

From "Thin" Familiarity to "thick" strangeness: Thinking the Other in *The Journey of Van Nguyen* (Duki Dror, director, 2005)

In one of the most disturbing scenes in the film *The Journey of Van Nguyen*—at least, for Israeli-Jewish viewers—Van, the narrator, and her father are in a Muslim graveyard in Jaffa. They are about to travel to Vietnam, from which the family fled in 1977, and they have come to the graveyard to worship their dead. The dead are twin girls that died at birth a few years after the family found refuge in Israel. While burning incense and setting fruits and tea on top of the gravestones for the spirits of the deceased, according to Vietnamese custom, the father explains how his daughters came to be buried in a Muslim graveyard: "We went to the Jews, but they said 'no'...; we went to the Christians, but they said 'no'...; then we went to the Muslims and they let us bury our dead.... I didn't know what to do."

In many ways, this scene captures the essence of the paradox in which the Vietnamese "boat people" who found refuge in Israel in the late 1970s are locked: a small group of people forcibly thrown from their war-torn homeland to a very different part of the world, only to find themselves trapped in another violent conflict, one that has outlasted the war in Vietnam and seems to be going on forever. Van's journey to Vietnam is therefore an attempt to reclaim the past that should have been, to return her personal history to the route it should have taken had her family not been catapulted violently away from everything that was normal, meaningful and precious. But like any attempt to live the past that should have been, Van's endeavor is tragic and futile. For example, when she faces her father's mythical foe, the village head that put a gun to his head and told him to leave and never come back, thus sending her family into exile, the man that haunted her nights as a child, she realizes that accepting the present, where he is just "an old man," means rejecting her father's narrative, the one that shaped her life and identity.

The Journey of Van (and not "Vaan," a failed attempt at capturing the tonal nature of Vietnamese without using diacritical marks) touches on many aspects of modern migration: it is about the social category of migrants and its lived, experienced phenomenology; it is about the relationship between migrants and the "old country"; it is about "migrants' time," which oscillates between the past and present and often lacks future; it is about Vietnam and its love-hate relationship with the huge Vietnamese diaspora; and it is also about Israel and Israeliness, and about the failed Israeli attempt to naturalize migrants, as opposed to the 'absorption' Jewish *olim*. These and other themes are treated in the film in different ways and, indeed, with differing levels of effectiveness, depth and success. However, for the purposes of this review we shall focus on one aspect that is not only central to the film, but in many ways makes it unique: the *languages* used, which weave the texture of the film and create its multilayered character.

At first, it seems that Hebrew and Vietnamese, the languages spoken in *The Journey of Van*, contribute to the sharp dichotomy between the "Israel" and the "Vietnam" depicted in the film: modern and traditional, Western and Eastern, urban

and rural, alienated and socially harmonious, violent and peaceful respectively. However, as both languages are spoken in different registers within different contexts, the use of language undermines the very binaries the film explicitly portrays, suggesting to those viewers/listeners who can capture the nuances that things are more complicated than they seem.

Two self-narratives make for the discursive frame of the story—one is a story of the journey of a refugee, Van's father; the other is Van's journey for her identity. Both self-narratives are written in "real time" throughout the film: the father writes his with a ballpoint pen in an old-style ruled notebook, calligraphically drawing Vietnamese letters; Van types her story on the Internet in the Israeli site "Isra-Blog," right into cyberspace, in a very "updated" teenage Hebrew. These two self-narratives not only differ in the language they use and the media they apply, but also represent two ways of articulating one's identity, two different discourses of self. The father's discourse is reminiscent of a story-telling: laconic and precise, centering on the events, the facts of experience, the context and the history. We learn less about his own reflections and emotions, his proscription, the experience of the re-education camp, the exhausting journey by sea; we can only imagine them. Van's blogging is different: it is a therapeutic-style meta-discourse on self and identity, focused exclusively on herself, her obsessive self-analysis, her sterile meta-reflections that lack awareness of the surrounding context, missing its basic events and meanings. Though Van's narrative of immigrant in a new society is supposed to be more familiar and closer to the Israeli viewer, it is the father's story that is more involving and invokes empathy and interest. There is not enough in the categories of "Vietnamese" and "Israeli" to understand the generational and discursive difference between these two intertwined worlds of the father and daughter. It is a difference between alienation and sensitiveness, dichotomic imagination and ambiguous experiences, and also between youthful confidence and experienced wisdom.

