FROM MEMORY TO POST-MEMORY: THE TRAUMA OF THE LEGACY OF WAR IN *VIET AND NAM*

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MEMORIES OF THE WAR IN VIETNAMESE CINEMA: AN INTRODUCTION

The war between Vietnam and the United States has been portrayed in countless fiction films over the half-century since the conflict ended in 1975. Despite the diverse perspectives that filmmakers have offered us, the image that has prevailed globally has been the Hollywood version, which presents American soldiers as the victims of the trauma of the war, while generally characterising the Vietnamese as heartless fanatics who fought for a pernicious ideology and relegating them to a supporting role in an American tragedy (Westrup, 2006; Healy, 2010).

The subjectivity of the Vietnamese perspective on the war and the pain it caused the Vietnamese people has faced difficulties in gaining visibility even within the country's own film industry. In a society where art essentially serves as propaganda, the government has imposed a degree of control over creative output that was particularly strict in the years immediately following the conflict. As a result, the human dimension of the war and the depth of the trauma were censored, and films made in the late 1970s and early 1980s—such as *Season of the Whirlwind* (Mùa Gió Chướng, Hồng Sến, 1978) or *Motherland* (Đất Mẹ, Hải Ninh, 1980)—offered, as Healy (2010) points out, an idealised vision of the war as a symbol of patriotism, national unity, revolutionary fervour and the efficiency of the communist regime. The official narrative of the conflict conveyed by these feature films—which are riddled with war slogans that were recycled in peacetime (Nhàn, 2008)—was rarely heard outside the country's borders, and when it was, its international reach was often limited to the Soviet bloc. However, with the *Đổi Mới* reforms, approved at the 6th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam in 1986, the country established a socialist-oriented market economy, opening up to foreign investment

and to regional and international integration. Although cautiously and under state supervision, these reforms introduced changes to the film industry that allowed for new topics and styles, as well as new audiences and distribution channels for Vietnamese cinema.[1]

During the reforms of the mid-1980s, Vietnamese filmmakers began moving away from narratives glorifying war and collective triumph to explore stories of personal tragedy, abandoning the socialist realism that had been dominant until then with films addressing intimate themes characterised by measured pacing, a contemplative tone, and the expressive power of silences and symbols. The new political climate allowed various films to go even further than the poetic, subjective approach taken by Đặng Nhật Minh prior to *Đổi Mới* with *When the Tenth Month Comes* (Bao Giờ Cho Đến Tháng Mười, Đặng Nhật Minh, 1984), a film that explores the complexity of the grief of a woman who has lost her husband at the front and hides it from her father-in-law. The same director would continue to explore women's experiences during and after the war (one of the recurring themes of Vietnamese cinema during the reform period) in films such as *The Girl on the River* (Cô Gái Trên Sông, Đặng Nhật Minh, 1987), which did not receive government approval, and *Nostalgia for the Countryside* (Thương nhớ đồng quê, Đặng Nhật Minh, 1995).

When the Tenth Month Comes also constitutes a seminal work for the films of the reform period that explore the thematic motif of the fallen soldier. Much like the deceased husbands in *Wharf of Widows* (Bến không chồng, Lưu Trọng Ninh, 2001), in Minh's film the husband who died in combat becomes a symbolic presence that shapes the lives of his loved ones, a kind of *con ma* or angry ghost associated in Vietnamese culture with those who died in tragic circumstances and did not receive a proper funeral (Kwon, 2008; Gustafsson, 2008). Far from being portrayed as a heroic martyr, the fallen soldier in these films becomes what Bradley (2001) describes as a spectre that subverts the construction of official memory by the State.

The trope of the war veteran was subjected to a similar subversion in *Đổi Mới* cinema, with the archetype of the victorious soldier giving way to the portrayal of ex-combatants as spectral figures who are unable to find their place in the post-war world. An example of this can be found in *Brothers and Relations* (Anh và Em, Trần Vũ & Nguyễn Hữu Luyện, 1986) and *The Retired General* (Tướng về hưu, Nguyễn Khắc Lợi, 1988), both of which depict divided families and highlight the difficulties veterans faced on returning home and their disillusionment with the communist system for which they had fought.

