

Tangled In Beauty

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*If I could make the world as pure and strange as what I see,
I'd put you in the mirror I put in front of me.*

—The Velvet Underground

Morning sunlight streaks through the humid air, stripes the wrinkled sheets with gold, and falls across the face of a young man, his hair and clothes already limp from the heat. Birds chirp along with the shrill beep of a watch alarm. The man rolls over heavily, throws out an arm, and grabs something on the shelf behind his bed. The opening chords of the Velvet Underground's "Pale Blue Eyes" drift from a small pair of speakers. He opens the curtain beside him to reveal another bed, pushed so close to his that the bed frames are touching. The shape of a curled body is now visible through a canopy of mosquito netting. The man leans over and pulls gently at the sheets.

"Liên, wake up."

No response. He scoots to the edge of the bed and squints into the sun. He stands, stretches, and pads across the room, passing through a hanging curtain of iridescent green beads that clatter and clink. When he lifts the netting, we can see the other half of the room: sunny yellow walls, canvasses, a cloudy mirror, and a body in white pants and a purple camisole, asleep on the white sheets.

"*Em gái*, wake up!" he says. He's calling her "little sister," an affectionate form of address used also by husbands speaking to their wives.

The frame shifts to a close-up of the man's hand gently rocking the woman's shoulder, then drifts down to her face and the nest of tangled black hair splayed across the pillow.

"Liên, it's late."

"Let me sleep a bit more," she mumbles, hugging the sheets, eyes still closed.

"No way. Today is mom's memorial. You have to help our big sisters in the kitchen."

And thus, sweetly and sleepily, begins Vietnamese filmmaker Tran Anh Hung's *Vertical Ray of the Sun*. The film opens a window into the lives of three sisters and a retinue of husbands, children, lovers, friends, and in-laws. We watch them dance through a radiant summer month before the curtain is drawn again before our eyes. In that timeframe, the family is shaken but not broken by a series of domestic misadventures, and each character grows as slowly and imperceptibly as the potted plants in Liên's bohemian apartment. Liên's older sister Suong has an unhappy marriage; both she and her photographer husband have longstanding extramarital affairs. Khanh, the middle sister, is newly pregnant. Her marriage seems to be a blissful contrast to Suong's, until her husband, a novelist suffering from writer's block, goes away to Saigon for research and comes dangerously close to infidelity himself. Meanwhile, their brother Hai, the young man from the opening scene, slips quietly and unobtrusively through the film, uninvolved in most of the family drama. He only appears in scenes with Liên and speaks to no one but her; his sole purpose seems to be to complete her character through dialogue. He brings out her youthful, playful side, while in scenes with her sisters or other adults, she is more reserved and self-consciously mature.

In his review for *The New York Times*, A. O. Scott described the film as "an oblique, visually intoxicating story." The term "oblique" refers to the lack of linearity, or what some might call focus, in the storyline: there are many secondary characters, all of whom have miniature subplots of their own, and none of these subplots really insist on resolution or even continuation. The film takes place over the month between the anniversaries of the beloved parents' deaths. Plot events start, end, and develop independently of this somewhat arbitrary time frame. Tran drifts away altogether from some of the thinner narrative threads, but as viewers, we don't really mind. The phrase "visually intoxicating" explains why: the images in *Vertical Ray* are breathtaking. Cinematographer Mark Lee Ping-Bin paints every beautifully composed shot with the vibrant color of a Matisse painting; the light is bright and golden, the frames so vivid and visually immediate you feel as though you could reach out and ripple the water in the washbasin before rubbing paint slivers off the stained, damp walls. Liên's broad knife cuts a melon cleanly open, and we can feel and smell the magenta-red pulp as she scoops the seeds out with pale fingers.

The film's beauty makes it both oblique and intoxicating, but this combination presents a pair of problems for the viewer. The aesthetics often overshadow both the narrative and the questions it raises. At times *Vertical Ray* seems like a series of gorgeous postcards placed in a row, a work of artifice

reminiscent of Gustave Flaubert's description of the "recklessness of style" in *La Tentation de Saint Antoine*: "How passionately I carved the beads of my necklace! I forgot only one thing—the string" (154). Yet despite lacking a driving narrative force, *Vertical Ray* still seems held together by a "string" other than the conventional, expected one. It is not governed by the trajectory of problem-climax-resolution. But that does not make it less effective.

The film's sensory richness and visual brilliance hold *Vertical Ray* together on their own. The soundtrack is perhaps the strongest unifying force, switching between contemporary-sounding orchestral strings, songs in Vietnamese, and American and British rock ballads. The *mise-en-scène* is consistently infused with melodies that complement its sound effects. It's full of water—splashing into a sink, trickling through the garden, sloshing against the sides of a plastic washbasin, dripping off long snaky black hair, pouring from the clouds, spattering onto cement sidewalks and plastic umbrellas, streaming off the backs of swimming children, and flowing outward in gentle ripples as motorcycles hydroplane through flooded streets. Even the other sounds are water-like—or at least begin to seem water-like over time: the clattering of the bead curtain, the clinking of dinnerware, crickets chirping, children shouting, the muted putter of motors, and the birdsong that drifts through the window that Hai unfastens each morning as Liên arises drowsily from wrinkled sheets.

Repeated scenes of Liên and Hai waking provide us with another point of reference. There are five scenes set in the delicately ornamented apartment, spaced evenly throughout the film. Each one differs in its details, but follows the same basic pattern with the same elements: the insistent beeping of Hai's alarm, the morning birdsong, Liên's magnificently sleep-tousled hair, the pleasant morning sounds wafting in on the same breeze that lifts the curtains in one gentle, continuous billow. The waking scenes act as narrative thumbtacks, pinning the languid chains of beautiful shots and meandering plot elements to a fixed and graspable timeline. They constitute Tran's own unique "string."

