and artificial. The camera records the fight, a sort of dance, and then pans right to record the men who continue to work seemingly unaffected by the commotion. Along the way, the camera catches Julià's lighting artifice and the hand of another cameraman. Finally, in part three, the women and men sit on chairs together in the same interior space. As each one enters the room, the phrase “come on in, and sit down” is repeated in Vietnamese. The group laughs and argues playfully, sounds from the inside intermingling with those from the outside. The camera records partial communications—bits and pieces of words and gestures. Something about a story of a dog chase is relayed for us in English by a disembodied voice. Someone is encouraged to “act it out for the camera.” And then the imperative, meant as much for the cameraman as for the viewer: “Mr. Nguyen, come on. You can see your image in the film. Maybe this thing will be famous.”

Above left: Untitled (*Truc Trang Walls*), color photograph, (48 x 62 inches), 2006
Above center, right, and cover: *Truc Trang Walls* (detail), film installation, 2006

But what exactly *is it* that Diep Nguyen and the others want to show Julià, the cameraman? And what, in turn, is Julià showing us? What is this family drama? Simply, it is the productive crisis of identity, beginning first in language, extended through family, and reflected in postcolonial nationalism.

Linguistically, the pronoun “I” in Vietnamese is not stable, changing in relation to the person being addressed. As a consequence, the particularities of traditional narrative based on a stable (camera) eye/I, what filmmakers call the point-of-view, do not conceptually apply in Diep Nguyen’s case. But this crisis of the “I” is not limited to Vietnamese culture; it is indicative of the broader colonial “I,” a subject that is only present in its masked form—that is, within quotations—for a Western audience. Hence the following paradox: the colonial drama, in any “authentic” form, must play itself out as a masked drama. The photographs accompanying Julià’s film demonstrate this drama. As representations of Diep Nguyen’s “collectables,” they point to the multiple points of conflicting identification: bullfighters from Barcelona, campaign buttons for Bill Clinton, busts of Lenin, flags from the Soviet Union, a mug from Las Vegas, etc. Julià emphasizes the surface value of the photograph and, by extension, the metonymic flattening of these contradictory “masks” of identification by “collaging” the fragments with an even focus. As such, the fragments are indexical of a man’s Diaspora, one that reiterates the shifting or floating “I.”

This operation – of putting on the diasporic mask – was understood first by Frantz Fanon who, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, describes the disembodied crisis of self-realization: the “fact” of blackness is a myth woven from a thousand anecdotes taken by the subject to be true.⁵ It was only later, in 1959, that Jean Genet’s play *The Blacks* extended Fanon’s observations to the crisis of white viewer-ship. The play, subtitled *A Clown Show*, is unconventionally plot-less. A group of blacks perform the ritual re-enactment of their resentments and feelings of revenge before a white audience through a re-enactment of the ritual murder of a white woman. First performed in the United States at the Saint Mark’s Playhouse in New York, this “plot-less” play is, in fact, an allegorical re-enactment and/or indictment of white passivity in the face of race struggles that defined 50s and 60s political policy in America and France. In his preface to the script, Genet stipulated: “This play, written, I repeat by a white man, is intended for a white audience...But what if no white person accepted? Then let white masks be distributed to the black spectators as they enter the theatre. And if the blacks refuse the masks, then let a dummy be used.”⁶

Fast forward to *Truc Trang Walls*: “Come on in, and sit down...”

Seeing as *The Blacks* was staged in New York City, at the dawn of the American War against Vietnam, it is as much an indictment of American passivity vis-à-vis the attempt to re-colonize Vietnam as it is an indictment of white racism against blacks in America and France. Genet’s play ends

with Archibald, the stage manager, thanking the blacks that have impersonated the whites, saying:

The time has not yet come for presenting dramas about noble matters. But perhaps they suspect what lies behind this architecture of emptiness and words. We are what they want us to be. We shall therefore be it to the very end, absurdly.

Julià’s film ends similarly unresolved, looping back to the workers who pose for the camera outside the house. Indeed, *the time has not yet come for presenting dramas about noble matters*. In its place, Julià gives us fragments of plot, repetition of scenes, and non-narrative structure, which together present a vertiginous dreamscape at once seductive and menacing. Notably, these filmic devices are not, as Canby might have it, just about the love of filmmaking. They are visualizations of a family drama – or rather a repressed *global trauma* – that seems to endlessly return, looping from Vietnam to America and back to Vietnam, most recently by way of a prolonged detour through Iraq. In lieu of this endless colonial return, the fracturing of classic notions of time, space, and nation is productive. For it resists the mythological colonial “I” concomitant with the West’s “democratizing” of the so-called third world, on the one hand, and the East’s (resistant) claim of ethnic purity, on the other. This was the “I” of so-called noble matters that Genet resisted so tenaciously to the end. In a likeminded way, Julià aims at presenting a set of repressed, hybrid identifications, manifest *between* the delineations East and West. To this effect *Truc Trang Walls* offers us a theatre of eclipse, one in which the definition of self delicately hovers in the balance between disappearance and brightness.

¹ Trinh T. Minh-ha, “Documentary Is/Not a Name,” October, (Spring, 1990).

² Adrià Julià, Exhibition Proposal, 2005

³ Vincent Canby, “Women’s Status in Vietnam in Documentary Form,” New York Times, (April 1, 1989).

⁴ Patricia Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

⁵ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, (London: Pluto Press, 1986).

⁶ Jean Genet, *The Blacks: A Clown Show*, (New York: Grove Press, 1960).

Adrià Julià TRUC TRANG WALLS

September 28 - October 20, 2006

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Brochure design: Lindi Emoungu

This exhibition is supported by the State
Corporation for Spanish Cultural Action
Abroad (www.seacex.es)



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