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### **Moto-mobile, Saigon/Motomobility**

by Ashley Carruthers

There are a staggering 20 million motorcycles in Vietnam today, and the market keeps growing by 2 million per year, giving the nation the highest per capita rate of motorcycle ownership in the world. Motorbikes have, as a result, become synonymous with the Vietnamese city, and have even left their imprint on the nation's culture and history. In *Static Friction*, Phunam, Matt Lucero and Tuan Andrew Nguyen of The Propeller Group turn the spotlight on this quintessential agent of Vietnamese mobility, asking us to engage more deeply with these machines as ciphers of change, alienation, resistance and the current status of the right to the Vietnamese city.

Seeing the wonderful works produced by the members of The Propeller Group for this show pushed me to ponder more broadly on the centrality of the motorbike in contemporary Vietnamese social life: what I love about it, what I hate about it, and just why it is that the motorcycle has become so ubiquitous in this nation. Below I will offer some general thoughts on the motorbike, mobility and the city in Vietnam, before turning to a specific discussion of the works in *Static Friction*.

#### **Why the motorbike?**

Economic and developmental explanations for Vietnam's fondness for the Honda include the rise in incomes over the last 20 years (average revenue per capita trebled between 1995 and 2005) and the rapid pace of urbanisation. Prosperity and complex city lifestyles where sites of dwelling, work, consumption and leisure are distant from each other create the need and desire for the kind of flexible mobility that only a private form of transport like the motorcycle can deliver. The relative affordability of motorcycles, coupled with the undeveloped state of the public transport sector in Vietnam—especially when it comes to supplying the tens of millions of short (<10km) trips that are made in Vietnam's cities every day—make the motorbike a natural solution.

While car sales have fallen dramatically over the last year due to the uncertain economic outlook, sales of motorbikes are up<sup>i</sup>, apparently because people view these vehicles as “indispensable”.<sup>ii</sup> In Hanoi and Saigon the market is described as being “saturated”, with one motorbike for every two people.<sup>iii</sup> The Honda's indispensability is only compounded by the absence of infrastructure for walking and cycling in much of Vietnam's urban space. In a nation wild for modernity, these have become low status activities associated with “backward” peasants and the urban poor. As elsewhere in the world, the undeniable amenity of privatised transport has led to a dystopia of traffic jams, air pollution, high risk road environments and cities held siege by the moped. At its best the Honda promises flexibility, speed and limitless convenience. At its worst, it threatens to destroy entirely the sedentary and ambulatory aspects of the life of the street, best symbolised in the image of pedestrians cowering against Saigonese walls as motorcyclists take to the pavements to avoid traffic congestion.

Economic and developmental explanations for the ubiquity of the motorbike in Vietnam only go so far, however. While the motorcycle is a pragmatic choice for mobility in Vietnamese conditions, it is also a cultural choice: there is something about the kind of mobility the motorbike allows that perfectly fits Vietnamese patterns of sociality. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu explains the French aspirational classes' fondness for “California sports” such as windsurfing, hang gliding and skiing by arguing that the sense of gliding and transcendence they produce mimics the dreams of effortless social mobility of the classes who participate in them.<sup>v</sup> Perhaps there is a similarly non-arbitrary relationship between moto-mobility and Vietnamese social aspirations. The sensation of ducking, weaving, being part of a mass moving forwards and yet strategising to find one's own unique way: doesn't this “feel” a little like the business of trying to make a living working several jobs at once, while keeping up one's familial, social and ritual obligations, and also finding time for leisure with friends? Indeed, it is the Honda that makes this frenetic mode of urban living possible. I think it's significant that while traffic in Vietnam is an annoyance as elsewhere in the world, people here are also (and perhaps uniquely) capable of describing the sense of bustle and chaos of the street as “vui” [fun]. This is especially so on a Sunday afternoon when urbanites take to the city to “đi vòng vòng” [lit. go around in circles] purely to enjoy the sense of mobility and sociality out on the road without the pressure of having to get to a certain destination on time.