Around the turn of the 21st century, the Vietnamese economy underwent further substantial changes that affected the country's film industry. After being subjected to an embargo for almost twenty years, normal trade relations with the United States resumed in 1994, and in that same year the Vietnamese government approved a program to rebuild the film industry, aimed at counteracting the decline of the country's state-run studios. The sector was gradually privatised, foreign funding was secured, and local filmmakers began being permitted to explore aspects of the war that had until then been off-limits. Perhaps the clearest examples of this are *Living in Fear* (Sống trong sợ hãi, Bùi Thạc Chuyên, 2005) and *Don't Burn* (Đừng đốt, Đặng Nhật Minh, 2009). From the perspective of a former South Vietnam-

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ese soldier, *Living in Fear* condemns the treatment meted out to those who fought on the losing side, highlights the difficulties associated with the country's reunification, and uses the problem of unexploded landmines as a symbol of the war's painful legacy. Taking a humanist approach rooted in the Vietnamese poetic tradition, the film offers an emotional expression of the trauma of war with minimal dialogue and dramatic action. On the other hand, *Don't Burn* tells the story of an American soldier who finds the diary of a woman who served as a medic for the Viet Cong. The diary, which recounts the horrors of the conflict, helps the soldier recognise the humanity of the enemy. With its introspective and elegiac tone, this film reconstructs the war as an experience of pain and humanity rather than victory.

The change of atmosphere in Vietnam at the turn of the century has had other significant consequences for the country's film industry. *Three Seasons* (Tony Bui, 1999) became the first American film to be shot in Vietnam since the end of the war. Directed by a Vietnamese immigrant who had arrived in the United States at the age of two, the acclaimed film deals mainly with the vicissitudes of the country's Westernisation, though it also includes the evocative story of an US army veteran who travels to Vietnam to search for his daughter and make peace with the country in which he fought. Another case worthy of note is *Green Dragon* (Timothy Linh Bui, 2001), an independent film also directed by a Vietnamese immigrant—in fact, the brother of the director of *Three Seasons*—which explores the plight of the Vietnamese refugees who left their homeland for the United States after the war. Although both films (especially the second) clearly flirt with the conventions of Hollywood cinema, it is interesting to observe how the cinema of the Vietnamese diaspora, until then known mainly for the success of the French-based director Trần Anh Hùng, openly examines the memory of the war and contributes to a transnational perspective on the conflict and its consequences.

In a similar vein, it is worth highlighting *Journey from the Fall* (Ham Tran, 2006) and its "bleak yet redemptive portrait of postwar Vietnam in the South" (Duong, 2020: 56). Banned in Vietnam, this film addresses two taboo subjects for the State: the re-education camps for South Vietnamese prisoners, and the tragedy of the *Thuyền nhân Việt Nam* (boat people), refugees whose flight from the country initiated a flood of migration that was particularly intense in the first twenty years after the war but has continued to this day. Conversely, a film that did get released in Vietnam was *The White Silk Dress* (Áo Lụa Hà Đông, Lưu Huỳnh, 2006), a historical melodrama written and directed by another Vietnamese immigrant who had arrived in the United States as a teenager. This film, which focuses on non-combatant victims and highlights the strength and spirit of Vietnamese women, was a huge box-office success in Vietnam and received significant national and international acclaim.

Filmmakers of the diaspora continued to seek creative ways to capture the complexity of wartime and post-war experiences, with notable titles such as *Mother Fish* (Khoa Do, 2009), an Australian feature film that draws on its director's experience as a refugee to delve into the hardships and dangers faced by those who set out to sea in small boats to flee their homeland. Meanwhile, domestic Vietnamese cinema took a different direction in the 2010s, with Hollywood blockbusters gaining a foothold in Vietnam and increasingly influencing the country's film production. The memory of the war is of little interest to Vietnamese youth, who view it as a matter of the past and who, moreover, have grown up with a different kind of cinema. The audience's thematic and aesthetic preferences are becoming Westernised, and the spirit of cinematic renewal that flourished in the 1980s and 1990s seems to have faded.

