

LONG BUI

Heteroglossia of History: Remembering the Republic of Vietnam in Contemporary Vietnamese Film

This article analyzes the enduring legacy of the Republic of Vietnam, the former ally of the United States during the Cold War defeated by northern communist forces in 1975, and how it is depicted in contemporary Vietnamese motion pictures financed and supported by the one-party government.¹ While there are many aspects of filmmaking to explore, I provide a critical look at the theme of history and memory. As case studies, I provide a close reading of two films made in 2005, on the thirtieth anniversary of the fall of Sài Gòn, a time in the country when there were celebrations of and reflections about the meaning of this event. *Giải phóng Sài Gòn* [Liberation of Sài Gòn] and *Sống trong sợ hãi* [Living in Fear] explore the incorporation of the defunct Republic of Vietnam (RVN) (informally known as South Vietnam) into the image-making machine and statecraft of the People's Republic of Vietnam (PRVN). The first film is a military epic about how the communists won the war, one that reasserts national pride while not completely demonizing communism's opponents in the process. The second centers on the lives of South Vietnamese soldiers and families, offering a sympathetic perspective on the plight of postwar populations. Both films, made with state support, remind audiences of the historical stigma placed on

the South Vietnamese, a broad category that includes political leaders, Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) soldiers, and all those who might not be part of the communist movement. Both films refamiliarize audiences with the South Vietnam regime and society, but they also reference dominant conceptions of wartime experiences and postwar identity.

Methodologically, this article combines close textual analysis of films with considerations of political economy to analyze the sociopolitical conditions for filmmaking in Vietnam. It does not address the explosion in the visual arts, literature, and social media from the 2010s, since those newer, transnational developments are beyond the scope of this project.² Nor does it provide an extensive history of Vietnamese filmmaking, though I will point out significant past works. Grounded in a focused consideration of the relationship between filmmaking and state power, this essay explores reevaluations of the place of South Vietnam and “southernness,” where “the creation of a common past is a means of defining what and who belong, and what and who deserve to be consigned to oblivion.”³ Just because South Vietnam has been historically marginalized does not mean it has been totally consigned to oblivion, since there are vexed layers of meaning to be uncovered around it.

The percolating tensions and ambivalence within state-sponsored cultural projects are never monolithic, especially in terms of how they circulate among the public. What such projects might say about historical silences and representations of memory is powerful. During the early twenty-first century, when the Socialist Republic of Vietnam is ramping up to become an economic power with growing cultural “soft” power, I explore the (ongoing) story of national liberation/unification, one that does not work through a completely slanted bias against southerners, as is usually assumed. Decades after the war ended officially in 1975, it is crucial to size up the meaning of (South) Vietnamese-ness for what it may be worth now and then. The two films analyzed here provide a way to think of state-funding memory projects in terms of what I am calling a heteroglossia of history, where creative artistic texts contain multiple viewpoints about the past. In drawing out these competing perspectives, I recognize that party-state approved works, despite their censorship of and ambivalence toward southerners, possess possibilities for affirming the legacy of the Republic of Vietnam.

Mining Vietnam's History through the Cinematic Gaze

Through film and filmmaking, one can think of Vietnam less in strict terms and more according to its variable social contexts. A common assumption about Vietnam is that it is a regimented totalitarian society despite economic globalization, and it appears to be so given ongoing news about media censorship or arrests of political dissidents. Creative entrepreneurship is stifled when, for example, the Central Council on Film Evaluation and the Cinematography Agency ban the theatrical release of films like 2013's *Bụi đời Chợ lớn* [Chinatown Dust], due to perceptions that it incites violence, possesses "poor" art production values, or does not reflect the "true" Vietnam.⁴ Even when approved for screenings abroad in prestigious international venues like Cannes Film Festival, Vietnamese films are edited for racy content or troubling scenes. Yet it remains important to accept that Vietnamese films are nevertheless malleable and porous, capable of breaking out of binaries that are still influential in popular thinking (censored/uncensored, public/government, North/South, communism/capitalism, progress/failure).

Cultural anthropologists have provided rich ethnographic studies on southern memory and challenged the assertion that the South cannot be remembered by showing the various ways in which people continue to fashion and assert memorial practices. While many might make the unqualified claim that the South cannot be remembered properly, anthropologist Christina Schwenkel has shown in her major study of war tourism and RVN guides in Vietnam that this is not always the case.⁵ She documents how South Vietnamese photojournalists were included in war exhibits in Vietnam and that there remains a constant circumvention of official memory by government officials at the War Remnants Museum in Hồ Chí Minh City. In another study on veteran graves and the remaking of military bases into tourist sites, Schwenkel brings to light the forms of ambivalence within memoryscapes, which are "symbolic interactions with 'the Other,' including spectral beings and battlefield adversaries [that] . . . engendered expressions of empathy and a deeper understanding between former enemies based on recognition of a shared traumatic history. This recognition of history, and of the Other's humanity . . . suggests the possibility for a new politics of empathic reconciliation to take place."⁶

Ann Marie Leshkovich has also written about southern memory in her essay “Wandering Ghosts of Late Socialism,” which explores traders in Hồ Chí Minh City to make sense of the human suffering that continued well after the war.⁷ Because most female traders come from the “losing” side, and most officials hail from the “winning” one, their interactions reveal gendered experiences with economic insecurity within late socialism and the constant pressure to make money. Leshkovich’s ethnographic study concludes with a final gesture to Vietnamese film to suggest that selective memories of the past erupt in a range of everyday sites that cannot be contained by economic or political reforms. As such, this article builds on that scholarship to show that film is another mechanism for seeing and remembering the South outside the official constructs of history.

Numerous media sources in Vietnam, such as novels, art gallery exhibitions, and museum exhibits, reflect changes in the publishing industry and arts in Vietnam in the last two decades. It appears that things started to change with the onset of the new millennium, marking the debut of films that addressed pressing social issues, as exemplified by *Gái nhây* [Bar Girls] (2003), which portrays the disruptions that have accompanied rural to urban migration, HIV/AIDS, prostitution, and the fraying of family and community ties. Unlike prior films that were focused on family melodramas and the like, *Bar Girls* presents a more “realistic” portrait of Vietnam, representing the dramatic changes in the country and desires of filmmakers to capture the interests of popular audiences.

Culture presents a theoretically rich site for engaging Vietnam’s paradoxes. David Biggs writes that at the heart of development in Vietnam is the failure of nation building; the incomplete integration of history with culture forms a kind of heteroglossia, something that compels the presence of two or more viewpoints within a text.⁸ Attentive to the heteroglossia of history found in contemporary Vietnamese cinema and society, I believe that by reading texts as they express viewpoints about North and South, we discover that the state of film and Vietnam in general is much more nuanced than meta-narratives about authoritarian controls and socialism. According to Pamela Corey and Nora A. Taylor, much critical writing on Vietnamese art in the early 1990s centered on the allegory of a once-repressed and now liberal Vietnam, “as if the adoption of a market economy in Vietnam

necessarily translated into a radical refashioning of the arts considering that the political system and much of its controls have remained in place.”⁹ Although artistic freedom and practices have flourished in Vietnam since, it is unclear whether *Đổi Mới* [Renovation], postsocialism, neoliberalism, globalization or any meta-framework can capture or explain the range of complex developments that led to the rise of contemporary art and experimental modes of expression in Vietnam. As the authors conclude, “Reform—in the sense of renovating the official infrastructure and institutions in which artists are taught and practice and exhibit their works inside the country—is little changed today. It is still important not to give short shrift to the significance of the 1990s in permitting artists to take a first major step outside the constraints of socialist realism.”¹⁰

The filmic portrayal of the South Vietnam nation-state remains sparse despite this slow move away from socialist realism. During the war, given the costs of making a narrative feature, most films shown in South Vietnam were popular ones from the West or other parts of Asia. Most films at the time were documentaries and newsreels, and the few that were made like *Nắng chiều* [Sunny Afternoon] or *Người tình không chân dung* [Warrior: Who Are You?] were mostly war-themed love stories involving soldiers and their female love interests. As Lan Duong has shown in a study of wartime films from North and South Vietnam, gender and affect are projected onto landscapes in a national cinema that continues to be symbolically divided. These themes are necessary to observe, given the lack of historical preservation for South Vietnam films after the war:

State power in Vietnam disallows unofficial representations of the wars that were fought on Vietnamese soil. As a result, very few films about South Vietnam and its collaboration with the US are found in the country's film archives; most are housed at the Library of Congress in the US or circulate as pirated films in Vietnamese American communities. Consequently, a swath of Vietnamese cinematic history is unaccounted for within the country's archives, as an official narrative about the development of the country's film industry presents itself only in terms of a North Vietnamese history of revolution and sacrifice.¹¹

Duong maintains that scholars need to bear a “synchronized looking in regards to Vietnamese cinema” with the recognition that the films are

“doubly temporal,” historical artifacts that reflect the period in which they were produced and the historical times they hope to capture, whether in the past or the future. We can recognize, then, the dialectical roles that North and South Vietnam play in the “formation of history as this history dynamically unfolded.”¹² After reunification, socialist films featuring the cruelties of the Americans were very much emphasized prior to the critical acclaim of films like 1999’s *Three Seasons*, an American film made by a Vietnamese American refugee about urban life in Sài Gòn, something only made possible by US lifting of sanctions against Vietnam.