## The Road as Social Space

John Urry has described the car as “a domestic, cocooned, moving capsule, an iron bubble”.<sup>vi</sup> The automobile allows a shell of private space to be extended out into the public realm, insulating passengers from physical and social contact with the world around them. In a context in which public space is pervaded with pollution, dust, precipitation, danger and incivility, this is the ultimate social privilege, and so it is not surprising that there is now a Vietnamese love affair with the car. I note, however, that the people I know in Vietnam who have cars have retained their motorbikes for those times when they have to get somewhere quickly, or just to ride them for the pleasure of it. Urban car travel has an even lower predictability of trip time than motorcycle travel, and the car cannot replace the sense of liveness and dynamism that moving through the Vietnamese city on a motorbike brings. While the car is a fundamentally asocial vehicle, a motorbike driven at low speeds in a crowd is quite the opposite. Like the walker but unlike the automobile driver, the urban motorcyclist is immersed in her environment, and her whole body is visible, unshielded by a windscreen. She is able to turn to the person next to her to exchange a look or a greeting, to pull into a roadside stall, or to stop in front of a friend's house and carry on a conversation with someone in the front room without dismounting. On Sundays, when motorcyclists “đi vòng vòng” for the sheer joy of the sensation, it even becomes possible to pick up members of the opposite sex while moto-strolling.

While the road in Vietnam is no doubt insanely dangerous and in many ways inhuman, I would argue that even the tarmac is in fact a “social” space. Vietnamese traffic is not rule-governed like traffic in the developed world. Rather, it is a continuous social negotiation where right of way and safety are mediated by means of eye contact and unspoken understandings. And while it is terrifying enough to be a pedestrian in large Vietnamese cities, at the same time one feels that as a walker one has a place on the road, and that it is indeed possible to blindly wade out into the traffic without looking and have one's right to exist in the midst of it grudgingly recognised. If by contrast one did this in an Anglo-American traffic culture one would run a considerably higher risk of being mown down by a driver who couldn't conceptualise the right of a pedestrian to exist in the traffic zone.

## Moto-flânerie

Moto-strolling is undoubtedly a kind of “flânerie”, although admittedly different to that famously described by Walter Benjamin. As Featherstone reminds us, with the figure of the Parisian Flâneur or “stroller”, Benjamin brought to our attention “the centrality of locomotion in social life”. He also stressed the phenomenological aspects of moving through the city, where “[t]he stroller is constantly invaded by new streams of experience and develops new perceptions as he moves through the urban landscape and crowds”.<sup>vii</sup> The city becomes a place “full of palpable excitement as people move through the libraries, squares, theatres and streets and come together in countless meeting places to share experiences and discuss the issues of the day”.<sup>viii</sup> The city’s public spaces, including its boulevards and roads, become sites where the public sphere spontaneously comes into being as people of different social classes mix, socialise, and share an aesthetic experience of immersion in the city.

Vietnamese moto-flânerie undoubtedly shares something of Benjamin’s utopian vision of the stroller, and draws on a Parisian imaginary that is built into Vietnamese cities. When in Vietnam I am usually a walker or a cyclist, but when a friend picks me up on a Honda I am always invaded by a sense of exhilaration as I am jolted into this totally different paradigm of mobility. As we deftly weave through the traffic on the main road before turning into a residential block to navigate a maze of narrow passageways, and then stop before a charmingly concealed garden cafe where friends wait for us at a table, I often feel that the Vietnamese city is built to be experienced from the back of a motorbike. It is no mistake that many Vietnamese films and music videos represent the city seen from the point of view of a motorcyclist. One of my favourite music videos in this regard is “Người ấy và tôi em phải chọn” [You have to choose] by Lư Chí Vỹ. In this piece, shot in the environs of the Nhà Thờ Đức Bà [Notre Dame Cathedral], we are mounted on a Honda for much of the time, seeing the love object and another man speed by on his bike, or seeing them seated at a cafe as we cruise by on the singer’s own bike. While the clip is a little glamorised, isn’t it true that young love in Vietnam happens almost exclusively on motorcycles and in cafes?! This video and others like it show that the quintessential aesthetic experience of the Vietnamese city is the moto-mobile one.