However, Vietnam's growing cinematic exchange with the outside world has given rise in recent years to a new generation of filmmakers

who, although trained and based in Vietnam, reflect the influence of international arthouse films in their work. Filmmakers such as Nguyễn Hoàng Điệp, Trương Minh Quý and Phạm Thiên Ân combine Vietnamese funding with international grants and are putting their country on the map of world auteur cinema. Without abandoning a local flavour, but with a clearly international outlook, their films cast a critical eye on the country's contemporary reality through intimate experience, poetry and symbolism.

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Among the films by these young directors, *Viet and Nam* (Trương Minh Quý, 2024) is undoubtedly the one that most explicitly addresses the trauma of the war between Vietnam and the United States. Set in 2001 (references to the 9/11 attacks contributes significantly to its historical context), *Viet and Nam* tells the story of Nam, a man in his twenties who works in a mine alongside his partner, Viet. Nam plans to flee the country illegally by sea, but first decides to help his mother find the remains of his father, a Viet Cong fighter who went missing in the South during the conflict.

Viet and Nam follows in the tradition of the cinema of the *Đổi Mới* reform era, even venturing into territories still deemed problematic by the Vietnamese government, which only filmmakers in exile have been able to explore. Moreover, the film employs the interpretative lens of post-memory (Young, 2002; Hirsch, 2008), referring to the unique experience of generations who did not live through the tragic events in question but who are indirectly marked by the emotional legacy of the trauma they caused. Furthermore, the film connects with a transnational logic evident in its humanistic approach to trauma, its cinematic style, the director's career, its status as a co-production, and its international release. Indeed, while the film was banned in Vietnam, it has been nominated at numerous festivals around the world (Cannes, Chicago, Sydney, Tokyo, Reykjavik and Guanajuato, for example) and has won awards at festivals in Munich, Singapore, Bangkok and the QCinema International Film Festival in the Philippines.

The evocative qualities of *Viet and Nam* make it an interesting object of study for the purpose of exploring how it interweaves thematic and formal elements to offer an alternative perspective on the memory of the Vietnam War. Guided by the methodology of textual analysis, this study examines the expressive and narrative devices employed in various key scenes of the film in order to highlight how it draws on the films of both the *Đổi Mới* period and of the Vietnamese diaspora, while at the same time taking the discussion of the trauma caused by the war to a whole new level.

NAM, VIET AND VIETNAM IN *VIET AND NAM*

Viet and Nam opens with a black screen spotted with small, gently falling white particles, which might be tiny snowflakes or floating dust. While we hear the sound of constantly dripping water, a human figure becomes discernible in the top right-hand corner of the frame. In the dim lighting, we can only just glimpse a naked man walking slowly, hunched over, while we begin to hear the movement of the water he stirs as he advances and his constant gasping, as if he were short of breath. The figure crosses the frame, and just before he leaves it we notice a hand clutching his leg. The last of the credits appear over the dark image, followed by the sound of a male voice-over describing the difficulties of being submerged in water inside a plastic bag that makes it almost im-

possible to breathe. Then a two-shot provides a frontal view of the young man speaking and the person listening to him. Both are seated with their backs against a dark wall. They are wearing the same uniform and their skin is stained with soot. The first man continues with his story, talking about the sunlight that seeps through the plastic bag, which contrasts with the gloom of their current setting. When the story is over, the two men stare at each other intently and caress one another's faces, while the constant dripping of water continues. One of the men sensually slips his thumb into the other's mouth (Image 1); then, a bell rings and the pair abruptly cease their affectionate behaviour. The shot, which has remained static for over two minutes, now shifts slightly as the young men put on their miners' helmets and stand up, while other miners pass in front of them like shadows.