Beauty also preserves the film's moral and social ambiguities. The lives of the older sisters are laced with infidelity, conflict, and tears. Liên seems relatively uninterested in a marriage of her own, content to climb into Hai's bed at night and teasingly insist that people on the street see them as a couple. In fact, Liên's relationship with Hai is a little unsettling; her adoration toes the line between the sisterly and the incestuous. No lines are ever crossed—other than the one between their two adjacent beds—but Liên seems just a little too dependent on her brother. This kind of unsettling ambiguity and taboo ought

to leave the viewer with something of a sour uneasiness, but the smell of the summer air and the chirping of the crickets make it palatable. A. O. Scott describes the film as “Chekhovian,” but aside from some superficial plot similarities to “The Three Sisters,” it is not. The golden light, the happy, serene domestic scenes, the wide-open unobstructed composition of each shot do not convey a feeling of decay or hopelessness.

Which adulterer—Suong or her husband—do we feel more sympathy for, and why? Is Suong’s decision to let her husband stay with his mistress a sign of maturity, or a sign that she’s making the best of a situation she’s stuck in, given her child and lack of independent income? Why is it acceptable that the women in *Vertical Ray* are constantly cooking, cleaning, and thinking about marriage and children, while the men are all brooding artists of one kind or other?

These questions don’t come up. Tran and Lee choose to keep us distracted. Suong may be going through a crisis, but the delicately arranged tray of teacups at her feet draws our attention more than her despairing pose. In interviews, the director has also been ambiguous about his own intentions; he denies any deeper meaning in his films’ symbolism, even though they are crafted to be symbolic. Instead, he claims that he is only concerned with “the construction of the film” itself (Sklar) and with discussing the unique “rhythm . . . of the Vietnamese soul” (Cross). Lee was cinematographer for Wong Kar-Wai’s film *In The Mood For Love*, which is, like *Vertical Ray*, visually masterful. But *Mood* allows us to remain in control of our own senses; we are never so captivated by the visual that we lose ourselves or our perspective on the characters and their actions. In *Vertical Ray* Tran and Lee never allow us to become more compelled by the human drama than the beauty of things.

The third time we wake up with Hai, the watch alarm beeps and the day creaks into being, as though all the previous scenes were a dream. This time rain pours onto the cobblestones outside the apartment window. The sky is gray, but the colors in the scene are just as vibrant, the light warm and comforting. After the usual waking routine, they sit by the window and look out at the downpour. Their conversation turns to a scene that Hai, a small-time screen actor, has to film that evening. He describes it to Liên, and they reenact it together: a simple, dialogue-less scene in which the heroine faces away from Hai’s character (a “bit part” that he complains will get edited out of the movie). He grabs her arm, she turns, and they look at each other. It is an inconsequential gesture, clearly pretend, until we see it repeated by different characters in subsequent scenes—Suong and her lover, and Liên and her boyfriend Ho (a bit part).

We begin to sense that the film folds in on itself, becoming self-referential, an artful tangle of golden light and delicate music. Tran won't let us out. He keeps pulling us back into the gorgeous world, and with every new morning, sunlit breakfast, rush of rainwater, we are captivated all over again. In the same letter in which he describes his passionately carved beads without the string, Flaubert wrote one of his most famous musings: "What seems beautiful to me, what I should like to write, is a book about nothing, which would be held together by the internal strength of its style . . . a book which would have almost no subject." Flaubert goes on to opine that the less meaningful, the less specific, an expression is, the closer it comes to being art: "the finest works are those that contain the least matter" (154).

Is *Vertical Ray of the Sun* a film "about nothing," like Flaubert's artistic ideal? It is indeed held together by style more than anything else. Everything is sacrificed for the sake of style, as if Tran were following Flaubert's rules: "There are no noble subjects or ignoble subjects . . . there is no such thing as subject—style in itself being an absolute manner of seeing things" (154). And Tran's "manner of seeing things," his free-flowing lyricism, is far more compelling than the actions of his characters.

But Tran does not eschew subject entirely—he just makes style the subject. He focuses on things that are usually deemed too insignificant, too circumstantial—a set of teacups rather than a weeping, betrayed wife. He ties us up in his magnificent creation and won't let us go until we've seen a timeless Vietnam through the emerald lens of childhood, a Vietnam contained within every misplaced rubber ball, fallen flower petal, and shiny braid. Far from being a film about nothing, *Vertical Ray of the Sun* is a film about everything. It is a vision in every sense of the word.

*Goodbye, everyone, this time I won't get to stay,
Goodbye, everyone, I have so many things to say*
—*The Married Monk*

In the final scene, Liên dances alone in the room, eyes closed, unbound hair swaying across her back. The scene shifts gently a few minutes later when Hai comes into the room. Liên is dressed and groomed. Church bells ring slowly in the distance as they discuss the day's memorial service—their father's. Still gently teasing each other, they gather their things and walk out the door, and the screen goes black. We hear one final chirp, one last gong of the church bell, and the door closes behind them. White title text appears on the screen: "À LA VERTICALE DE L'ÉTÉ," and after a moment the cred-

its begin to roll. We sit there, a little shocked from the gentle but abrupt withdrawal, still entwined in the threads that Tran has woven around us. And we know they are not plot threads. They could never be. But we remain still, tangled in the song that is, like water, everywhere around us.

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