## Key to the City

Not the least of the amenities of motomobility is the way it allows access to the narrow “hẻm” [laneways] that are often the only means of passage through urban residential blocks. The motorbike also has an incredible advantage over the car in terms of parking. Hondas can be stacked side by side in a fraction of the space needed for automobiles, and the business of motorbike valet parking employs hundreds of thousands of people to boot. These kinds of arrangements allow high population densities in inner city residential areas, making a “smaller” city with more variety and more destinations within an easily motorcyclable area. I love these blocks, like hidden continents whose coasts alone are visible from the street. Recently I wandered down a hẻm in Danang and came upon an original 19<sup>th</sup> century villa. I began talking to an itinerant seller, who was talking to a lady whose house was diagonal to the villa, who ended up being a member of the family who had owned it since its construction. I ended up spending an hour in there talking to her husband. In the foyer was an 18<sup>th</sup> century mirror that had been given to his wife's Mandarin grandfather by Minh Mạng. The original tiling, staircase, fittings and everything were still intact. Sadly, these organic urban structures are being destroyed by “decongestion” [giải tỏa] and the entirely unnecessary imperative to make all new homes accessible by four-wheeled vehicle.

Not only do motorbikes allow a denser and richer urban texture, they are also superior in terms of their ability to funnel large numbers of people through a limited amount of road space. A motorbike occupies one sixth of the “cell” of moving time-space taken up by a car, and has a superior capacity to weave around blockages. While traffic engineers have traditionally used a model of fluid dynamics to conceptualise the behaviour of car traffic, a metaphor of “particle-hopping” has been proposed for the behaviour of motorbikes in mixed traffic.<sup>ix</sup> This quantum mechanics of motomobility is beautifully captured by Rob Whitworth in a video work called *Traffic in Frenetic HCMC* (2011) that The Propeller Group have used as a contextualising piece for *Static Friction*. In this time-lapse video, the elevated perspective of the camera turns motorcyclists into non-human actors inside a giant urban particle accelerator. We watch in horror and fascination at the seemingly impossible spectacle of roundabouts without any visible rules being negotiated safely by hundreds of vehicles at once. Part of the brilliance of this work, which miniaturises the city and turns it into a giant Lego construction with moving parts, is to focus us on the city as a giant machine for moving people and goods. The imaging of rivers of light moving

through the night streets illustrates perfectly the idea of the city as a space of flows.

### **Decals and Delinquency**

Motorbikes are unquestionably a means of demonstrating social status in Vietnam today.<sup>x</sup> A complicated but universally understood hierarchy of brands and specifications exists, with Piaggios and Vespas at the top and so-called "Chinese" bikes at the bottom. The most desirable bikes will be parked by the valets right on the pavement outside fashionable cafes and clubs while older or lower status bikes are taken to a backstage area. Their owners are additionally penalised by having to wait longer to have them retrieved when they are leaving. Those who cannot afford the new high status models can "upgrade" their old bikes by having new-style farrings, stickers and colour schemes applied to them by businesses that have sprung up to serve precisely this need. There is something quite poignant about these counterfeit claims to status, which are in any case transparent in the eyes of those they are meant to impress. Yet this practice clearly demonstrates the direct connection made between one's social status and one's ride in Vietnam today.<sup>xi</sup> It also illustrates how the culture of scarcity and recycling of the post-war years has given way to a culture of continual upgrading. A thing which is not upgraded in today's Vietnam will rapidly "degrade" [xuống cấp] and lose status, despite the fact that it may still work perfectly well.