The film's first two shots introduce us to Viet and Nam, a pair of miners forced to keep their love for one another a secret, far removed from the light of day. Neither in this scene nor at any point in the film, however, is it made clear which one is Viet is and which one is Nam.[2] This vagueness sets the tone for the ambiguous rhetoric that pervades the film, while at the same time drawing attention to what unites and (con)fuses the two protagonists throughout the film: the paternal absence that marks their past, the romantic relationship that binds them in the present, and the shared fate that the future holds for them. The characters' names—and the film's title—also suggest that the story of these two is being presented metonymically as the story of their nation.

Image 1



At the same time, we are given a first glimpse of the intertwining of several themes explored in the film, with the connection established between work in the mine and the enigmatically introduced theme of fleeing the country illegally by sea. Both experiences are marked by a suffocating atmosphere which, as will be discussed below, characterises the lives of various characters and is conveyed to the viewer by means of dark, claustrophobic settings, accentuated by the film's 4:3 aspect ratio. Similarly, the symbolic omnipresence of water in the film is already made clear in these opening scenes. While this scene shows the mine's groundwater and the water mentioned in the story, subsequent scenes will feature rain, a river, a pond, a flood or the sea for different expressive purposes. In any case, the constant appearance of this symbol invites us to contemplate the polysemous nature of the Vietnamese word *nước*, which can be translated as "water" but also as "homeland", "fatherland" or "nation"[3] (Nguyên, 2017), further encouraging a metonymic-metaphorical reading of *Viet and Nam*.

Another important element, which is introduced in a more veiled manner as the film unfolds, is the motif of the earth, the ground beneath which the two young men carry out their arduous work, which is used to allude to the hidden nature of their homosexual relationship, and will also be connected later in the film to the unexploded bombs, the remains of those who disappeared during the war, and ultimately, to everything buried beneath the government's version of the conflict. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the title planned for the film's failed premiere in Vietnam was *Trong lòng đất* [In the Heart of the Earth].

Finally, the brief sequence discussed above clearly exudes a contemplative aesthetic, constructed using long, static shots with no back-

ground music, reflecting a placid narrative, a slow pace and an intimate tone that invite the spectator to reflect on the sometimes cryptic and often critical perspective offered by the film. The opening scene thus gives a first glimpse of a cinematic work that blends a documentary approach with a lyrical or even dreamlike atmosphere to present us—through the careful parcelling out of information and the use of editing and ellipses—with a sort of jigsaw puzzle of interchangeable pieces that we must piece together to get a picture of the (post)memories of the war in contemporary Vietnam.

SON, MOTHER… AND THE GHOST OF THE FATHER

Later in the film, various fragments delve into Nam's relationship with Hoa, his mother. In one of these, the two characters are shown panning for minerals in the river and in the humble, gloomy family business while an announcer on television lists the names of soldiers whose bodies have not yet been found. In another scene, while working by the river, Hoa says to her son: "He's back. This time he was standing about a hundred or two hundred metres away from me. It looked as though he was carrying a pistol behind his back. Then he disappeared. When I turned around, there was a very large tree. Then I woke up." The conversation that ensues makes it clear that Hoa is sharing with her son the latest dream in which her husband—the father whom the war never allowed Nam to meet—appeared to her.

The ghost of the fallen soldier haunts Hoa's dreams, keeping her in a state of perpetual mourning for the missing man. Nam is Hoa's only possible refuge, and the image of her absent husband merges with that of her son: "He was the spitting image of you. You look just like him," she tells Nam as they prepare the mosquito net for the bed where they will sleep after she sings her son a lullaby. The bond of mutual



Image 2

understanding between them has already been highlighted moments earlier, in a scene showing Nam carefully painting his mother's nails (Image 2) while she worries over her son's injuries and the risk of infection in the mine. Without words, Nam confesses his relationship with Viet to his mother, before announcing that he will soon be leaving them as he intends to move abroad. Hoa tries to convince him to stay and builds yet another bridge between her husband and her son, between past and present: "Your father… I should have told him not to go."

