

Film is a language: Carol Nguyen's identities

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Canadian-Vietnamese award-winning filmmaker, Carol Nguyen, is at the age of 19 and already counts with more than sixty appearances at film festivals around the world. She has directed 10 short films between high school and the university, discussing, in particular, identity and cultural heritage. Ambassador of the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) for the campaign *Share her journey*, Nguyen received three awards at TIFF *Jumpcuts* and two at the Grand Prize High School Winner at the Heartland Film Festival.

Nguyen was one of the filmmakers invited to the 45th Gramado Film Festival (Brazil), in which Canada was honored. During the Festival, Nguyen exhibited three short films and composed the panel "Women of the audiovisual". The panel, which was also attended by the Canadian filmmaker Amber Fares, by the producer Lucy Barreto, by Eloiza Mara da Silva, from the Brazilian National Film Agency (Ancine), and by Eva Piwowarski, curator of the Gramado Film Festival, discussed the issue of gender in the film industry, all under the moderation of the Consul General of Canada in Sao Paulo, Stéphane Larue.

In this interview, held in August 2017, at the 45th Gramado Film Festival, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, Nguyen comments on the themes that currently move her productions. A descendant of Vietnamese immigrants, Nguyen uses subtle visual poetics to represent permanence, losses and resignifications of traditional and familiar customs that are constantly intertwined by the fusion of cultural horizons. *Uprooted* (2013), one of her first productions, is an animation that tells the story of her father's painful departure from Vietnam - a country the filmmaker has not yet met - and his subsequent adaptation to Canada. In *How do you pronounce pho?* (2014), Nguyen portrays the difficulty of preserving customs while faced with insertion into a strange community. How to prepare a meal whose main ingredient can't be found in the supermarket? And how to convey such knowledge to your descendants? Nguyen says that three

generations are enough for a culture to be assimilated. This problem is latent in her last short film, *Every Grain of Rice* (2017), in which the filmmaker exposes the anguish of being part of this generation of transition. In the film, Nguyen narrates memories that are confused with her own dreams and stories conveyed by her ancestors, stating that "when someone dies, they always take something with them." Nguyen supports much of her production in oral tradition, in narrators that open windows of cognition to the past and to identities that are lost or changing.

You are a young filmmaker at the very beginning of what it seems to be an interesting and rewarding career. As far as we know, your films are all short films. How does this format work for you? Do you think about producing feature films?

I am only 19 and don't feel prepared to make a feature film yet. And, also, what comes with a feature film is the budget, right? A lot of money! I am not in a point stable enough of my career to do that. However, I do know that when I am ready in order to do make a feature film, it will be a documentary. But, as up to now, a lot of short films are going visible and it is just more convenient to the stories I want to tell, because It's more compact and I don't need too much time to explain them. But, yes, maybe in a few years I'll do a feature film.

Do you already know what the documentary will be about?

Yes. With all my films we could see a thread of culture, family and identity. I really would love my first feature film to be a documentary. Documenting my parents going back to Vietnam for the first time, because they left the country several decades ago and they haven't been back yet. Vietnam isn't their mother land anymore. It's not the country where they grew up anymore. To see their return and, also, to connect to my roots for the first time will be a very impactful experience. I think I will learn a lot about myself and how my parents grew up. I will see how the transition to another country really is and, also, how this return impacts on them. I want the first one to be a symbolic film about my beginnings, which is also their beginnings.

Why did you choose audiovisual as a strand of artistic expression?