The analysis of market decals is not exhausted here, however. Decals, as The Propeller Group show us in *Collision* (2012), are also a means of personalising bikes and expressing the subcultural and countercultural affiliations of the rider. They are often connected to the practice of illegal motorbike racing, a means by which alienated urban youth push against all sorts of spatial, social, cultural and political boundaries. Among other things, this practice is about the liminal, out of body experience of pure speed, so beautifully described by Milan Kundera:

Speed is the form of ecstasy the technical revolution has bestowed on man. As opposed to a motorcyclist, the runner is always present in his body, forever required to think about his blisters, his exhaustion; ... when he runs he feels his weight, his age, more conscious than ever of himself and of his time of life. This all changes when man delegates the faculty of speed to a machine: from then on, his own body is outside the process, and he gives over to a speed that is non-corporeal, non-material, pure speed, speed itself, ecstasy speed. -- Milan Kundera, *Slowness*

In *Collision* (2012), The Propeller Group draw on this Futurist imaginary, evoking as well its perverse postmodern celebration in J.G. Ballard's *Crash* (given Vietnam's outrageously high road toll, this reference has a macabre appropriateness). *1967* (2012) also references the aesthetics of the collision, but brings along connotations of suspended animation and history lived in the present. In this work, the iconic Honda ss50 is suspended in space and time, held in place using the same technique whereby the hub is fixed in the middle of the rim by the tenuous thread of the spokes. As anyone who has ever laced an old fashioned wheel will know, at first the whole proceeding seems ludicrous, and one can't imagine how the weak, bendy steel spokes can possibly be strong enough to support the weight of the bike and rider. As the build progresses, it becomes clear that the wheel gains its strength purely from the opposing force of the tightened spokes radiating out from the hub to their anchor points on the rim. If the crucial number of spokes should break on a pothole or a brick lying in the street, the whole wheel collapses like a crushed egg. The tenuously suspended Honda distills the fragile memory of the war culture of Saigon in 1967, a time at which there were 475 000 US soldiers in the south, people wore miniskirts and listened to the Beatles, and courageous pacifists in Vietnam, Japan, Australia, Thailand, the US and elsewhere risked imprisonment, police brutality and death to protest against the killing. In a post-war society founded on the rejection of consumer capitalism and its culture, these beautiful bikes persisted in a ghostly existence as signs of a global system from which Vietnam had disconnected itself, and a dream of a modernity that was, for the moment, not to be. *Chasing Inertia* (2012) is another phantasmagoric object produced from leftover motorbike parts, in this case, inner tubes. The artists have produced an object that, miraculously, has only one inflation valve, and apparently consists of a whole series of lengths of tubing vulcanized together using the simple technology employed by roadside repairmen.

*'Portraits of Mechanical Reproduction'* (2012) draws also on the aesthetics of speed and catastrophe, but the postcard-like depiction of the street-racing bikes shows them instead in an idealised state of rest and potentiality: pre-collision, as it were. These renditions of photographs sent to the artists by the members of an underground racing milieu remind me of a pair of teenage men I once saw sidling up to a flag seller on a corner in Saigon's District One in the mid 1990s. While the seller was looking away, the passenger grabbed a national flag and the pair zoomed off into the traffic with it. This was a time at which a rash of moto-crime was gripping Saigon, and you had to be careful about having your wallet or bag in your hands while exposed to the street. The combination of

nationalism and criminality embodied in the men's theft of the flag shocked and intrigued me at the time, and obviously it has stayed with me. Simply explained, their desire for the flag was connected to football and the masculine cult of sporting nationalism. In a country in which even expressions of nationalism are monopolised by the state, however, this passionate love of the national team, coupled with thrill-seeking, speed and the capacity to simply disappear into the road, seemed like an act of some power, expressing a rogue spatial citizenship of a nation of the street that didn't officially exist. Just as listening to a Walkman in public in the 1980s was for Japanese teenagers a daring refusal of the official values of communal culture and public civility, for Vietnamese teenagers opting for the aesthetic experience of (criminal) speed through the city performs a rejection of the "ethical" experience of belonging to an official, sedentary political community such as, say, one's local Ward, or a chapter of the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth League. They belong instead to a hyper-mobile community of riders who find freedoms not otherwise available in the coffin-cheating intensity of street racing.