The absence and silence surrounding the South remains in state-regulated media, where movies, music, and books from southern authors have been banned by the ministry now known as the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism since the late 1970s.¹³ Yet Vietnamese cinema has always reflected the sliding scales of value-making in which images and discourses of the people’s war for national liberation are supplemented by more complex subtle interpretations of Vietnamese society and politics. For example, the first feature-length Vietnamese film ever made was the 1959 *On the Same River* [*Chung một dòng sông*], which focuses on the story of two young lovers, separated from one another by the river marking the boundary between North and South Vietnam. In this allegorical story, two lovers put their affections for one another aside to fight for national reunification.

Panivong Norinder divides the history of Vietnamese cinema into four distinct periods, corresponding to the country’s shift from French colonialism (1887–1954) to the American War (1954–1975) to the post-reunification period (1975–1986), toward the neoliberal period under globalization.¹⁴ The first two periods gave rise predominantly to documentaries, cartoons, and feature films about anti-imperialist resistance against France and the United States. Post-1975, Vietnam produced films that “aimed at transforming the traditional forms of life and ideology.”¹⁵ The period from reunification (1975) until Renovation (1986) witnessed state-issued films that boosted national morale by representing the beauty of northern peasant life. After that, new stories emerged that served “counter-hegemonic purposes without interference from the state.”¹⁶ Such films included the 1987 film *Cô gái trên sông* [*The Girl on the River*], which

provided space to consider southern struggle.¹⁷ *The Girl on the River* discusses a southern prostitute who falls in love with a northern cadre officer who leaves her after the war. She eventually marries a South Vietnamese Army veteran. For this reason, *The Girl on the River* was able to keep a southern prostitute as its main character with the full backing of the Vietnamese Cinema Department, despite some reservations from members of the Ministry of Culture.¹⁸ Since then, there has been an easing of government supervision, bolstering a greater number of stories related to South Vietnam that previously could not come about.

Despite this, war-themed films have become unpopular in Vietnam with a generation born after conflict who did not grow up with violence and want more entertainment.¹⁹ Globalizing economic trends are reflected in movies that set out to expand Vietnam's fledgling culture industry and bring it up to date, catering to market demands while staying communist in name.²⁰ Even as there is always a push for patriotic images, history and memory are being redefined and recreated in Vietnam. Beneath the present demand for consumer goods are "doubts, nostalgia, searching and reflection, which seem to intensify as it becomes more obvious that the market economy offers no panacea."²¹

The turn of this century witnessed a surge of diverse film offerings, and interest in cinema took off when international private investors stood to gain revenues from Vietnam's new middle class and "the effects of market liberalization on people's lives."²² Many of these films were financed independently by overseas producers and investors. In 2012, despite their small numbers, foreign expatriates or returnees of Vietnamese descent were involved in half of all commercial films in Vietnam.²³ To compete with these more entertaining, higher quality films by overseas Vietnamese as well as with the flood of Asian and Western films, Vietnamese filmmakers have sought to carve out novel ways of representing Vietnamese-ness on the silver screen, but there are limits, as seen in *Chinatown Dust*. The film's producer Jenni Trang Le describes how the censorship board did not approve of a movie with gangsters and no police officers in it as a symbol of order; the film's director put up the censorship board's letter on digital platforms like Facebook as a call to action that said "Hey, you know, we're so limited by these guidelines, if you want to advance cinema in Vietnam we need to have

the government be more understanding.”²⁴ The post went viral but to no avail. Censorship hinders what Le identified as Vietnam’s ability to match the power of Hollywood.

Other works that present the complex situation of South Vietnamese memory in Vietnam include the postmodern art of Dinh Q. Lê, a Sài Gòn-based contemporary artist who remixes old wartime/refugee images. One refugee story made into film is *Journey from the Fall* [*Vượt sóng*], released in 2006 to wide acclaim. Later movies like *Go Go Sisters* [*Tháng năm rực rỡ*] present stories of young women in the wartime South, making tragicomedy out of violence (all the while integrating and drawing from South Korean commercial inspirations). These films resonate with the work of Cambodia’s Rithy Panh, who focuses on the lives of everyday people in the post-Khmer Rouge era, and the work of acclaimed Thai filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul, who faced censorship due to his ability to interweave murky notions of the historical past, memory, and sexuality.

Exploring the power dynamics between North and South in the films *Liberation of Sài Gòn* and *Living in Fear*, I find them representative of a global Vietnam that is plunging into taboo stories. *Liberation* tells of divided loyalties leading up to the end of war, while *Living in Fear* broaches the divisions that persisted after the war. Juxtaposed with one another, they tell the story of a revolutionary moment for Vietnam in the mid 1970s, but they also speak of a key moment around 2005 when dominant images of nationhood came into question. The evolution of this question of southern Vietnam in cinema and society over time is present in more than just two films, but these two films are particularly effective in illustrating the complexities surrounding representation of South Vietnam and its citizens in contemporary Vietnamese cinema.

Liberation of Sài Gòn and the Remembrance of History

Before 2002, only a few government companies were allocated funds to produce films to be shown in state-owned cinemas, and film scripts still had to be vetted and approved by the Department of Cinematography. In that year, the department abolished the prefilming censoring of scripts, enabling the establishment of private film studios with the aim of encouraging competition and innovation in order to improve Vietnam’s film

industry. “The new policy will have a great impact on the industry,” said the director of the Department of Cinematography, “from now on, private producers can decide the stories they want and the script. We aim to provide better conditions for young film-makers to produce quality movies to satisfy young fans.”²⁵ Lê Hoàng, director of the 2002 blockbuster *Bar Girls*, recognized early on that “films that deal with realistic drama of everyday life are much more appealing than those focusing on war.”²⁶ The success of *Bar Girls* can be attributed to new thinking at the Ministry of Culture, but it also represents a struggle over what to do with memories of war in an age of mass entertainment. Lê Hoàng explained the approach under such a loosely statist system: “Filmmakers usually choose scripts treating ‘traditional subjects’—war memories and socialism building—because it is the safest way to win state approval and funding.” Yet Lê Hoàng eventually stuck to his instincts with *Bar Girls*, wanting to “make something more enjoyable that people are interested in.”²⁷

Vietnamese war narratives often involve a collapsing of nation (ethnic unity) and revolutionary struggle (against foreigners). This was especially the case after the end of the Soviet Union in 1989 and the loss in faith in communism thereafter, as Christoph Giebel explains:

In this context, the revival of war memory is, in part, aimed at creating undivided, patriotic loyalty to the Party-led state. The constant public reminders of military heroism are attempts by an aging revolutionary generation to keep their hold on power. The invocations of war memory are also a response to the ever-increasing lure of commercialism and materialism on Viet Nam’s increasingly apolitical youth. One of Viet Nam’s responses to the collapse of the communist world order is to offer public reminders of revolutionary sacrifice and struggle, in order to cement a certain way of being Vietnamese.²⁸

State-sponsored cinema is where one can look for the heteroglossia of history, where the contradictions of “being Vietnamese” intersect with the revival of war memory and “becoming Vietnamese” under the present demands for commercial entertainment.

Liberation of Sài Gòn takes place in the autumn before communist forces seized the city in 1975 and presents a sympathetic portrayal of the conquered South Vietnamese. Made in collaboration with the government’s main film

company (Liberation Studio), this movie was planned as the climax to a four-part movie series called *State of War*, with *Liberation* capping the prior release of 2004's *Memory of Điện Biên* [*Ký ức Điện Biên*], 2005's *Tiếng cồng đình mệnh* [Goodwill Destiny], and an incomplete film about the military-base cities of Huế and Đà Nẵng. Opening with shots of battle scenes at Buôn Ma Thuột in the Central Highlands, *Liberation of Sài Gòn* recreates the 1975 Spring Offensive with a cast comprising both professional actors and amateurs from local sites. History, or the state's version of history, stands tall as the framing device, while the agential force and locomotive of change is "the people." Hence, there is no singular main protagonist. The large ensemble cast features the perspectives of military officials and citizens alike, both from the RVN as well as those with loyalties to the southern-based National Liberation Front.

In the opening scene, southern troops advance on a group of northern soldiers, but it is the latter force that eventually prevails. This moment embodies a decisive military event when the communist forces take control of the Central Highlands and the city of Buôn Ma Thuột—a diversion to allow the main ground forces to go after gateway southern cities like Xuân Lộc.²⁹ This battle scene segues into a discussion between President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu and the head of his cabinet. The president feels these invasions are the violation of the Paris Agreement that he begrudgingly signed. He says in frustration, "the Americans promise that in emergency cases, they will intervene. Now it's time to ask them to fulfill their promise." The back and forth exchanges between the US and South Vietnamese governments are the main point of emotional contention (and not so much the North-South divide). In another emotional scene, we see US Ambassador to South Vietnam Graham Martin working with Sài Gòn's desperate rulers to figure out the best escape plan for Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, who is cursing the US decision to withdraw American troops. After sending out a message from his advisor to President Ford for more support, a foreign envoy arrives to say it is difficult to bring American forces back now that the exit strategy is in full swing. The South Vietnamese regime is now fully on its own, and the film shows the sense of helplessness of regime leaders, especially after Henry Kissinger asks for the resignation of Nguyễn Văn Thiệu (a request backed up by a representative from France speaking for other countries). South

Vietnam's president attempts to give away the country's gold reserves to the Americans in a bribe for protecting this position, a request promptly turned down. Southern leaders' deep frustration with the Americans is palpable throughout the film.