Nam's vicarious memory of his father—and, in part, his memory of the war—is filtered through his mother's perspective, through the memories she has of him. But his father does not appear to Nam in his dreams; instead, he appears at the moment of sexual climax with Viet. The father's ghost intrudes upon the lovers and Nam sees his father's face merge with Viet's, as he confesses to Viet in a later scene. The spectral presence of the absent father haunts Hoa and Nam's daily

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lives much like the many ghosts of the war who, as will be discussed below, invade the country's everyday existence. In this way, as the film's director himself describes it: "*Viet and Nam* interweaves the image of the father with the history of the nation. The relationship young people have with this 'father' is a relationship with a national history full of crises which, in my view, have not been resolved or sufficiently discussed" (Quý, 2024).

DIGGING INTO THE EARTH

Shortly before the film reaches its halfway point, following a fade to black, the title *Viet and Nam* appears on screen, establishing two more divisions to accompany the many reflected in the story. The first is the split contained in the title itself, which makes explicit the separation between the two parts of the country's name; the second is the split in the narrative introduced at this moment, dividing it into two parts. The action then shifts to southern Vietnam, and more specifically to the Ba Chúc Memorial, which pays tribute to the victims of the massacre committed there in 1978 by Pol Pot's troops. Around this location, Hoa and Nam search for the remains of Nam's father, who was a Viet Cong guerrilla. They are accompanied by Viet and Ba, a veteran who had befriended the missing man during the war. The four characters look around at the skulls and bones piled up at the memorial while an elderly woman lights incense sticks and places them on an altar. Ba confesses to Hoa that he finds it hard to breathe there, and they leave in the company of a visitor who tells them about a medium who specialises in locating the remains of the missing. Despite acknowledging the futility of her quest, Hoa is determined to find the tree she has seen in her dreams, aided by Ba, who constantly shares stories of the war with his travelling companions. These stories continue to feed Nam's memory of a father—and of a war—that he never knew first-hand.

After dodging various unexploded bombs still buried in the ground and taking a short rest by the river, the four continue their journey through the dark jungle until they reach a place where mannequins of soldiers depict scenes of the war. Nam approaches one of them and strokes him affectionately (Image 3) immediately after a chronologically decontextualised shot of a man crying on his knees in the rain amidst the mud and smoke. Both these shots are accompanied by a song performed a cappella by a female voice. Although the credits do not identify the composition, the repetitive structure of the vocal chant is reminiscent of *chầu văn*, a Vietnamese folk music genre used at spirit-conjuring rituals to induce a state of trance. The next shot reveals the diegetic source of the music, showing us the back of the woman singing (soon to be identified as the aforementioned medium), who is dressed in a traditional pink *áo dài*. As will be the case throughout the sequence, the editing here breaks the continuity to create a dialogue between different locations and, above all, different times, all equally marked by the horror of war.

When the song is over, the medium begins communicating with the spirit of a fallen soldier. Off-screen, one of the soldier's relatives is heard weeping, and the medium turns around. Her white-painted, tear-streaked face looks sinister, as does her inquisitorial expression when she accuses some of those present of not believing in her

Image 3



powers (Image 4). The camera shifts to show the relatives of the soldier whose spirit the medium has contacted, holding photos of the missing man, and finally, the medium approaching the four protagonists, who simply watch from a distance. A medium close-up then shows the woman in a trance with a look of horror on her face, her back to the audience watching her. In the next shot, she is shown lying on the ground, having taken on the form of the soldier who was shot in the war, who she claims was buried by his comrades at that very spot. Following the medium's instructions, a man starts digging there, and then the medium herself gets into the hole and begins burrowing with her hands. She takes a handful of mud and holds it up to one of the fallen soldier's relatives: "Here is the flesh of your father's head. The flesh has turned to black earth." Notwithstanding the grotesque nature of the medium's performance and the possibility of deception, the funeral rites carried out by the soldier's family in the following scene reflect their need to close an open wound that the discourse of victory has failed to heal.

