

DAVID BIGGS

## Film Review: *The Future Cries Beneath Our Soil* [Mùa Cát Vọng]

Phạm Thu Hằng's 2018 film, *The Future Cries Beneath Our Soil* [Mùa Cát Vọng], is a hauntingly beautiful, intimate account of the slow demise of one troubled man and his extended family living in a rural village of Quảng Trị Province. With most scenes set in the dark rooms of a rural home and the surrounding white sand hills, the film is an aesthetically rich mosaic of mostly silent, elegiac landscapes interspersed with conversations between the film's main character Lộc and his relatives, verses of songs, and smaller snippets of daily interactions. It is in these brief segments and exchanges that we learn about the seriousness of Lộc's alcoholism, his wife's struggles to make ends meet, the family's worsening financial situation (as his wife sells off the pigs to pay back loans), and eventually Lộc's demise followed by scenes from his funeral.

Phạm Thu Hằng describes her film as a "Zen movie,"<sup>1</sup> a documentary that follows its subjects without narration, historical explanations, or interpretations. This presents challenges, especially for foreign students unfamiliar with Quảng Trị or postwar life in Vietnam, but the film is nonetheless evocative and the conversations engaging. It sidesteps the almost-obligatory scenes that most domestically made Vietnamese films include—shots of urban centers, historic characters, traditional Vietnamese

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FIGURE 1: Lộc at his home, the primary setting of the film. Still from *Mùa Cát Vọng*, directed by Phạm Thu Hằng, 2018 (1:07).

art forms—and instead drops the viewer into a landscape of dunes and a poor home without doors near a highway. Unlike narrated documentaries, *Mùa Cát Vọng* falls more in the genre of art film. The viewer is left to reflect on how the characters' lives—economically troubled, depressed, tragic—are connected to Quảng Trị's past, filled with large-scale military operations and bombing some forty years earlier.

Therein lies a key question of the film: How are people's lives today, especially those born after the end of the war, still touched by war? At what point might we just chalk up this man's demise to alcoholism, possibly mental illness, and poverty? He has no direct experience of war, nor does he bear any scars from exposure to its remnants. There is no overt, material evidence that the larger family has suffered direct harm, but the film's landscape scenes repeatedly point to scars of war. A group of men walk into the distance to detonate unexploded ordnance. In other scenes, people measure and walk through the brush, searching for bombs with wires and metal detectors.

This question of defining the limits of war's effects on the present is important not only in Quảng Trị but in most of Vietnam. Families in Vietnam and across its diasporas continue to grapple with the legacies of war. At what point might individuals declare an end of war's trauma in everyday life? That is a core struggle in the film, and it is an important issue

among many academics. Rob Nixon, in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, suggests that we pay attention to the outer rings of violence, those ripples from the origins of violent events to distant effects over years and decades, through human generations, memories, and multiple layers of landscape.<sup>2</sup> Phạm Thu Hằng's "Zen movie" is an exploration of these far-reaching ripples of war's violence made manifest in conversations, pans of rural landscapes, and contrasting views. One of many short, poignant scenes that propels the story is a morning drinking encounter between Lộc and his brother Đình (14:01), where the brother criticizes Lộc for his reluctance to "gather wood with his wife." Repeatedly throughout the movie, this brother shows up at the house, noting Lộc's reluctance to join crews collecting scrap metal and his repeat failures to work in the fields. Eventually Lộc refuses to do much of anything but fret, sing songs, and drink.

Just as one begins to wonder about Lộc's well-being, the film turns to a more upbeat scene as Lộc eats lunch with his wife. She says, "Darling, recite a poem for me" (18:44), and he responds, "Once I was a lost bird, spreading my wings and flying alone, in the dark of night, autumn wind makes the rain go fast, in that violent night storm." The poem's ending is drowned out by the noise of truck horns on the road outside, and it is nearly impossible to make out the audio; but most riveting in the exchange is Lộc's wife and her expressions. She teases and encourages him, listens to every word, absorbing his words gently, patiently. And it is in these moments of the film that one gets a glimpse into the deep emotional toll that this slowest ripple of violence exacts on the loved ones of the suffering.