On the other side, there are long sequences featuring political talks and meetings among the leadership of the Central Committee of the Vietnamese Communist Party. The master strategist Võ Nguyên Giáp, speaking to the committee, points to the main thrust of the coming revolution: "We must grab this opportunity [to liberate the South] or we will mess up history." There is much rhetoric about rooting out "the enemy"—a highly combative stance balanced by respect for the lives of southerners. The communist leaders debate ways to minimize casualties when its army finally captures Sài Gòn. Indeed, there is always a human element to the whole conflagration as seen, for example, when liberation soldiers driving tanks into the city express a fear of running over the corpses of their fallen comrades.

Women play a crucial role in the film's version of the campaign, since the liberation army relies on a corps of trusted young women to lead the men to the capital of South Vietnam. The main female protagonist of the movie, Madam Bảy Lương (played by veteran actress Lan Hương) is the wife of an affiliate of the Central Committee of the Vietnamese Communist Party in South Vietnam; she is in charge of propaganda within a city special task force and learns the streets of Sài Gòn, pretending to be a business trader. While male characters dominate the film, Bảy Lương distills a filmic subject maternal in her regard for the many young male soldiers she meets, one of whom turns out to be her long-lost son (who smiles at her not knowing who she really is).

During the Vietnam War, women were often effective spies, crossing enemy lines due to gendered assumptions about their innocence.³⁰ As a member of the southern-based resistance Bảy Lương embodies the power of women to operate within the hypermasculine spectacle of politics (and the phallogocentric gaze of war films). When we are first introduced to her, she is wearing an elegant bright red shirt and riding a luxury automobile, going to meet with a secret agent who tells her details of the dire situation in Sài Gòn. She later reports back to foot soldiers and commanding officers during a final campaign rally (complete with elephants) seeking to bring together the peasant masses, women, industrial workers, and Chinese minorities.

One poignant scene shows Bảy Lương briefly glancing at her son Binh, but she does not recognize him because they have been separated since he was a child. The son came back to fight from studying abroad, motivated by his father, a high-ranking northern officer. Despite his patriotism, Binh epitomizes the complexity of Vietnam as his parents originally came from the south but support the communist cause. Speaking to a love interest who thinks his northern accent is cute, Binh admits, “I’m seen as a Hanoian, but my father is from Sài Gòn and my mother is from Long An.” The statement about southern heritage by this liberation soldier suggests all Vietnamese have cross-regional ties, despite the divisiveness of the seventeenth parallel. The interconnected focus of *Liberation* gives heft to the conceptualization of the South Vietnamese as not a ghost nation, crumbling or withering away in communist historical memory, but a people always being actively reincorporated into state discourse.

This dignified treatment is not extended to foreigners; the English-speaking Western actors deliver lines in a rather stodgy manner (partly to slow down for translation purposes). It is always the Vietnamese who are given symbolic primacy and emotional depth, even though the film’s plot focuses on over twenty major historical figures. People from both South and North Vietnam are given equal time and serious treatment, while the Americans are seen somewhat as a meddling, distant foreign influence. The main American figure, Ambassador Martin, woefully underestimates the severity of the situation, even when most American officials were convinced that the RVN was on the verge of collapsing. He still believes the fortress of Sài Gòn could be held due to the tenacity of the republic’s army and refuses to leave for the airport with the final caravan of foreigners fleeing Sài Gòn (Liberation Front guarantees the safety of evacuating Americans, even as the airport gets attacked). This faith in the ARVN endures, despite one quick scene where we see the rowdiness of a drunk ARVN soldier firing bullets randomly into the crowd. Most of the movie, in fact, tries to humanize South Vietnamese soldiers, as witnessed in an early scene in which an ARVN officer tries to convince his mother to flee with him, though she declares she is too old to leave. She pleads with him not to leave her to die alone. The subsequent abandonment of this elder is not to show the lack of courage or filial devotion by southerners. Rather, it expresses the painful personal decisions

many had to make due to their military affiliations. Another emotional scene involves a communist elder sister who tries to rescue her brother, an officer in the South, and convince him to leave under her protection before the liberation army enters Sài Gòn, but he refuses. All these cross-regional kinship ties seem to argue that Vietnamese people are still related (and relatable), and the films try to personalize the political.

The film's climax features the infamous moment in which North Vietnamese tanks crashed through the gates of the Presidential Palace (named Independence Palace by the Provisional Revolutionary Government and then renamed Reunification Palace by the communists). Former President General Dương Văn Minh takes over as the president in the last days before the country falls, and one can read the sense of fatalism when the northern troops come to the palace and demand his resignation. His attempts at negotiating with the liberation party to create a "coalition" government are shot down. The leader of this group flatly responds: "You have nothing to hand over, because you are all prisoners of war. . . . Liberation troops have seized control of the city. We will ensure your safety." The liberation of Sài Gòn on April 30, 1975, is portrayed in perfunctory terms without too much gloating about the North's victory.

On a more personal dimension, the young man Bình gets shot and killed while riding into Sài Gòn, and his lover, Út Liên, cries over his fallen body. Yet the boy's parents live, and the two aging lovers embrace after many years of separation. The final shot of the movie features the mother, Bảy Lương, embracing the boy's father as the camera pans up to fireworks bursting above the city skyline—a modern image of Sài Gòn with a final reminder of the affective dimensions of war. This decision to end the film with the parents' reunion and the son's premature death emphasizes the clipped opportunities of the country's youth and the older generation's pain due to war.

Beyond the film's subplot about family separation, *Liberation of Sài Gòn* appears to be another propagandistic film from the state on the surface, but it serves a special purpose for public history. Released on the thirtieth anniversary of Sài Gòn's liberation, the 2005 film on the surface recounts the numbered days of the southern regime from plummeting into disarray until reaching its final death throes. At first glance, the history-focused text retells

the oft-rehearsed story of southern incompetence, but a closer reading reveals the need to analyze this text against its ideological framing and place within the broader context of Vietnam's present market concerns. After thirteen years of preproduction, the final released version set Vietnamese film records for the longest running time, biggest production, and highest expenditures, at a cost of 12.5 billion VNĐ.³¹ The financial costs for *Liberation* proved enormous, but the political stakes warranted it. In addition to state money from the Ministry of Culture, it received much support from the Ministry of Defense, but free market mechanisms made maintenance costs, travel, and accommodation for extras a source of alarm, eventually prolonging production.

The producers banked on the film's timing with the end of the war's thirtieth anniversary to enhance the film's public appeal. Long Vân, the film's director, recognized that the finished movie did not end up doing a good job of promoting Vietnam's glory and apologized in advance of its release for the production quality. *Liberation* was released with pomp and circumstance despite the director's admission that the film missed the mark in artistic excellence. However, he expressed that it offered an honest faithful account of the war, and that it hopefully would generate more interest and investment in Vietnamese cinema. He admitted as much when he said, "We cannot make movies like an American war epic and must find other ways to show the war. It will not have too many scenes of blood, but the battles are those we want the audience to feel."³² In other words, while the story seems fitting enough, the film's production values did not measure up to the greatness it sought.³³ The director's admission of the film's amateurish qualities means the state cannot easily convince audiences to like it. The poor commercial reception of the film dampened its marketability. In step with previous government efforts to manage public discourse, the film's "failure" to make a profit can be found in the director seeking approval from the citizenry, which gave the film a muted response. This massive failure happened despite the film's great technical achievement—*Liberation* is the first to have sync sound and represents the first feature with live in-sync voice technology.³⁴

Despite its artistic and economic shortcomings, *Liberation* retains a sense of greatness by reveling in its own historic symbolism, marking a reunited Vietnam. Unable to generate a spectacle to match other types of action

movies, the film spotlights the survival and spirit of Vietnamese people. As Long Vân put it, “Making an epic is difficult, especially one able to please young audiences. . . . I hope that the historical truth and what is unknown about the nature of the event will attract an audience. For example, viewers only know of Secretary Lê Duẩn of the Politburo being determined to liberate the South, and they know reunification, but we have to show them the actions of leaders like him.”³⁵ The filmmakers spent a lot of time combing through materials on the Hồ Chí Minh campaign, meeting living witnesses, talking to senior figures, and consulting with members of the communist army (but not members of the ARVN or former leaders of South Vietnam). Here, the old and present landscapes of war compose those “non-fiction film fragments” from which the “wholeness” of narrative film is engendered.³⁶

Liberation of Sài Gòn cannot be taken as an example of the Vietnamese nation slowly opening up to the southern regime but as something open to interpretation (government studios never expressed the intent of the film as a means of reconciling with southern Vietnamese). Part of the provocative claim being made here is that the film’s focus on communist experiences vis-à-vis southern struggles is an attempt to construct a “usable past” for present discourses, which are attempting to unify the population at a cultural level. This diachronic and dialectical dimension, or what I am calling the heteroglossia of history, narrates the pliability of war history and memory through “symbolic strategies that assist in the process of smoothing over painful memories on the path toward ‘national unity.’”³⁷ *Liberation* shows a country still finding its way in 2005, a time of momentous change similar to 1975 that allowed for much reflection about the country’s progress. An interpretative openness remains, even though *Liberation* conveys the greatness of socialist oligarchs like Lê Duẩn and the power of “the common people to rise up for the offensive on that historic day.”³⁸ The media rollout for the film made obvious the desires of the filmmaker to construct a great epic for a population willing (rather than coerced) to love a state production about war. Such tension between expectation and reality addresses the relationship between state-mandated memorialization of history and private desires by citizen-consumers. Online, that dissent was well noted:

On the commemoration of 30 years of the country's big day, such a film is a failed effort! Maybe until the 50th anniversary or 100 years from now we will have a better film. If LV said he made this movie for future generations for reference use in schools for students, then I guess I'll have to wait until they make it . . . but watching it in the theater is money wasted! It is not worth a pair of tickets.³⁹

Just watched the movie, disappointed! The filmmakers had expressed too much ambition for the film, expecting it to be a grand epic drama with emotion, commensurate with the stature of a major offensive and uprising. But the aspirations seemed to go too far from reality at all, and what is happening on the screen shows us a superficial film epic! Even illustrating the history, they did poorly! In terms of human drama and technicality of the present cinematic Vietnam, we can hardly reconstruct national history honestly about what had actually happened. So, with such conditions, it means why not find a better way to make a good film that consumes a large budget of the state?⁴⁰

The clear disappointment registered by online critics afforded the protection of anonymity suggests individuals are not afraid to voice their opinion of the state's flaws in terms of getting history right. Attempts to pictorialize Vietnam's history through cinema is part of a fluid dynamic process in which "the state," broadly conceived, capitalizes on its understanding of historical and national greatness in relation to the ideas of the domestic population.⁴¹

In this context, *Liberation* telescopes the need to win over audiences with little patience for old moralistic tales and history lessons handed down by the government. Despite state imperatives to glorify socialist history, Hue-Tam Ho Tai argues that since the 1980s, Đổi Mới reforms have allowed a range of actors besides the state to occupy the public realms of history and memory, which includes "the deconstruction of the official past . . . [as] thus an untidy, somewhat surreptitious, seldom openly confrontational by-product of economic reconstruction."⁴² Vietnam's foremost director Đặng Nhật Minh takes seriously this deconstruction of the past as a reflection of economic reconstruction. Released two years before Vietnam's ascension into the World Trade Organization in 2007, *Liberation* presents the issue of political economy and the way the film could be marketed. He notes, "Since Vietnam is about to expand into the WTO, the economic factor is a priority, and

because film is a commodity product, it must also follow the general rules [of the free market].”⁴³

But as a response to poor movie sales in the commercial market, *Liberation* director Long Vân resorted to saying the film is important beyond entertainment as a text for future generations of students to learn history.⁴⁴ One film critic, however, lamented the superficial presentation of Vietnamese history, asking, “How can we feel the fast pace and how large the win is when the audience is not provided those details that matter? Historical elements would therefore decrease the value. In other words, the ‘main character’ [history] is not portrayed there.”⁴⁵ Marketing for the film prioritized the state’s decades-long quest to produce movies “made about the important victory and greatness of the people of Vietnam.”⁴⁶ Individuals who watched the film said it was a good film with solid storytelling, but many critiqued it for its dated feel. On online forums, commentators had generally negative opinions. Some evaluated it as looking too much like a documentary rather than a movie, while others expressed the opposite. Some skewered its technical aspects but commended it for a humanistic story, while others found it wrong-footed in every way. What unites all these differing opinions is a sense that a better film could have been made.

Liberation could not match the high expenses and buoyant expectations attached to it. The state’s attempt to make history come alive was an admitted box office flop, but it still raised interesting questions about the war’s meaning and the value of remembering South Vietnam. While the film tells the simple story of how communists delivered a coup de grace to their southern enemies, news reports said, “the filmmakers are open for viewers to contemplate the cruelty of war.”⁴⁷ As the director of many commercially successful films about Sài Gòn/Hồ Chí Minh City, auteur Long Vân sought to bolster the negative image of South Vietnam, he says. Credited also as one of the film’s screenwriters, the director says the focus should not be on southerners’ losses, but “the key is how the viewer understands the script and why we won over the United States.”⁴⁸ The value found in showing how the communists and the southerners “won” over the Americans makes explicit the desire for all Vietnamese to unite as one. From its title alone, *Liberation of Sài Gòn* appears to deliver a somewhat straightforward message about the emancipation and unfettering of the South from the

Americans. A year after liberation, the victorious communist forces renamed the South's capital city Hồ Chí Minh City after the country's most famous revolutionary hero, to eradicate any remnants of public loyalty to the Americans. In giving the movie the title *Liberation of Sài Gòn*, however, audiences are reminded of the name "Sài Gòn" and what the name represents historically as a symbol of what came before. According to Partha Chatterjee, scholars must attend to the internal contradictions of non-Western societies trying to rid themselves of former histories while constructing their own postcolonial futures, rather than see them as fully independent from the past, coping as they always do with residual side effects wrought by violence and conflagration.⁴⁹

Liberation of Sài Gòn contends with an equal number of characters from the North and the South to show the impact of war on a nationwide scale. "I think that this is a war affecting the entire population, so showing the loss of both South and North is inevitable," Long Vân said.⁵⁰ The director refers to the deep enmeshment of people across the North-South divide. If the *Liberation of Sài Gòn* celebrates the achievements of the communist state and leaders over its "enemy," it also asks about the personal toll and taxing load placed upon South Vietnamese soldiers, civilians, and politicians to fight for their failing cause.

Historically, the Hà Nội-based government has viewed films made in the North "as more artistic than those produced in the South, which are viewed as more market-oriented."⁵¹ *Liberation* serves as a tool for propagating Vietnamese nationalism; it is pro-communist but not antithetical to the south. Yet, it is fair to southerners without being too pro-southern and affirming the other side as equally heroic. In this paradoxical manner, what *Liberation* demonstrates is the muddling but not outright replacement of outdated political divisions. As Lan Duong makes clear, scholars need to take note of those "refurbished deployments of state power" that deal with the "continual contest of resistance between the powerful and powerless in the realm of art and politics."⁵² Scholars must deconstruct the apparent nationalist ideology in films like *Liberation*, emphasizing a nuanced study of Vietnamese society that recognizes the power and powerlessness of the south, and their resistance to the state's gaze. In documenting the work of South Vietnamese political actors, this filmic artifact offers a moving tribute to South Vietnam, even if the selling

point of the film hinges on Vietnam's youth citizens being compelled to buy into this state memory-making project. In reprocessing the country's historical heteroglossia, *Liberation* exposes the elliptical spaces of cultural memory.

Even if the film in the end failed on commercial terms, *Liberation* contributes to the need to find complexity in state-sponsored Vietnamese films and to conduct further dialogue about their social meanings.

Living in Fear in Postwar Vietnam

This close reading of the film *Living in Fear* will explore its plot, key scenes and characters, and specific audience reception, to stress the ideological underpinnings of and structural factors behind the film. The reading of the film's characters and setting, as well as its reception and modes of funding, reveals the heteroglossia of a "changing" Vietnam that is not changing in some other ways. While Vietnamese newspapers mostly discussed the film in terms of one man's obsession with land mines, US newspapers were more candid in broaching the topic of reconciliation between the North and South. One American critic wrote:

A new breed of characters has replaced the old communist heroes on Vietnam's big screens: hustlers and dancing girls, drug dealers and cross-dressers. But perhaps the most startling character of all is Tai, a soldier from the former South Vietnamese army. In a nation where anti-communist soldiers were traditionally cast as villains, *Living in Fear* portrays Tai sympathetically. Vietnam's film world is changing fast. The government is easing control over content, old taboos are fading, and private money is for the first time entering an industry that was entirely state-run until 2003. The changes reflect the broader transformation of Vietnamese society, where the economy has been booming over the last decade as the government has eased economic controls and made room for private enterprise. . . . *Living in Fear* nudges reconciliation along by portraying both northerners and southerners in shades of gray.⁵³

Although the film was screened at several international festivals and colleges in the United States, it never found a Western commercial distributor and so remains a mostly Vietnam-targeted production. It was one of the last movies produced under the old government system and remains significant for marking a transitional moment in Vietnam, both in 2005 and 1975.

Living in Fear is a state-funded private production about a former soldier from South Vietnam named Tãi, a poor man who nurtures a private obsession with land mines that consumes his life. While the film received financial support from the state, it represents the director's personal efforts. The success of this led the director to make other films with mostly private funding, such as 2009's *Chơi vơi* [*Adrift*], which deals with the issues of homosexuality and the disenchantment of youth. The director's critical success with this film turns on his attempt to make difficult subject matter appealing. Through the juxtaposition of images of the violent and the saccharine on screen, the films that have emerged after the gradual loosening of standard censorship are still blocked in their radical potential to tell everything and say anything.