Another scene, comprised of a single shot, returns our attention to the static (as static as the official memory) re-enactment of episodes from the war. A horizontal tracking shot moving from left to right captures the mannequin soldiers using picks to dig up explosives buried in a stretch of ground marked with red flags. In what sounds al-

Image 4



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most like a documentary voice-over, Ba names the various devices shown there. The long descriptive shot ends by focusing on a visitor with only one leg, who observes the motionless display while leaning on a crutch. The sequence is intercut with a series of brief scenes that take us to different places and times, all of which are thematically connected as they revolve around Nam's imminent departure and the consequences this will have for his relationship with Viet, who compares his fate to that of the women who a quarter of a century earlier waited in vain for their husbands to come back from the war.

We then return to the jungle, where Hoa finds the tree they were looking for. The four characters dig at the spot with their picks, just as we saw Viet and Nam doing earlier in the mine, the man who helped the medium, and even the mannequins in the re-enactment. The sound of a sharp thud makes them all stop digging suddenly, and their silence and exchanges of glances maintain the suspense for a few seconds. As Ba warns them, what they have uncovered is not the remains of the missing man but an unexploded bomb. As in the film *Living in Fear* mentioned above, the undetonated explosive buried underground represents the suffering deeply embedded in a country barely capable of expressing it. In this case, the scene connects the unexploded mine to the ghost of the fallen soldier, and thus to the raw scars expressed in Ba's guilt, Hoa's unresolved grief and Nam's complex relationship with the figure of his father.

The sequence ends with a final scene that begins with a close-up of a frog in the rain emerging from a puddle that has formed where they were digging. The four travellers are sleeping by the tree. Nam wakes up, watches the frog and follows it through the trees until it disappears into a hole in the rocks. The rain has stopped and a wide shot shows a bare-chested Nam standing in the middle of the frame, staring at the hole. A reverberating internal voice-over give us access to the thoughts of the young man, who fantasises about his father's return home. The camera gradually zooms in, adding an emotional undertone to a scene with a distinctly dreamlike quality. A reverse shot shows the hole in the rocks, and the camera zooms in on it. We hear the sound of dripping water coming from its dark interior while we can just barely make out the rocks in an image that recalls the scenes in the mine where the lovers work. A shot taken from inside the hole shows Nam again as he finishes his imaginary dialogue: "Dad, I'm scared." Just then we hear the sound of a gunshot and Nam collapses to the ground (Image 5). The next shot shows him lying still, with no sign of a bullet wound. This time speaking aloud, the young man asks: "Is this what it's like to be dead?" This question, which ends the sequence, highlights Nam's inability to make peace either with the vicarious memory of his father or with the homeland he is about to leave, while at the same time opening the door to an ending in which the protagonists will try new ways of banishing their ghost(s).



Image 5

A BETTER FUTURE?

Back home, various scenes return us to daily life in the mine. The editing suggestively connects the end of one sequence with the start of the next one. A wide shot shows Viet, Nam and other miners in a mine shaft lift as it begins to descend. The shot lingers for a few seconds after a large grate covers the shaft, and this image is juxtaposed with a shot of Nam in another confined space—in this case, inside a moving vehicle. The next shot shows the container in which Nam will leave the country. A young man dressed in a blazer, Hawaiian shirt and sunglasses is drinking Coca-Cola while giving instructions in the middle of the night to a group of people on how to open the containers. Just then, another van arrives on the scene with more people ready to make the illegal journey and, as we discover along with Nam, Viet is among them. The scene ends with a long tracking shot lasting over a minute, with no sound other than ambient noise, rolling past one container after another, bringing to mind not only those who fled Vietnam in the late 1970s, but also those who are still leaving the country today in search of a better life.

The action cuts directly to a scene in which Ba confesses to Hoa the secret he has kept since the war ended. Ba's confession begins with a static long shot lasting over three minutes, showing him with his face to the camera while Hoa goes about her work in the family business. Shortly before Ba's account reaches its climax, Hoa sits down. A few seconds later, we hear exactly the same words from Ba again, over a medium-close-up shot of Hoa in profile. It is then that the veteran finally reveals that he accidentally shot Hoa's husband in a moment of panic.