Because film is an universal language. There are three components to film: there is the audio part, the visual part and then the intangible part, which is the symbolic part. You can cut to one thing and then cut to another, creating a whole new meaning. Film is a language where you put two images together: you put a man in one picture and then you cut to a woman. It doesn't mean a man and a woman anymore. It creates lust, creates passion, love. That universal language allows me to connect with everyone. You don't have to speak English to understand someone else's film. You don't have to understand Vietnamese. Film allows you to express in a way that you don't have to use language. You don't have to use something tangible. And film is a means where you can say something without not having to write anything at all. You don't have to tell someone 'oh, this is a very dramatic shot'. You can feel it! Because everyone is human and everyone knows how sadness feels like, what love feels like. So, by seeing a good shot you can be triggered. Film allows you to do that, and with my experience as second-generation Vietnamese-Canadian there are often a lot of experiences that I can't even explain to myself. I can show it on the screen, I can make someone act it out or edit it in a way you will could be able feel how I feel. There are some experiences and some dramatic feelings that I have that I cannot verbally communicate.

The production of a film requires several elements that need to be carefully thought through and worked on. In your films, we see that you contemplate most of these positions, such as art direction, scene direction, photography, production and sound design among others. You really are a filmmaker. What is the special reason for you to conceive the multiple details of your productions?

I'll speak, specially, about art direction, because I think I'm most precise with art direction, and this is going back to language and symbols. I really like to embed meaning and symbolic interpretations into my art direction, because there are is so much that I want to say that I can't say all through the narrative of the dialog itself. And it's very important for me to insert my own personal culture, heritage and my understanding of the things that I'm talking about in the film. So, for example, I use the

color white a lot and white to me is very personal, because I have two identities: the western identity and the Vietnamese identity, which is the Asian identity. And it's very dual sometimes. The white color, to the westerners, stands for peace, hope, it's the color you wear to weddings and it's purity, but to a lot of Asians it's quite the opposite. White in the Asian culture means death. And, for me, white has a very personal relationship with death, because as a child I've grown up with a lot of deaths and funerals. I use white a lot because I want to emphasize that there is a dual meaning in my identity, that there is a dual meaning between life and death, and love and hope, and that's just one example. I try for everything in my films to have a meaning. Because I feel like that's important if you're trying to build a world. Everything must be there for a reason. I even care and give attention to what my characters wear. In *Façade*, for example, they all wear turtle necks, because they are choking in that environment, they can't breathe, because they are there isolated, alone. So, with my art I think I'm very precise because I want everything to have a meaning. And, if someone asks me about it, I can pinpoint why it's there and what is its meaning is.

In general, arts, such as literature, music, and cinema, as aesthetic manifestations of a way of being-in-the-world, have a special way in ability to humanize points of view. What is the importance of dialogue with others in the formation of our identity? How important is it to introduce reflections on cultural identity in a world where the apparent dilution of boundaries does not necessarily correspond to the acceptance of differences?

I think it's a very good question. These world of multiculturalism is growing, and that's what our world is going to be. My generation, especially in North America, is the generation that in which our parents were immigrants. They came to North America, building it of not only of white people, but also ethnic people. This is what it's going to be like. My generation is the generation that is growing up and contemplating identity, because they are in the western society, but they have a whole different identity at home. So, this theme and this identity - I wouldn't say crisis -, but theme and concept, is the only thing that our world is going to be growing out of at such an exponential rate. Because of globalization, people are very open-minded and going to different places

now. You know, what are the chances of me marrying Vietnamese or Asian men?

This is something that we must talk about, because this is where our world is right now. Especially in North America, where multiculturalism is such a huge thing. And when we talk about multiculturalism it's really celebrated, you know, "oh, we're diverse, congratulations, we have Asian people, black people, white people, we have everyone". What we don't talk about is that multiculturalism is a very friendly way for assimilation, which is a loss of culture. This is what we're dealing with. I worry that one day my children won't understand my parents and their language anymore. My children won't understand Vietnamese. My children won't understand what it feels like to be Vietnamese, what is to be Vietnamese, because who knows, their father could be someone from another culture, and this is what we have to deal with. It's not necessarily a bad thing, it's not a bad thing at all. I'm very proud to be Canadian and Vietnamese. But it's something we have to talk about, because a lot of people like myself are not clear about their identity and need it to be discussed. Need support from others, who are like us.