Given the unevenness of national modernization projects as well as asymmetries of power between people and the state, and between culture and politics proper, Vietnamese cinema presents a rich place for deconstructing aesthetic uses of nostalgia, melancholia, bereavement, anxiety, and the uncanny. It motions toward the triumph over tragedy rather than always the other way around.⁵⁴ Through contemporary films like *Living in Fear*, we find "a return of the repressed but under the guise of a return to origins . . . [but] there is nothing to return to, and the desire for return, for roots, for connection and reconnection (through idioms of family, native land, belonging, love, and even physical love) is foreclosed."⁵⁵ *Living in Fear* provides a meditation on the harsh realities of war's aftermath, urging viewers to accept the South Vietnamese as a melancholic population found in inhospitable postwar spaces. Tãi's family is in an area riddled with land mines, which Tãi is able to defuse and sell for a profit. With no viable employment prospects because of his prior position in the former South Vietnamese government, Tãi takes up land mine clearance and is provided room and board (even as the costs on his family life and psyche prove too much to bear). Through this man's story, one reads the ennui of South Vietnamese people undertaking risky practices in a reconfigured social landscape that is soaked in history. But as Christophe Robert notes: "There is no possibility for nostalgia because, according to official state ideology, there is nothing to be nostalgic for. This is the continuation of war by other means in peacetime, after the end of the war, a revolutionary dynamic in which all productive

forces in society (including “intellectual workers”) must be mobilized to construct a new society, a new socialist people. This of course has a particularly strong resonance in Sài Gòn and South Vietnam, the side that was defeated in the war.”⁵⁶

In her study of real-life mine clearing work, Christina Schwenkel investigates the collective memory shared between north and south by examining collectors who sell unearthed war relics to international tourists. She documents the fraught encounter between disparate cultures that requires both risk avoidance and engagement, constantly recreating alliances and boundaries between those actively involved in the removal of hazardous debris from the demilitarized zone. The scavenging of junk scrap metal is often left to the rural poor and other stigmatized collectors who “appear to violate many of the shared values and ethical principles of risk in the community . . . collectors confront risk rather than avoid it. They turn a hazard into a potential. They profit from risk, and in the process they commodify it . . . [it] becomes a form of social pollution that signifies a breakdown of the social and moral order.”⁵⁷ That profit-from-pollution story is as much a historical and contemporaneous one as a question of social representation and “reality.”

Living in Fear is a significant cultural text, because it demonstrates the ambivalence of being *liberated* but now *living in fear* under a socialist regime. A former actor turned filmmaker, Bùi Thạc Chuyên is a director whose work can be classified as art house, films that in previous times would have been found objectionable in Vietnam. In his interviews with news media, Bùi Thạc Chuyên mentions the inferior quality of Vietnamese cinema and the need to build up the industry to compete with other cinemas internationally. Given the touchiness of the issue, he does not mention censorship, although it might be a factor in underdevelopment.

Censorship still plays a huge role in Vietnam but needs to be understood more as an opaque, nonlinear process always being reconfigured by state officials and artists, along with the negotiations between them. The ebb and flow of censorship is not monolithic, and state-supported studios have promoted innovative ways of thinking about the country, war, and market reforms in the postwar period. There have been Vietnamese artists skillfully working around imposed boundaries of censorship since the mid 1990s,

which saw, for example, the publication of *Three Others* [*Ba người khác*], the first novel to discuss and critique unjust communist land reform policies in the 1950s.⁵⁸ The book was allowed to go to print even though open and frank discussions of such historical matters are prohibited in public.⁵⁹ Despite the novel's focus on material objects, violence, and degeneration of cadre leaders, its tolerance by the state evidenced a steady if somewhat slow relaxing of publishing restrictions, especially when it comes to issues of public memory.

A historical heteroglossia indeed is evident. From museums to the erection of statues to promoting the war tourist industry (for foreign visitors), the labor to commodify war exacerbates the

larger problem of engineering memory, especially in political cultures where the identity of the nation-state is in a considerable state of flux . . . [revealing] the tension between familial and state cultures and the increasing importance of formulating a past suitable for tourist consumption. In addition, a dramatic shift in official priorities, from an economy of pure socialist collectivism to one that is market driven, offers much insight into the relationship between state power and public forms of remembering.”⁶⁰

As Bodnar writes, this enlarging of what South Vietnam means for Vietnam today reveals “the tortured history of Vietnam and the modern clashes over what most needs to be recalled . . . [and what] has left the Vietnamese with an assortment of issues regarding their past.”⁶¹

Set in the month following the end of the war, *Living in Fear* opens with communists arriving in Tãi's town, donning green uniforms and blaring their instructions for people to serve a new country, while a voice-over from Tãi describes his fears of this primal scene: “The soldiers of South Vietnam will be killed, wives and children also, they will be bathed in blood. And while they [the communists] treat us okay, I'm still afraid . . . very afraid. I don't know when I'll stop being afraid.” Despite fearing the People's Army of Vietnam will execute all former soldiers of the ARVN, Tãi is not killed. Instead, he and his family are forced to move to a parcel of land next to a field not yet cleared of land mines. The communist soldiers in charge of this exodus are led by a female cadre leader named Ms. Uyên, who guides the newly relocated to homes being newly built, since their old village was going to be razed for collective farming. Collectivization constitutes an ill-

conceived strategy of national reorganization that uprooted populations to state-managed agricultural collectives or New Economic Zones, a disastrous policy for many within the country.⁶²

To support his second wife Út and their baby, Tỏi pilfers rice from village collections despite strict ration standards, until he discovers a more lucrative if illegal way to feed his family. A few short months after relocating, Tỏi meets a northern communist soldier named Năm Đực, who tells Tỏi about the good money he can earn as a mine clearer. Năm Đực, who sells his land mines for alcohol, teaches Tỏi how to clear the mines, adroitly locating and ferreting out these weapons of destruction in a campsite once occupied by the Americans, and then filling the cavities of death with living plants. Through Năm Đực, Tỏi quickly turns to collecting scrap metal and old military products such as bullet shell fragments and barbed wire to earn money. The exchange between the men can be read as former enemies commiserating and coming together as one. While Tỏi befriends a northern ex-soldier, he is at the mercy of top-ranking communist officers who constrain him to a life of drudgery and hard labor. The officers, however, are not depicted as cold bureaucrats removed from the everyday life of citizens. His surly brother-in-law and a female cadre become more sympathetic to Tỏi's personal struggles and view themselves as his guardians. There is still tension in the interactions between Tỏi and these two, the latter wanting to rehabilitate this man and make him a better man for society. Both still berate him for having two wives and for his past South Vietnamese association, but that does not mean they want him to live a life of total misery.

Living in Fear is a follow-up to the director's 2001 documentary *Tay đào đất* [The Digger], which explored the same subject of land mines in Vietnam's countryside. The film provides a snapshot in time about the responsibility burdening South Vietnamese soldiers and their families to exist as full human beings despite their material deprivation. The screenplay is originally based upon the real-life story of Ngô Đức Nhật, who cleared more than two thousand land mines, a deadly occupation that often kills its practitioners. Bùi Thạc Chuyên read a newspaper article about this one man's struggle to make a living clearing mines despite his contributions to the local community, and this became the inspiration for the story.⁶³ The director came up with the idea for the film as a means of reaching a wider

audience about the American War as part of the country's "legacy of four hundred years of continual warfare" as it says on the opening statement that starts the film.⁶⁴ Bùi Thạc Chuyên's unconventional film won Vietnam's best director and screenplay Golden Kite award, the country's highest film honor.

Living in Fear addresses highly political issues such as land seizure, government officer abuses, population displacement, land mine deaths, and social discrimination. Yet it displays these topics within a fluid cinematic frame that is not necessarily predisposed to glorifying northern victory over the South. Nguyễn-Võ Thu-Hương takes exception with the image of the South Vietnamese as mere victims "awaiting liberation" from the state, given the history of "violence inflicted through post-war policies of dislocation and imprisonment."⁶⁵ As she puts it, this position ties a liberatory discourse to those who are "neither puppets nor enslaved people . . . [but] occupying human positions with their full implication of human agency."⁶⁶ This decade was a time for reassessing war generally, with visits from US President Bill Clinton in 2000, the first American president to visit Vietnam since the end of the war. That same year, a successful art exhibit remembering the twenty-fifth anniversary of the liberation of the South and the country's reunification at the War Remnants Museum displayed the work of international photojournalists killed in action. It called attention to the "discordant ways in which Vietnamese subjects are constituted (or not) as historical agents."⁶⁷ The middle of that decade further opened the door of historical remembrance with the publication of *Nhật ký Đặng Thùy Trâm* [Last Night I Dreamed of Peace: The Diary of Đặng Thùy Trâm], a 2005 bestseller in Vietnam and internationally. The writer was a Vietnamese physician who was killed in the war (the text was found and kept for years before being donated to an American archive by a US veteran). The 2009 film based on the book, *Đừng đốt* [Don't Burn], proved a success. Such a cultural phenomenon coincides with political events to show that war and history are never locked away in the past, frozen in time, but always unfolding, forever open to reexamination and rediscovery.