The disruptive rhythm of the editing in this scene allows us to focus first on the heart-wrenching testimony of the man who served in the war,

and then separately on the distraught reaction of the woman who lost her husband and the father of her child, thus drawing our attention to the different emotions associated with a multifaceted memory that is not—and cannot be—the same for everyone. After this scene, Hoa calls the medium on the phone and tells her everything she wants her to convey to her late husband, while a wide shot of a country road shows a Vietnamese flag fluttering in the centre of the frame, once again emphasising the collective nature of a trauma that affects the whole country in one way or another.

The film's final scene begins with a medium close-up of Viet and Nam that recalls the shot that first introduced the couple to us. Both men are bare-chested and covered in soot, leaning against a black wall. Viet kisses and caresses Nam, who says to him: "I've finally seen him. But he didn't say a word to me." Viet replies that it was a hallucination caused by a lack of oxygen. Nam looks into the camera and asks Viet if he can see anything. The camera pulls back gradually as they talk about the darkness of the place and the need to stay calm and not use up too much air. At certain moments, the couple seem to be floating against a starry night sky, but both their conversation and the image—which is now a long shot— reveal that they are actually inside a shipping container (Image 6). In the final shot, while we hear Nam talking about the story of exile and happy return told by the Vietnamese legend of *Mai An Tiêm*, the container drifts on the waves in the vastness of the blue sea.

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Image 6

CONCLUSIONS

This analysis of *Viet and Nam* has explored how the film orchestrates a pluralistic memory of the war, adopting a subjective and intergenerational perspective to challenge the static nature of the official narrative. The film eschews the traditional heroic model by focusing on the memory of Ba, a war veteran, while also conveying Hoa's fruitless efforts to find closure for her grief, as a woman who cannot break free from her past. But in addition to exposing the permanent scar of the trauma suffered by these two characters, *Viet and Nam* also ventures into the realm of post-memory with its examination of the legacy of grief inherited by Nam, its young protagonist. It thus explores the connection between a nation, its youth and its war-torn past through a narrative shaped by the queer experience, with an intimate story that functions as a counter-narrative to the patriarchal framework of the institutional rhetoric.

The film offers an *archaeology of trauma* (this expression seems particularly apt given the symbolic role it assigns to the earth) in which the ghost of the fallen soldier not only connects the aforementioned characters, but also serves (especially if we consider the function of water, another of the film's symbol, water) to characterise the spectral country that Quý shows us: a shattered Vietnam in which the wounds of the past mark everyday life in the present. The filmmaker's for-

mal choices prove crucial to these dimensions of his work. On the one hand, the use of sensory (and especially the dreamlike and the quasi-fantastical) elements more effectively exposes the contradictory persistence of national pain than mere mimesis could. On the other hand, the fragmentary and non-linear narrative, replete with silences, ellipses and the interweaving of different themes, settings and time-frames, helps place the film in opposition to the monolithic vision promoted by the official (and impossible) unified memory.

Thus, while telling a personal story, the film presents a portrait of contemporary Vietnam that at times even confronts with a tragedy that transcends not only geographical but also generational boundaries. With its emphasis on the human experience of trauma, the weight given in its story to exile, and the somewhat veiled references to Pol Pot's genocide or the 9/11 attacks, *Viet and Nam* opens the door to a transnational interpretation. This possibility is further reinforced by the film's international impact and the dialogue Quý establishes between the Vietnamese aesthetic tradition, slow cinema, and that global style of auteur filmmaking whose influence on the director has not gone unnoticed by critics, who have compared him, for example, to Bresson, Resnais and Tarkovsky (Fabre, 2024) or to more contemporary examples such as Alain Guiraudie and Apichatpong Weerasethakul (Henderson, 2024).