In that scene I was reminded of so many stories of loved ones in Vietnamese families, especially in refugee communities, who failed to make the transition *out* of the war. Like Bảo Ninh's *The Sorrow of War*,<sup>3</sup> the ripple effects of the war manifest for many in addictions and mental illness. In almost every extended Vietnamese family, there are individuals like Lộc who succumb to these illnesses. And this scene reminds me that next to many of these tormented individuals are family members who nevertheless tend to their parents, children, or spouses with loving care. The film's situation inside a home reminds me of Eugene Smith's 1971 photographs at Minimata Bay, Japan, most notably his famous image "Tomoko Uemura in Her Bath." Smith rented a home in the fishing village for some months,

living in Minimata while documenting the struggles of villagers to get compensation and medical care to help with their long-term exposure to methyl mercury. He published his photographs in *Life* magazine, and the image of a mother caring for a severely disabled child catalyzed the Japanese public against this environmental crime. Phạm Thu Hằng's subjects in *Mùa Cát Vàng*, however, are far removed from the central moments of the Vietnam War and the violent battles that took place in Quảng Trị.

And so, we are left to wonder, to make up our own minds about Lộc and his family. To what extent can we link his suffering to the events of the war?

As if to challenge this very question, the film then makes a tour of the neighborhood. We meet one man waving a metal detector through a young plantation of acacia trees (20:23). We then meet two neighbors describing the old wartime landscape. Here we witness humorous banter, two men talking nonchalantly about collecting scrap metal and the locations of forgotten American bases now covered in spindly acacia trees. We repeatedly meet one of these men in the film. He presents a stark contrast to Lộc. While Lộc struggles to get out of bed in the morning, this other man is seemingly "making it" in the sense that he is sober and gives the impression of being mentally and economically stable. He appears in cameos throughout the film, at his fields, in front of his home, at a hospital room criticizing a friend for smoking. In multiple scenes, the camera follows him through the haunted, sandy landscape with its water-filled craters (56:45).

I am especially intrigued by this man. Why do we repeatedly meet him? What relation does he have to the main character, Lộc? Is he a brother or a cousin? The film never overtly explains this, and maybe leaving such questions unanswered contributes to the "Zen" effect.

This opposition in characters and perspectives, one man moving forward while another sinks into alcoholism and paralysis, is perhaps an attempt to capture a deep, continuing debate in Vietnamese society, especially within families, about war's physical and psychological legacies. At various points in the film, neighbors navigate this boundary. They share stories about the old days; an average of ten bombs dropped on every square meter of land in Quảng Trị and postwar recovery work was "brutal" (25:55). This remembrance of the old days is contrasted to new efforts in clearance work, some of it funded by the United States, where teams make a "show" of detonating the



FIGURE 2: Unidentified man with metal detector walking near a bomb crater. Still from *Mùa Cát Vàng*, directed by Phạm Thu Hằng, 2018 (56:45).

odd piece of war material here and there. Especially in central Vietnam, many old-timers look at newer efforts to clean up bombs and especially the multi-million-dollar cleanups of dioxin at former air bases such as Đà Nẵng and Phù Cát as “performances,” perhaps with ulterior motives. As with unexploded ordnance, the immediate effects of dioxin from Agent Orange were “absorbed” by older generations but may continue to “echo” in the health of grandchildren and great-grandchildren today.

This hauntingly beautiful film, set in a troubled household in one of Vietnam’s poorest provinces, reminds viewers that the fainter effects of war and militarization—like tiny pieces of shrapnel lodged in trees and sand dunes, camouflage-print clothing and war songs—will continue to persist for decades. Craters are still visible in the dunes. Tree plantations cover the once-barren plots that Americans left when they evacuated their forward bases, but names like “McNamara” (a reference to the McNamara Line on the edge of the demilitarized zone) still feature in local conversation.