*Burning Rubber* (2012) is also concerned with the milieu of youth motorcycle subcultures, although the act of the burnout is performed with a curiously clinical intent. It is done in the absence of any apparent exuberance on the part of the rider, and without the requisite crowd of friends and gang members cheering him on. The rider in fact seems totally out of place, spinning fast but going nowhere in a space of transit. His act of excess and waste is both invisible and incomprehensible to the utilitarian traffic passing by as he renders his calligraphy of rubber on the street surface like a mysterious, Vietnamese Dada version of the Stig.

*The Dream* (2012) complements beautifully the kind of post-communal wasteland evoked by the images of the racing motorbikes and the strange rider in *Burning Rubber*. A Honda Dream, welded to a foundation of steel girders, is abandoned in a street that is itself abandoned—a post-sedentary space in a city that has become nothing but flows and intensities. Thieves come in the night to cannibalise the parts from the bike, but find that they cannot make off with the frame itself, since it is rendered immobile by being attached to a huge chunk of steel. The surfaces of the bike are all gone, but it seems that its essential core remains. Or does it? After the sculpture of the stripped frame is returned to the gallery for exhibition, the curator finds a plate riveted to the steel announcing its place of production not to be Japan, but Taiwan. A fake! The Dream, it seems, was an Illusion all along.

The works in *Static Friction* succeed brilliantly in estranging us from the taken-for-granted everydayness of the motorbike in Vietnam. They plunge us into a meditation on the strange materiality of these objects of desire and convenience, and show us that there is indeed a rich, diverse and demotic culture of moto-mobility in Ho Chi Minh City. These works also make us reflect on the nature of space in the city, and reveal the tensions and contradictions in the way urban space is produced as something transited but also something (impossibly) dwelled in. To be in motion on the back of a motorbike in the city is also to be at home in the city.

April 2012

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i <http://vietnomics.wordpress.com/category/vietnam-transportation/> . Motorcycle industry earns robust growth, 2011. Vietnam Business News. [http://businesstimes.com.vn/motorcycle-industry-earns-robust-growth/?utm\\_source=feedburner&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=Feed%253A+VietnamBusinessWeek+%2528Vietnam+Business+News%2529](http://businesstimes.com.vn/motorcycle-industry-earns-robust-growth/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%253A+VietnamBusinessWeek+%2528Vietnam+Business+News%2529).

ii Nguyen Anh Nam, 2007. MASTER PLAN FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF VIETNAM'S MOTORCYCLE INDUSTRY IN THE PERIOD OF 2006-2015, WITH A VISION TO 2020. MINISTRY OF INDUSTRY, INSTITUTE FOR INDUSTRY POLICY AND STRATEGY, Hanoi.

iii Ibid., p.13.

v Pierre Bourdieu, 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Richard Nice, trans. London: Routledge. Pp. 220, 370.

vi John Urry, 2007. *Mobilities*. Polity: Cambridge. P. 120.

vii Mike Featherstone, 1998. "The Flâneur, the City and Virtual Public Life." *Urban Studies* 35(5-6): 911.

viii Raymond Williams, 1973. *The Country and the City*: London, paraphrased by Featherstone, *ibid*, 911.

ix Lawrence W. Lan and Chiung-Wen Chang, 2003. "Motorbike's moving behavior in mixed traffic: Particle-hopping model with cellular automata." *Journal of the Eastern Asia Society for Transportation Studies* 5: 25. See also, Quynh-Lam Ngoc Le, Ngoc-Hien Do and Ki-Chan Nam, 2009. A simulation model for the mixed traffic system in Vietnam. *International Journal of Simulation and Process Modelling*, 5(3), pp.233–240.

x Alison Truitt, 2008. "On the back of a motorbike: Middle-class mobility in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam." *American Ethnologist* 35: 3–19.

xi Thanks to Alana Shaw, who made these observations about motorcycle "upgrading" as part of her individual research project for The Australian National University's Vietnam Field School, Jan 2012.