In short, this study shows that *Viet and Nam* expands and at the same time shifts the focus of the cinema of both the *Đổi Mổi* era and the Vietnamese diaspora. From the former, it takes its intimate approach and its subversion of the epic narrative, while from the latter it takes the exploration of memory from the perspective of an unsettling alienation and the drama of exile. However, the dismantling of the official narrative that the film seeks to achieve through its focus on grief is not merely the result of merging themes and styles from the cinematic trends discussed in the introduction. As a film about the echo at a point when there is almost no voice left, *Viet and Nam* can be understood as a convergence of domestic and diaspora memory, but also as an intersection of the war experienced and the trauma inherited, of history and rumour. Its focus on vicarious memory, its adoption of a non-heteronormative gaze, and its experimental formal approach point towards a kind of rupture that serves as an indicator of a generational shift. *Viet and Nam* demonstrates that trauma can be transmitted, reinterpreted and filmed without having been directly experienced, that national memory can be conceived of in a context of emotional intimacy, and that the queer experience not only inserts a dissident body into history but also offers an alternative way of telling it. It is at this meeting point—between post-memory, queer sensibility and a transnational aesthetic—that the film opens up a new direction in Vietnamese cinema for exploring the memory of the war. ■

NOTES

1 For a detailed analysis of cinema during the *Đổi Mới* period, see Charlot, 1989.

2 Not even the end credits specify which character each actor plays. For the sake of greater clarity, and following the example set by the film's director in interviews, we shall henceforth refer to the protagonist as Nam.

3 The film *2030* (Nước, Nghiem-Minh Nguyen-Vo, 2014) addresses the polysemous nature of the Vietnamese word for water in a similar manner, connecting the floods caused by climate change to the loss of national territory.

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FROM MEMORY TO POST-MEMORY: THE TRAUMA OF THE LEGACY OF WAR IN *VIET AND NAM*

Abstract

This article offers an analysis of *Viet and Nam* (Trương Minh Quý, 2024), examining the film's alternative approach to the memory of the war between Vietnam and the United States. It begins with a brief overview of the films that consolidated the official interpretation of the conflict promoted by the Vietnamese government, and then considers the transformations brought about by films of both the *Đổi mới* era and the Vietnamese diaspora, which introduced new ways of thinking about trauma. A textual analysis of *Viet and Nam* shows how the film engages with these movements while taking a significantly different approach to the memory of war, highlighting the importance the film gives to the experience of grief, the exploration of post-memory, and the inscription of a queer gaze that destabilises dominant frameworks. At the same time, the film's fragmentary sensory narrative is revealed to be a device for conveying the indirect experience of trauma, connecting the intimate with the historical and offering a reflection on memory from a generational and transnational perspective.

Key words

Vietnam War; Memory; Post-memory; Trauma; Queer; Exile; *Viet and Nam*; Film Analysis.

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DE LA MEMORIA A LA POSMEMORIA. EL TRAUMA DE LA HERENCIA BÉLICA EN *VIET AND NAM*

Resumen

El presente artículo toma *Viet and Nam* (Trương Minh Quý, 2024) como objeto de análisis con el fin de examinar cómo el film procura una aproximación alternativa a la memoria de la guerra entre Vietnam y Estados Unidos. En primer lugar, se revisan sucintamente las representaciones cinematográficas que consolidaron la lectura oficial del conflicto promovida por el gobierno de Vietnam para, posteriormente, atender a las transformaciones introducidas tanto por el cine del *Đổi mới* como por el cine de la diáspora vietnamita, ya que estas impulsaron nuevas vías para pensar el trauma. Seguidamente, el análisis textual de *Viet and Nam* muestra cómo la película dialoga con estas corrientes, a la vez que introduce desplazamientos significativos en su abordaje de la memoria bélica. Se destaca, así, el importante peso que el film otorga a la experiencia del duelo, a la exploración de la posmemoria y a la inscripción de una mirada *queer* que desestabiliza los marcos dominantes. Asimismo, se presenta la narrativa fragmentaria y sensorial del film como dispositivo que permite articular la transmisión del trauma más allá de la experiencia directa, vinculando lo íntimo con lo histórico y abriendo una reflexión sobre la memoria desde una perspectiva generacional y transnacional.

Palabras clave

Guerra de Vietnam; Memoria; Posmemoria; Trauma; *Queer*; Exilio; *Viet and Nam*; Análisis fílmico.

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