Van recounts her story, written and told, in fluent Hebrew, the language she seems most comfortable with. However, while speaking Hebrew, she and her sisters, who grew up in Israel from a very young age, have a unique accent, shaped by the tonal character of Vietnamese. This accent makes them unmistakably foreign for the Israeli viewer/listener, yet the nature of this foreignness remains unclear, as this is such a rare accent. However, when the adults have a conversation, the youngest sister (born in Israel) feels awkward: "I don't understand them ... they speak too fast, I don't belong to them ... I don't understand them." In this sense, language becomes an arena of both family consolidation and estrangement: "My parents are different" she later tells her friend, an Arab-speaking girl, in the courtyard.

It is of little wonder, then, that Jewish-Israeli kids (the family's neighbors in the poor Jewish-Arab neighborhood of Jaffa D) refer to the young sister as "Japanese." Indeed, many of the Vietnamese immigrants in Israel have ended up working in Chinese restaurants, capitalizing on the only asset they have which could have been marketed to Israelis: their slanted eyes that, in Israel, relegate them to the broad category of 'Chinese', with 'Japanese' as a synonym. Similarly, Van's father, who

works in a (Chinese? Thai? Oriental?) restaurant, speaks Hebrew with his employer, but his Hebrew is extremely limited and so heavily accented that it is hardly intelligible (and, therefore, is accompanied by Hebrew subtitles).

Once in Vietnam, however, Hebrew becomes the intimate language Van and her father use when they want to communicate privately. But when speaking Hebrew, the power structure is undermined: whereas Vietnamese grammar and pronunciation are based on age hierarchy, once switching to Hebrew, Van speaks to her father in an instructive and demanding tone and manner completely unacceptable for a Vietnamese child. And while we can't see the reaction of those Vietnamese present, her father's forced smile and silence hint of his embarrassment at the public breach of etiquette, which can be tolerated in Israel (where first-generation Israelis often function as translators for their parents, a situation that potentially turns parent-child relations upside down), but not in Vietnam.

At the same time, these nuances are probably the film's weakest points: in order to decipher the symbolism in the film, the viewer must speak Hebrew and Vietnamese and possess knowledge of both cultures. Unfortunately, potentially knowledgeable viewers are very few (no more than a couple of hundred Vietnamese migrants that remained in Israel and their children), as both Israeli and Vietnamese viewers are unable to understand much of what is shown and said about the other culture. In this respect, it is of little wonder that the film raised a lot of interest in Vietnamese diasporic centers: while Vietnamese migrants in the U.S. and Western Europe probably know very little about Israel, they are intimately acquainted with the 'Vietnamese migrant' phenomenon and hence can decipher the encoding.

For the critical Israeli viewer, the film offers moments of familiarity and self-recognition, even if they are not obvious or expected. "I'm going to help my father to take his land back," says Van to her Israeli friends before her departure to Vietnam. As she states, she knows very little about the place, the country or the culture. She does not want to live in Vietnam. She only has "an idea"—an idea of her father's right to the territory, to the land, to the Home. Later, while sitting with her newly introduced uncle, she repeats this notion over and over and does not really hear how her uncle tries to calm her down: "Yes ... but things do not work that way." The expected difficulties when reclaiming "the land" only excite her—she wants "to insist," "to prove ownership rights," she blames her Vietnamese family for being too passive. Moreover, when in Vietnam, the idea of "the land" actually takes shape within the beautiful landscape and welcoming family, depicting a past that should have been and a potential future: "If we'll have the land, I'll come back here".