Living in Fear starts off with Ms. Uyên, the cadre leader telling the southern peasants that their land is now subject to seizure in the name of state collectivization for the "new economy." Such a bold declaration bears

resonance beyond the time frame of the film, since it can also allude to Vietnam's new economy in the twenty-first century. In the film, Tãi is forced to ply his trade in bomb clearance for the state as one of the more than twenty million people from the south whose lives were upended after the war, when all land was repossessed by the state to aggregate power.⁶⁸ A film about survivors, the movie recognizes the living as a haunted and haunting population after reunification. We may read this film as a natural follow-up to *Liberation of Sài Gòn*. It introduces a topic seldom discussed: the reeducation of South Vietnamese soldiers, the relocation of their families, and the necropolitical conditions or politics of death to which they were subjected. Assuming that "South Vietnam" simply disappeared glosses over complex negotiations that took place *after* the war. After the shuttering of the Sài Gòn government in 1975, the heavily bombed demarcation line once separating North from South Vietnam became obsolete, even as the political identities associated with those spatial boundaries lingered.⁶⁹

The material costs of war are matched by psychic ones. As a psychological drama, the film inspects Tãi's fear of and fascination with land mines that also promise to obliterate him. Tãi and his family are relocated to desolate areas adjacent to "dirty" minefields not yet cleared of explosive devices, places of danger that pose a looming threat to the family in their efforts to scavenge materials for housing and food. Rummaging at night in forbidden zones marked by posted signs and fences, Tãi supports his family, but this forced occupation feeds a growing addiction found in the exhilarating experience of it. This imminent sense of thwarting death and getting close to death is a sign of the ghostly status he and other former ARVN soldiers occupy in a "classless" communist society. As he did not leave his country as a refugee like so many others, Tãi is an internally displaced person, a political subject forced to suffer in his homeland.

As an example of the nation's (post)crisis identity, Tãi tries to live a proper family life, but his marriages to two women violate Vietnam's conjugal law. He is torn between his love for two women, a gendered metaphor for sexual and political geographies that men like Tãi must personally toggle. Tãi's marriages are indicative of the difficulties many Vietnamese faced in bridging seared familial loyalties, a balancing act that never ground to a halt when the country became one. When the war's fighting stopped, he brought his

younger second wife and her child to a new home. Like other Vietnamese films such as 1999's *Đời cát* [Sandy Lives], offering stories of husbands decoupled from wives during the war and the extramarital affairs caused by such long-time separation.

Postwar, Tãi decides to resume contact with his first wife and ends up taking care of both women. The scandal of a once divided, now unified country is reflected in this illicit love triangle as well as the dangerous labor he takes up to support his wives. Tãi learns how to make bombs safe by disabling them, and after every successful job, celebrates and funnels the rush of postponing death by coming home to make rough love to his second wife—if only as a way to feel the sensation of being alive by sexually conquering the female body. Such displays of carnality and flesh rare in Vietnamese cinema are interrupted by the actress playing Tãi's wife (Hạnh Thúy), who found these scenes initially uncomfortable. Graphic sex denotes loosening standards for Vietnamese cinema, even if it recalls the wartime image of hypersexuality associated with South Vietnamese soldiers and women (as assumed prostitutes or loose women).⁷⁰ Offering a resignification of patriarchal society, sex here signifies Tãi's control over women but also signals a man standing right on the brink of premature death.

The film depicts the crisis of male identity in postwar society.⁷¹ Tãi's sexual conquest over his wives/bombs typifies a male-centered order, whereas the role of women is reduced to surface characterizations, domesticated into roles that replay gendered norms.⁷² Along with Tãi's growing alcohol problem, the film centers on the personal loss of male veterans like Tãi.⁷³ When Tãi goes back to his old hometown to visit his first wife and two children, his unexpected arrival rouses animosity in his brother-in-law, a communist official who routinely beats him to the ground and calls him a sinful bigamist who not only betrayed his vows to his wife but also his country. Tãi's sticky marital situation forms an analogue to his fraught obsession with mines slowly littering his house—an obsession that acts as “a strange kind of absurdist liberation, a space beyond fear.”⁷⁴ His obsession with land mines adds to the family drama, which is accentuated in one scene where Tãi's two spouses give birth in adjacent hospital beds, while he frantically attends to them simultaneously.

In Vietnam's postwar social order, Tỏi's exclusion from power as a soldier from the defeated side is made glaring. This is apparent when Tỏi's first wife tries to plead with her brother to be nicer to her peripatetic husband, telling him "you know that he's very afraid," implying the retribution Tỏi fears from communist soldiers. The brother responds unsympathetically, "What is he afraid of? He should be afraid of going to hell for living with that other woman. It's not that the communists didn't treat him right. A lot of assholes came back from the war and made an honest living, so what?"

From his enfeebled demeanor to his prostration before communist authorities, Tỏi is depicted as a dunce, someone who cannot speak properly, thinks slowly, and bows to others, but whose inability to face up to authority makes him quick-tempered with his children and spouse. When Tỏi goes to ask his brother-in-law to look over a job application, his brother-in-law intones, "It is fortunate that the war is over. If it was still continuing, I would have killed you . . . but your family is my family and my sister took you as her husband. Things are different now." At surface level, the two men are not true equals, given the opprobrium shown by socialist authorities toward ARVN soldiers. In a country that bans any stories with ghosts, the display of the socially dead can happen through the story of a man who cannot die. Here, the Vietnamese ancestral ritual of kinship memory and political hero worship are confronted by the "ghosts of war" haunting the two bases of society, the family and the state.⁷⁵ The film essentially disabuses audiences of another proverbial story of victors versus vanquished. There are no pure victims, nor pure heroes.

Whereas the two communist leaders (Ms. Uyên and Tỏi's brother-in-law) make Tỏi's life hell, it is primarily land mines that pose an incessant threat to Tỏi's well-being. In this regard, the film does not have an obvious "enemy" or human villain. The character that most embodies the new authority of the state, Ms. Uyên, the militant and assertive communist soldier, even manages to give off a warm, sensitive, if tough persona. She tells Tỏi not to clandestinely pursue land mines on his own, since this is the handiwork of professionals and not regular folks, lest people think the communists forced him into dire situations. But Tỏi becomes his own worst enemy, drinking all day and sleeping with the payload of B-52 planes. He eventually becomes an expert at defusing land mines and begins to perceive them as a personal

challenge or hobby that starts to take over his life, one that worries his wives and fellow villagers. There are many scenes where the villagers stand in a line to stick their poles into the ground to locate and nervously defuse the land mines as a group. This intimacy with death maintains “the remoteness and seeming irretrievability not only of the original moment of loss [of the war but] even traces of the loss.”⁷⁶

Despite the film’s concerns with South Vietnam, the United States remains the unspoken ultimate culprit for these constant woes and animus. When asked by an interviewer if he’s ever “lived in fear” from something, the film’s director says that while he did not live through the war, he experienced fear when he first glanced at a US map that revealed the many sites of undetonated land mines, “Yes . . . when I looked up a map of the US Air Force, I found a map that had scattered red dots everywhere that anyone who knows what they mean knows refers to the land mines planted by the Americans.”⁷⁷ In this statement, Bùi Thạc Chuyên identifies the primary source of living in fear: the many pieces of unexploded ordinance and land mines that still dot the Vietnamese landscape. This statement is a reminder of American military violence in deforming the country’s territory into a concentrated keg of mass destruction with 20 percent of the country still polluted with land mines or unexploded ordinance.⁷⁸ The director’s quote recalibrates the real enemy and source of disquietude for Vietnam’s peasants as the corrosive technologies that warp, mutilate, and obliterate their bodies indiscriminately.

Many of these issues are concentrated in some areas considered to be Agent Orange hot spots. In postconflict landscapes, there is a need to redefine the issue of defoliants and cluster bombs, which constitute a “significant ghost” of war as the former US Ambassador to Vietnam called it, since residual dioxin around former US military bases creates physical, psychological, and economic damages that contribute to “ongoing ruination of people’s lives.”⁷⁹ The force that military ruins exert upon Vietnam’s present and future is being confronted by organizations actively involved in solving these issues, like Project Renew, founded in August 2001 by the government of Quảng Trị Province and international nongovernmental organizations.⁸⁰

Beyond US-Vietnamese relations, the film distills a complex web of interpersonal relations across political divides within Vietnam. As someone born after the war, director Bùi Thạc Chuyên portrays the reunification

period as neither a victory nor a catastrophe but a time of much uncertainty, one worthy of remembering and revisiting again. The film sensitizes spectators to the struggle for survival over grinding poverty, broken family ties, and environmental damage that affected both sides. As the director remarked in an interview for an article entitled “Movie Spans Vietnam’s North-South Divide,” he says he “wanted to show that no matter what side you were on in the war, when it was over, we all started in a land scarred from bombs . . . but we can adapt and overcome.”⁸¹ He notes how all Vietnamese are affected by land mines, and there is constant risk of fatalities.

Beyond the seriousness of the subject, *Living in Fear*’s genius use of comedy shows us the exigencies of people’s lives, and the macabre and sublime quality of living in a war-torn society. When a little boy herding livestock loses his family’s cow in the deadly minefields, Tãi goes out to drag the blown-up carcass of the cow back to the original owners, who are so grateful to Tãi they offer him a piece of the dead cow’s thigh as a meaty concession; now he can eat and live on what was murdered. This gag acquiesces to the daily gamble of life with the acceptance that one must enjoy the fruits of death while facing the ever-constant prospect of it.

This constant sense of play and comedy is best captured in the promotional poster for *Living in Fear*.⁸² Ghostly footprints are set in relief around a sleeping Tãi, the undetectable traces of those (un)dead from war. Lying down on the ground with a mine placed on his forehead, the picture is at once silly if also somber, making light of the rather supernatural quality of both sleeping with the dead and being near the foreboding threat of things that can kill. The visual image embellishes Tãi’s mock performance of death and harbors no illusion about the creepy unmitigated presence of the funny “toys” of death and his absent presence as a former ARVN soldier.

