

Which Revolution?

Spike Magazine Issue #70
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Stills from *IF REVOLUTION IS A SICKNESS*, 2021, 4K Video, Sound, 18:53 min.

An underlying strain in Diane Severin Nguyen’s (*1990) new video *IF REVOLUTION IS A SICKNESS* (2021)—the Vietnamese diaspora in former Soviet satellite states like Eastern Germany, the Czech Republic, and Poland—still feels unfamiliar. But Poland has a considerable Vietnamese minority, and by now, also a growing K-Pop subculture, trending largely among teenagers.

The film is formally split in four parts, indicated by a change of the subtitle font, along with the voice and language in which it is dubbed. The first portrays a young Vietnamese girl alone in a desolate Eastern European fall landscape; her outfit suggests a peasant dress of the kind idealized in many former socialist states. In her solitude, she is accompanied only by a male voice speaking in Polish, addressing her as “Dear Weronika”. With this monologue voice-over, Nguyen invokes a classic cinematic trope, albeit with a socialist revolutionary twist. What we hear is freely adapted from Ulrike Meinhof’s letters—dispatches from the leading figure of the German self-proclaimed socialist guerrilla Red Army Faction (RAF)—written from solitary confinement.



The autumnal setting, garnished with slow piano music and occasional barbed wire, is, in cinematographic memory, as much linked to the atrocities of World War II and documentaries such as Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* or Alain Resnais' *Night and Fog* as it is to the frontiers of Cold War Europe. The implied displacement and isolation of the young girl is then tapered by a sequence showing her washed up on a shore. While this scene clearly hints at the terrors of war leading to the horrors of migration for the Vietnamese, it is also hard not to think of the viral image of Alan Kurdi, the dead Kurdish boy stranded on a Mediterranean beach in Turkey, which circulated at the height of the recent European refugee crisis—an image also restaged by Ai Weiwei, who used it as photo-op for questionable ideas of activism. Perversely, the willful reproduction of this particular image follows the logic of a meme by intertextualizing its already viral content. But unlike Ai's posing, here, the moral postulate is not as clear: the video, especially its first half, performs an idea of introversion and psychology, a quasi-therapeutic strife with inherited ideas of revolution and identity. A slowly accelerating set of beats and the girl's timid practicing of K-Pop dance moves increasingly disrupts the piano and its melancholic, historicizing mood. One historical narrative gets ousted by another. Nguyen employs the structural logic of music videos—K-Pop in particular—where set, styling, lyrics, and dance moves create an air of entertainment. This approach, at times, gives the serious topics at issue a gimmicky overtone, but also helps navigate their severeness, enabling the work to freely accumulate ideas of identity and contemporaneity.



IF REVOLUTION IS A SICKNESS, 2021, Installation View, Sculpture Center

As the little girl becomes a teen-ager in the second part of the film, her dress and surroundings evolve with her. Even the food she eats changes accordingly, from a cornbread-like toast to something that looks like a traditional Polish pastry. The contrived way in which Nguyen introduces certain props in close ups and clip-like sequences throughout the video—a hammer used as a micro-phone; balloons spelling “1989”—points to her background in photography. The landscape is more urban now; the voice-over that of a slightly older Weronika, musing in Vietnamese about her fate. Her ponderings are somewhere between prose and philosophical slogans, culled in part from the writings of Hannah Arendt, another central and complex female figure in a postwar transatlantic discourse. The prose and lyrics emphasize an inner conflict, in limbo between essentialized identity and participation in a community (a state, or a K-Pop band – or both). Meanwhile, the collision of haunted remnants of Poland’s past with stylistic elements of the K-Pop industry dramatizes cultural points of friction.

In the last two parts of the film, we see Weronika and other Polish teen-agers forming a dance group, depicted in time-lapse while the piano soundscape gets layered with electronic beats. It culminates with the group—Weronika in the lead—performing a K-Pop song in English, the dominant language of contemporary media. (The song is co-written by Nguyen and produced especially for the exhibition.)

The issues brought up here are usually addressed with respectful gravitas, in order to do justice to the severity of the matter. Nguyen candidly bypasses this convention by embedding her exploration within a teenage subjectivity. Much like song lyrics, the textual elements throughout the film appear deep and shallow at the same time; Arendt and Meinhof blend in with K-Pop. There is something abject about the “conflation” of historical symbols of political struggle and identity, and its incorporation into the realm of popular music, that points to a common dialectic: the legitimate desire to tell one’s personal experience, conveyed through the standardized aestheticization of mass and social media. To put it in pop-music parlance: the revolution will be televised.