So Van's father takes her to the village of his youth, to "the land," to the house that does not exist anymore. Van sees the land. The beauty and size impress her enormously—"Up to those buildings? All this? I want this ALL!!!" However, there are people living on this land, in a house they have built; they are local *olim hadashim* (new immigrants), as Van's father names them ironically. The new settlers (who bought the land from the new regime) invite Van and her father to their

house, offer them tea, and the conversation about “the land” and “the home” begins. “Ask them how we could buy it. How much do they want?”, Van expresses herself very assertively in Hebrew. “Ask them if they want to leave instead and we’ll make an exchange.” Her father gently complies and gets the polite answer: “I might wish to live elsewhere, but I have no place but this. Maybe that’s why you wish to come back.... At the end of the journey there is no place like home.” This is more than Van can bear; upset, she gets up and leaves the place angrily.

It is too much for the very Israeli Van to conceive of a situation where the Home you have already imagined as belonging to you could be also a real home for the other. This home could be understood differently by him, chosen for a different reason and within a different historical context, but it is still his home. It is too much for her to recognize that fulfillment of the “ownership” and “right” would involve a violent exercise of power over others, oppressing them and inflicting suffering. Perhaps, as an Israeli, she doesn’t really care. Van does not appreciate the extremely kind suggestion of the new landowners “to come and live on the land” just next to them. She feels that she deserves it “ALL”; it would not be “special enough” just to share the land.

Finally, she finds it hard to discover that the relations between “me” and “other” could be much more complicated and much less dual than that of “power” and “weakness,” “one of us” and “the enemy,” “the winner” and “the victim.” This is why she is so confused observing the friendly manner in which her father meets the “bad man” who threatened him with a gun 30 years before. “Why are you so nice?”, she asks him.

Facing the challenge, and even the irrelevance, of her taken-for-granted Israeli ways of thinking and judging reality, Van is experiencing a sort of discovery of herself. But this time she articulates herself not only through the tortures of the post-modern therapeutic soul, as now she sees herself “in the context” of Vietnam and its history. Before the journey, she is not totally ignorant, but her familiarity with Vietnam is “thin.” Her “Vietnamese-ness” is based on the use of language with her parents, but first and foremost on her “difference” from the surrounding context—her non-Jewishness and slanted eyes. In her inner experience, she is Israeli, but she looks different.

When Van’s sister is recruited into the Israeli army, she is asked whether she is the first Vietnamese to be inducted. Her strangeness is in her looks. The visibility produces a particular sort of strangeness within the experience of belonging and familiarity. We see just the opposite condition at the end of the journey, as we walk with Van on the streets of urban Vietnam. For us, and as she reflects by herself, she is an integral part of the picture: her looks are absolutely integrated in this space. But while her looks are familiar, she does not belong: “I walk here as a tourist, I walk here as an Israeli,” she tells us. Van is not a tourist in Vietnam, but she is existentially and phenomenologically a stranger. Her relation with this place has changed. She has lost her confidence in what Vietnam is, in the fact that she belongs to it and the land belongs to her, that she still has a right. Vietnamese culture, even

its language, is no longer a “thin” familiar connection, but rather represents a complicated, sometimes painful and always imperfect world that one could experience and learn, decipher in an attempt to understand. But her strangeness now is very “thick”—it is a strong experience of the other and the different world, and it is always emotional and confusing. “I want to be at home,” cries Van at the end of the film, “but I also want so many other things.”

We could expect that, after the discovery of her “real” Vietnam connection, Van would strive to thicken her strangeness with meaning and understanding. This would, hopefully, allow a new kind of familiarity. Yet today she looks Vietnamese but she feels different. Someone in the street calls her a *Viet Kieu* (overseas Vietnamese). Explaining what *Viet Kieu* are, Van says: “They look like Vietnamese, but they are not really”; they are Vietnamese who live “in the West.” However, Van’s home is not in the “West,” but rather in the Middle East, in Israel, the land that so many people claim and imagine to be “all theirs.”

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