Three Seasons (pp. 115-117)

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“THREE SEASONS.” Produced by Tony Bui, Jason Kliot, and Joana Vicente; directed by Tony Bui; screenplay by Tony Bui and Timothy Linh Bui, 1999; color; 113 minutes. Distributed by October Films.

“Three Seasons” tells the story of Vietnam in transition. Directed by Tony Bui, a Vietnamese-American, the film follows three very different people, who represent three diverse aspects of Vietnamese society, and one American GI, who returns to Vietnam to make peace with his past. Knowing that he fathered a daughter during the Vietnam War, James Hager sits outside his hotel, day and night, staring at what used to be the GI bar, hoping that he might be able to find his daughter and make amends. In an emotionally raw scene, Hager recognizes his daughter from across a table and he meets with her to say he is sorry. Along the way, Hager interacts with several Vietnamese people, who are all trying to improve their economic status—Woody, an irresistibly cute street urchin, selling knick-knacks out of a box; Hai, a cyclo-driver, who dreams of better things; and a young woman who sells him flowers on the street.

Obviously set well after the war in Vietnam, the film shows a developing country with new building sites, skyscrapers, and a fluxing Western influence. Hai, the cyclo-driver, becomes enamored with Lan, a prostitute he escorts home safely one night. Sporting a short haircut and very sexy Western clothing, Lan works in modern hotels, servicing wealthy business men who, she believes, can offer her a way out of the slums. The hotels look similar to upscale American hotels, and the men she picks up do not differ much from archetypal corporate Americans. Hai relentlessly pursues Lan, waiting outside swanky hotels to make sure she always has a safe ride home. In typical Hollywood fashion, the lowly cyclo-driver triumphs in a bike race, winning enough money to be able to spend the night with Lan. The hotel room scene shows the ultimate contrast between rich and poor, as Hai appears completely out of place. This meeting displays the difference between modern and traditional values, with Hai asking Lan to remove her make-up and put on a more modest, traditional piece of clothing. Respecting her as a woman, Hai does not sleep with her, and Lan falls in love, realizing that a poor man can offer her more than just money—he can see her true identity.

In another aspect of the plot, a young woman lives a more
traditional Vietnamese life working on a lotus-growing farm, with a beautiful lake filled with lotus blossoms and a temple in the middle. An aged teacher, dying of what is later revealed as leprosy, calls the young woman in after hearing her sing a song he remembered from the floating markets he frequented as a young man. She reads some poetry the teacher wrote, and offers to be the vessel through which his words could flow once again, by writing down the poems he dictates to her. As she records his history, she connects with the teacher, a link she does not share with any of the women on the farm. While unsuccessfully trying to sell her lotus flowers on the streets of the city, the young woman questions what place her traditional wares have amongst modern conveniences. Both the teacher and young woman embark on personal journeys—the teacher helps the woman realize she can learn from the past and stay rooted in traditions without fearing modern change, and in turn, the enlightened young woman comforts the teacher in his final days.

The final storyline concerns a little boy nicknamed Woody, who appears to be only six-years-old. He wanders the city streets day and night, in sunshine and rain, selling watches, cigarettes, and other small items to anyone he encounters. Woody follows Hager into a seedy bar, where he receives a beer from Hager, and then passes out. When he wakes up, Woody finds that his box of merchandise is gone and assumes that the American took it. He now must find his box or risk a severe beating when he returns to his boss. After searching every avenue he knows, Woody goes to his boss, who tells him not to return until he finds his box. Later, Woody spots the American and follows him to his hotel where Hager assures him he did not take the box. Woody then sees a man passed out on the curb with the box in his arms. Woody swoops in, takes his box back, and resumes his job.

Tony Bui places on film a portrait of a modernizing Asian country struggling to find the harmony between tradition and technology. While every character manages to maintain their traditional values, Tony Bui offers audiences a Hollywood happy ending that does not account for actual reality. He exposes some social injustices of their society, but offers no way to end them. Bui has an opportunity to make a social statement with Woody’s plot line, but chooses to make it sentimental and happy rather than socially aware. He sleeps on the streets and suffers abuse
from his boss, but the film never examines the continual cycle of poverty in Third World countries.

This film is directed toward American audiences. Hager's storyline parallels to that of Asian-American relations and the attempts to atone for damage done. Many American veterans of the Vietnam War often return to make amends and find closure. However, other Americans in Asia exploit people through prostitution and child labor. Bui's tone remains relentlessly optimistic as America continues to mend the wounds created almost forty years ago. Bui creates an incredibly beautiful film, though it often resembles a glossy Travel Channel program. Bui's Vietnamese-American heritage shapes the film, which moves between traditional values and the promise of a new westernized Vietnam. He compromises his film for the sake of Hollywood—it becomes too commercial and unrealistically upbeat. Ironically, the film teaches the importance of holding on to traditional values and breaking with Western influences, while the director sells out by making the film by Hollywood's standards.

Megan Howland