Canada is the country honored at the 45th Gramado Film Festival. What is the importance of promoting this exchange, especially in the cinema field?

I think it's extremely important because of the culture and the industry. Culturally, as much knowledge as you could spread, as a human being, to another with differences, I think that's beautiful. Because we all have different experiences on this Earth and if you could express that to one another and meet someone who is totally different and relate to him, that's beautiful. Whether that is Canada and Brazil or two other countries. But, I also think it's very important that two industries connect, the Brazilian (South American) industry and North American industry. Because right now film is so exclusive to Hollywood. And what Hollywood is, is very... just Americans. And the way that the system is built is not inclusive at all to women, to ethnic people, to ethnic women, to ethnic men from all different places. So, if we can break into Hollywood then is our responsibility to create something better, and to create inclusivity for ourselves. So, that is what we are doing right now by that connection between Canada and Brazil.

The panel to which you were invited to attend during the Festival has on its roots the issue of gender in the film industry. Why is it important to bring this discussion to the official Festival's program?

It was a great panel. I feel very happy with how it went and I think we need more events like this to create better equity for women and ethnic people in films, because right now what we need is equity and not equality. And what it means is: we do not have the same advantages as men right now in the industry. So, we need that leverage and that support in order to get there. More than that: we need more panels and workshops, to educate more people and bring awareness.

A lot of people think equity is unfair, but what equity really means is, for example, if there was a disable person and a person like me, equality is forcing all of us to take the stairs. That disable person cannot make it up the stairs, because he, or she, doesn't have that privilege of the health that I do. Equity means that we give that person a ramp, something that he can compete with. So that's what we need for women right now, and this exposure and the panels will do that.

I can tell you for sure that it is working, because as a young filmmaker I could feel that fight that my elder female filmmaker colleagues had fought for me to experience the privilege that I have experienced on films right now. I have to thank the women that came before me, who have faced discrimination and sexism in order for younger people like me to have the possibility to be here. Without that I wouldn't be here, so I will just say "continue what we're doing, and one day we'll get there".

What is and how does the Share her journey campaign work? What's the importance of projects like this for equity of gender in the film industry?

The Share her journey is a campaign from TIFF. They are gathering female ambassadors like myself and other female ambassadors from all around the world to get us to share our stories in films to help empower other women. Our main goal is to raise 3 million dollars in the span of 3 years and what they will do with that is to create more workshops with women about business and films, about technical abilities and storytelling, so we can have the tools to compete with people who are already in the

industry. That's basically what the campaign is, and TIFF is doing a great job at trying to create inclusivity. They are trying to do a 50/50 female to male directive films right now in their current festival. So, every year they're pushing for gender equality, even with their younger workshops, I can tell, because I came from a younger sector from TIFF, called Jumpcuts, and it was 50/50 male to women. As far as Canada, I can say that one third of our industry is run by Hollywood, which is not good, because we don't control that. They shoot in Canada, they bring their own crews, they can hire who they want to hire, so we can't have much control of that. But with the independent scene, the underground scene, we are improving. Specially with the other scenes like my generation at the university. We can choose our own crews to work with. So that's improving a lot.



Carol Nguyen

Notes

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³ As questões são fruto de trabalho conjunto dos entrevistadores e foram propostas, presencialmente, à cineasta Carol Nguyen por estes. A coleta de material para embasá-las surgiu, sobretudo, da análise dos filmes de Nguyen, disponíveis em sua página no site *Vimeo*, a partir dos quais os entrevistadores debateram a formulação das questões conforme suas áreas de atuação. A transcrição foi realizada, também, de forma conjunta, a partir da reprodução do áudio da entrevista gravada com a cineasta durante o 45º Festival de Cinema de Gramado. A tradução foi realizada por Lucas Moser Goulart. A revisão da tradução foi realizada por Ingrid Gehlen Castro.

⁴ Toronto International Film Festival.