Dark humor offers a creative device for framing emanations of death in the reconstruction period. It evokes the dissonance between life and death, helping to reconcile competing familial and romantic relations as a microcosm for the nation’s frayed domestic relations. This interplay between the amusing and the macabre manifests itself in the landscape. During one riotous episode, Tãi pulls a line from a mine and it unexpectedly explodes. Tãi falls to the ground and his friend Năm Đức and his wife hover over his limp body wondering if he is dead. Tãi wakes up and says with an unexpressive face, “Do you have anything to

eat?” and everyone laughs. Such high jinks impute the ways people are inured to what Jacques Derrida calls those “untimely specters that one must not chase away but sort out, critique, keep close by, and allow to come back.”⁸³ The film provides space for a generous “reading [of] the future into the past” where “memory works forward as well as backward; the past is shaped by the future as much as the future is shaped by the past.”⁸⁴ While it revivifies the memory of hardships foisted on ARVN soldiers, it affirms the possibility of retelling the past in a way different from most state-sponsored war commemorations like monuments dedicated to war veterans or institutions like the War Remnants Museum.

This creates an interesting moment to think of the past and present rubbing up against one another within filmic text, a historical heteroglossia of sorts. As Nguyễn-Võ Thu-Hương writes, it would be too easy to regard South Vietnam as a “mere interruption in the nationalist revolutionary historiography of Vietnam” as “all official historiographies forget or appropriate the dead in a symbolization process that runs the dangers of an ‘eternal return to the self.’ . . . [T]he course of the history that we inherit demands an ethical stance toward this historical other who has been elided by war victors.”⁸⁵ Hue-Tam Ho Tai echoes this by observing,

It would be tempting to study the relationship between history and memory in Vietnam in terms of hegemony and counter-hegemony pitting the state against individuals, losers against winners, North versus South. While it is certainly possible to study memory and countermemory through these analytic lenses, Vietnamese attempts to come to grips with the legacy of a century's worth of war and revolution raise issues that are far more complex than a simple story of tension and opposition.⁸⁶

Despite its subtle critique of nationalist teleology, this government-approved film remains part of the state's machine's effort to manage the war's memory in the twenty-first century, relaying the power of the state and its many actors to deploy through complex ambivalent modes. “I was surprised that the government allowed my film to be shown,” said Bùi Thạc Chuyên. “The censorship committee didn't cut anything.”⁸⁷ The director also claims he did not go out of his way find a controversial topic but rather it seemed to find him. Government subsidization remains a cardinal element for growth in the industry, since there are few filmmaking opportunities for

directors. When asked by a newspaper whether his film is too serious or too slow for its audience, Bùi Thạc Chuyên responded,

I look at things that happen every day that are important. Finding out new things about the revolution is a great thing. . . . We need to give what's new and old to the audience. Moreover, in Vietnam, finding an income for film directors is extremely difficult. There are not many movies to choose from in Vietnam.⁸⁸

The demand for greater economic returns in film draws sustenance from the wish for better incomes for film producers and more interest from domestic audiences. As someone who grew up in the north, the director sees the need to respect the history of South Vietnam (working with an all-southern cast), even though his filmic subject matter is not the most profitable topic to bring to screen for Vietnamese audiences overseas.

The heteroglossia of history is never completely closed off. *Living in Fear* concludes with a startling final scene where Tãi's young daughter, Lanh, hears an unexpected explosion in the field and thinks her dad has been killed. She darts off to search for him. When she finds him alive, he tells her, "It's just someone's cow, far away, I don't know whose cow." She then runs off merrily to school to signal the happy ignorance of not knowing the dangers that lay dormant. The film ends with an overhead shot of Tãi digging furiously in a lush green field of vegetation. The scene offers no cathartic form of closure, leaving audiences with an image of an individual who remains trapped in his obsession, which throws into relief the emotional aftershock of war. This lack of release from death, in many ways, epitomizes the ghostly presence of South Vietnam in contemporary Vietnam.

Conclusion

The early 2000s was a period in which new films articulated new ideas and desires for turning Vietnam into a center of arts and culture. According to Theresa Do, the government saw the need for an overhaul of the system for regulating the film industry given the abysmal shape it was in: "Rigid censorship of scripts, a long and slow process of approval, low government budgets, a lack of modern technologies, and outdated (war) themes were until recently the main reasons for the failure of the Vietnamese cinema to

be a successful form of popular entertainment.”⁸⁹ This did not mean suddenly more civil liberties or a democratic space for Vietnamese filmmakers to say what they want, since societies do not shift instantly from one system to another. If anything, the gradual lifting of censorship sets an interesting climate for the careful curation of the arts. This contradiction and flexibility in filmmaking bolsters fertile ground for representing many sides of Vietnam, including the legacy of South Vietnam, even as there are limits on what can percolate up in the public sphere. As part of a postwar generation that does not know war but also rejects stereotypes about the war, filmmakers Long Vân and Bùi Thạc Chuyên are directors that are moving away from stories of the Southern regime and its soldiers as irrelevant; they do so in innovative ways within the confines of state censorship by actively engaging with it in order to spotlight economic and political structures during and after the war. Filmic works like the two studied in depth here bring fresh opportunities for critically looking back in time (and to the future). They seek to promote a reunified Vietnam, while giving needed attention to the divided Vietnamese experience within texts. This heteroglossia of history, as I am calling it, complicates the image of the socialist nation-state as either one of pure censorship or complete openness, of one stuck in the past or one barreling toward the future. They do not simply bookmark important moments in Vietnam’s ongoing history but give room for thought about what *living* and *liberation* mean for a society always undergoing transformation.

LONG BUI is Assistant Professor in the Department of Global and International Studies at the University of California, Irvine. He is the author of *Returns of War: South Vietnam and the Price of Refugee Memory* (NYU Press 2018). He would like to thank Jessica Lockrem, Lan Duong, Viet Le, Christina Schwenkel, and the anonymous blind reviewers for their wonderful help and comments.

ABSTRACT

This article considers state-funded films in contemporary Vietnam and the legacy of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam), which fell to communist forces in 1975. From a close reading of films produced on the thirtieth

anniversary of the end of the war, the article deciphers complicated meanings about national identity, history, and gender. In this new political economic context, the possibilities for remembering the southern regime—including its people and veterans—remains open and closed. Through the framework of heteroglossia of history, the co-presence of competing viewpoints within cinematic texts points to the complexity of an ever-changing Vietnam.

KEYWORDS: *Film, cinema, South Vietnam, RVN, Republic of Vietnam*

Notes

1. “South Vietnam” can refer to the “Autonomous Republic of Cochinchina” (1946–1949) and the “Associated State of Vietnam” (1949–1954), but I am exclusively referring to the “Republic of Vietnam” (1955–1974). Under the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, this region is referred to as “southern Vietnam” and its people “southerners,” even though I mention the historic nation of South Vietnam as an overlapping geography. North Vietnam refers to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) under the leadership of the Vietnamese Workers’ Party. Under the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, this region should be referred to as “northern Vietnam” and its people “northerners,” something that overlaps with the historical country of North Vietnam.
2. Việt Lê, “Many Returns: Contemporary Vietnamese Diasporic Artists-Organizers in Hồ Chí Minh City,” in *Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art: An Anthology*, eds. Nora A. Taylor and Boreth Ly (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asian Program Publications, 2012), 85–116.
3. Hue-Tam Ho Tai, “Introduction: Situating Memory,” in *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam*, ed. Hue-Tam Ho Tai (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 227.
4. *Free Muse*, “Vietnam: Film Censorship Upsets and Confuses Film Producers,” *Free Muse*, April 15, 2013, <http://freemuse.org>.
5. Christina Schwenkel, *The American War in Contemporary Vietnam: Transnational Remembrance and Representation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).
6. Christina Schwenkel, “The Ambivalence of Reconciliation in Contemporary Vietnamese Memoryscapes,” in *Four Decades On: Vietnam, the United States, and the Legacies of the Second Indochina War*, ed. Scott Laderman (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 105.

7. Ann Marie Leshkovich, "Wandering Ghosts of Late Socialism: Conflict, Metaphor, and Memory in a Southern Vietnamese Marketplace," *Journal of Asian Studies* 67, no.1 (2008): 5–41.
8. David Biggs, "Breaking from the Colonial Mold: Water Engineering and the Failure of Nation-Building in the Plain of Reeds, Vietnam," *Technology and Culture* 49, no. 3 (2008): 599–623.
9. Pamela Corey and Nora A. Taylor, "Đổi Mới and the Globalization of Vietnamese Art," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 14, no. 1 (2019): 3.
10. *Ibid.*, 10.
11. Lan Duong, "Gender, Affect, and Landscape: Wartime Films from Northern and Southern Vietnam," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 15, no. 2 (2014): 258–273.
12. *Ibid.*, 279.
13. David Kunzle, "Two Different Wars," in *As Seen by Both Sides: American and Vietnamese Artists Look at the War*, ed. David Thomas (Boston, MA: Indochina Arts Project, William Joiner Foundation, 1991), 31.
14. Panivong Norindr, "Vietnam: Chronicles of Old and New," in *Contemporary Asian Cinema: Popular Culture in a Global Frame*, ed. Tereska Ciecko Anne (Oxford, UK: Berg, 2006), 48.
15. Annette Hamilton, "Renovated: Gender and Cinema in Contemporary Vietnam," *Visual Anthropology* 22, nos. 2–3 (2009): 143.
16. Mark Philip Bradley, "Contests of Memory: Remembering and Forgetting the War in the Contemporary Vietnamese Cinema," in Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Country of Memory*, 214–216.
17. Another notable film is 1984's *When the Tenth Month Comes* [*Bao giờ cho đến tháng mười*], which featured complicated female characters as the keepers of familial memory and how familial memory competes with official forms of the state. A widow hides her husband's death from his family despite the government's wish to honor his death as patriotic sacrifice for the country.
18. John Charlot, "Vietnamese Cinema: First Views," in *Colonialism and Nationalism in Asian Cinema*, ed. Wimal Dissanayake (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 109.
19. Theresa Do, "Bargirls and Street Cinderella: Women, Sex and Prostitution in Le Hoang's Commercial Films," *Asian Studies Review* 30 (2006): 175–188.
20. At the same time, various components of the state have worked semi-independently of one another, while the Ministry of Culture, as the sponsors of Vietnamese government film, retains a more liberal slant than others like the Ministry of Public Scrutiny, thus marking diversification in the political economy of film. See Mariam Lam, "Việt Nam's Growing Pains: Postsocialist Cinema Development and Transnational Politics," in *Four Decades On: Vietnam, the United States, and the Legacies of the Second Indochina War*, eds. Scott