The film ends with a funeral and then a suicide. Lộc’s death happens off camera, and we only pick up fragments of conversation about an accident, possibly while drinking, involving Lộc’s brother in some drunken event, possibly something as simple as falling off a bed (1:19). The film spares viewers the immediate aftermath, but it resumes some days later at the

funeral. The camera sets on Lộc's wife, sitting in her solid-white mourning clothes at a table to receive gifts [*bàn tiếp lễ*] from funeral goers where she sits alone with a blank expression. We then see Lộc's face in his portrait on the ancestral altar, his guitar hanging to one side of it. There we learn that Lộc was born in June 1971, a child of the war in its most ferocious years, and over several more days, drunken conversations among family and friends point to his brother Đình as a guilty party in his death. Đình cries at his brother's altar, lamenting his passing. And later, through a phone call, we learn that Đình, too, has died from an apparent suicide.

The film ends with more beautifully sad music, and we hear Lộc's father playing the guitar, singing the following lines:

Many lives I have lived,  
 This day, gray sky above my head,  
 The old leaves are falling,  
 Hundreds of years under the dust

Perhaps it is this song that inspires the movie's enigmatic title, *Mùa Cát Vọng*. The sandy [*cát*] hills that feature in the film's final minutes suggest "dead" land, land lacking sufficient clay or humus to retain water and support crops. Throughout central Vietnam, villages have for centuries used such spaces for cemeteries. That may explain the word *cát* in the title, but the term *vọng* is less clear. *Mùa Vọng* is literally Advent, the Christmas season, in Christian calendars, and it is this season when the film takes place; but perhaps the title is meant to conjure more an image of one's "return" or "coming" to the sand via death. The English title is not a direct translation, and I failed to understand how "the future" had any bearing on a film seemingly so caught up in echoes from the past; but that is just a small quibble.

Phạm Thu Hằng's first feature-length film is a provocative, engaging work of cinematic and audio art. While most viewers will be mesmerized by the pans across haunting landscapes and the deep exploration through the spaces of the home, the soundscapes of *Mùa Cát Vọng* are equally rich and offer a rare glimpse into Vietnam's wealth of folk music. Throughout the film, songs sung by Lộc and others convey echoes of the war, and the final scenes with Lộc's father picking up the guitar and singing about leaves

falling, turning back into dust, is heartbreaking. Unlike so many war movies, this documentary-like film brings viewers deep into the private stories, songs, and pasts of a single family living in a former war zone. Given decades of the state's heavy-handed approach to memorializing the war, *Mùa Cát Vọng* offers a fresh, uniquely different view from the sand up.

DAVID BIGGS is a professor of history at the University of California, Riverside, focusing on environmental and Southeast Asian history. He is the author of *Quagmire: Nation-Building and Nature in the Mekong Delta* (University of Washington Press, 2010) and *Footprints of War: Militarized Landscapes in Vietnam* (University of Washington Press, 2018).

PHẠM THU HẰNG has worked as a researcher at the Vietnam Institute of Culture and Art since 2004. She later joined HanoiDoClab, a breakthrough documentary and video art center in Hà Nội, where she made several short documentary films. She has since added her voice to the small but active and growing community of young independent documentary filmmakers in Vietnam. Phạm Thu Hằng recently obtained her master's degree in documentary directing at a consortium of three universities in Europe under the Doc Nomads joint master's degree program in Lisbon, Budapest, and Brussels. Her filmmaking concerns many themes but mainly draws attention to rediscovering Vietnamese culture and the connection between the internal world in Vietnam and the world outside, especially in the context of contemporary globalization.

### Notes

1. Chris Humphrey and Thi Nguyen, "Q&A: In Conversation with 'The Future Cries Beneath Our Soil' Director Pham Thu Hang," *Urbanist: Hanoi*, June 25, 2019, <https://urbanisthanoi.com/film-tv/15337-q-a-in-conversation-with-the-future-cries-beneath-our-soil-director-pham-thu-hang> (accessed December 9, 2020).
2. See, for example, Nixon's discussion about vernacular versus official landscapes and the temporalities of place. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 17.
3. Bảo Ninh, *The Sorrow of War: A Novel* (New York: Pantheon, 1993).