- Laderman and Edwin A. Martini (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2013), 155–182.
21. David G. Marr, “History and Memory in Vietnam Today: The Journal Xua & Nay,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 31, no. 1 (2000): 1.
 22. Chương-Đài HồngVõ, “Vietnamese Cinema in the Era of Market Liberalization,” *Political Regimes and the Media in Asia: Continuities, Contradictions and Change*, eds. Krishna Sen and Terence Lee (London: Routledge, 2007), 71.
 23. John Boudreau, “Decades after Fleeing, Vietnam-American Filmmakers Return to a Changed Country,” *San Jose Mercury News*, November 24, 2012.
 24. Elphick Wo, “Straight Outta Saigon: Jenni Trang Le Talks Vietnam’s Film Industry,” *Maekan*, August 13, 2018, <http://maekan.com> (accessed July 27, 2019).
 25. Tran Dinh Thanh Lam, “Gritty Reality Film Makes Industry Sit Up,” *International Press Service*, April 22, 2003, www.ipsnews.net (accessed June 1, 2012).
 26. Ibid.
 27. Ibid.
 28. Christoph Giebel, “Revolution, War, and Memory in Contemporary Viet Nam: An Assessment and Agenda,” in *Ruptured Histories: War, Memory, and the Post-Cold War in Asia*, eds. Sheila Miyoshi Jager and Rana Mitter (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2007), 308.
 29. By the spring of 1975, most US troops had already been sent home and, in their absence, the communists advanced to the point of controlling almost two-thirds of the southern territories. The cities leading into Sài Gòn were the final defense of the capital. Xuân Lộc was one of them, and in the run-up to the war’s end, an ARVN division was deployed to protect this area; the soldiers were described in the media as hopelessly outnumbered, standing heroic against a much bigger opponent and withstanding a barrage of attacks for two weeks. This “last stand” emboldened the worn-out South Vietnamese Army to draw the fight out, even though Xuân Lộc soon enough fell, the effect of which cost the President of South Vietnam his office. George J. Veith and Merle L. Pribbenow, “‘Fighting is an Art’: The Army of the Republic of Vietnam’s Defense of Xuan Loc, 8–20 April 1975,” *Journal of Military History* 68 (2004): 163–214.
 30. Lan Duong, *Treacherous Subjects: Gender, Culture, and Trans-Vietnamese Feminism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012).
 31. Much of the historical content for the film is based on the memoirs, articles, and novels of Colonel Nguyễn Trần Thiết in his experience as a Hà Nội soldier and military journalist. See Tuổi Trẻ, “Phim Giải phóng Sài Gòn: Chục tỉ đồng cho

- chục ngàn người xem!” [Film *Liberation of Sài Gòn*: Ten Billion Đồng for Ten Thousand to Watch], *Tuổi Trẻ*, May 14, 2005, <http://tuoitre.vn/Van-hoa-Giai-tri/Dien-anh/78468/Phim-Giai-phong-Sai-Gon-Chuc-ti-dong-cho-chuc-ngan-nguoi-xem.html> (accessed May 22, 2011).
32. The film has attracted over twelve thousand spectators and earned about 170 million VNĐ. *VN Express*, “Movie *Liberation of Sài Gòn* Launched,” *VN Express*, April 23, 2005, <http://vnexpress.net/gl/van-hoa/2005/04/3b9dd8eb/> (accessed June 1, 2012).
 33. This despite inviting technical equipment as well as makeup, sound, costume, and editing experts from China and Thailand, the latter serving as postproduction site.
 34. Hiền Hương, “Diễn viên phim ‘Sống trong sợ hãi kể chuyện đóng cảnh nóng’ [Actors in the Film *Living in Fear* Talk about Hot Scenes], *Dân Trí*, November 29, 2007, <http://dantri.com.vn> (accessed May 3, 2011).
 35. *Việt Báo*, “Công chiếu bộ phim ‘Giải phóng Sài Gòn’” [Screening of the Film *Liberation of Sài Gòn*], *Việt Báo*, April 29, 2005, <http://vietbao.vn/Van-hoa/Cong-chieu-bo-phim-Giai-phong-Sai-Gon/20416517/181/> (accessed June 11, 2013).
 36. James F. Moyer, “Film and the Public Memory: The Phenomena of Nonfiction Film Fragments,” *Contemporary Aesthetics* 5 (2007): 25–26.
 37. Macarena Gómez-Barris, *Where Memory Dwells: Culture and State Violence in Chile* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 5.
 38. *Văn Hóa*, “‘Sài Gòn Liberation’ Upcoming,” *Văn Hóa*, May 21, 2003, <http://vietbao.vn/Van-hoa/Phim-Giai-phong-Sai-Gon-sap-ra-doi/20012589/183/> (accessed June 1, 2012).
 39. Posted by khiyeuem. “Liberation of Saigon,” *YXine*, http://www.yxine.com/?gf=bv&view=1&articles_id=308 (accessed June 1, 2012; no longer available).
 40. Posted by Dreamhood, “Liberation of Saigon,” *YXine*, http://www.yxine.com/?gf=bv&view=1&articles_id=308, May 7, 2005, (accessed June 1, 2012; no longer available).
 41. Robert Weller, “Responsive Authoritarianism and Blind-Eye Governance in China,” in *Socialism Vanquished, Socialism Challenged: Eastern Europe and China, 1989–2009*, eds. Nina Bandelj and Dorothy J. Solinger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 83–99.
 42. Hue-Tam Ho Tai, introduction, *Country of Memory*, 3.
 43. Cited in “Giải phóng Sài Gòn: Minh họa lịch sử bằng phim” [Liberation of Sài Gòn: Illustrating History through Film], *YXine*, 2005, http://www.yxine.com/?gf=bv&view=1&articles_id=308 (accessed June 11, 2013; no longer available).
 44. *Ibid.*

45. Tiến Võ, “Giải phóng Sài Gòn, khốc liệt và xúc động” [Liberation of Sài Gòn: Fierce and Emotional], *VietBao*, April 26, 2005, <http://vietbao.vn/Van-hoa/Giai-phong-Sai-Gon-khoc-liet-va-xuc-dong/20414759/1> (accessed June 1, 2012).
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid.
48. “Nhiều hứa hẹn với bộ phim truyện nhựa Giải phóng Sài Gòn” [Many Promises in the Film *Liberation of Sài Gòn*], *Việt Báo*, April 18, 2005, <http://vietbao.vn/Giai-tri/Nhieu-hua-hen-voi-bo-phim-truyen-nhua-Giai-phong-Sai-Gon/55061273/233/> (accessed July 29, 2019).
49. Partha Chatterjee, “Anderson’s Utopia,” *Diacritics* 29, no. 4 (1999): 128–134.
50. *VN Express*, “Movie *Liberation of Sài Gòn* Launched,” *VN Express*, April 23, 2005, <http://vnexpress.net/gl/van-hoa/2005/04/3b9dd8eb/> (accessed June 1, 2012).
51. Lan Duong, *Treacherous Subjects*, 162.
52. Ibid., 120.
53. Ben Stocking, “Movie Spans Vietnam’s North-South Divide,” *USA Today*, August 19, 2007.
54. Dana Healy, “From Triumph to Tragedy: Visualizing War in Vietnamese Film and Fiction,” *South East Asia Research* 18, no. 2 (2010): 325–347.
55. Christophe Robert, “The Return of the Repressed: Uncanny Spaces of Nostalgia and Loss in Trần Anh Hùng’s *Cyclo*,” *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 20, no. 1 (2012): 401.
56. Ibid., 408.
57. Christina Schwenkel, “War Debris in Postwar Society: Managing Risk and Uncertainty in the DMZ,” in *Interactions with a Violent Past: Reading Post-Conflict Landscapes in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam*, eds. Vatthana Pholsena and Oliver Tappe (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2013), 145.
58. Tô Hoài, *Ba người khác* [Three Others] (Hà Nội : NXB Hội nhà văn, 2015).
59. Lại Nguyên Ân, “Reflections on the Novel *Three Others*,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 2, no. 2 (2007): 272–276.
60. John Bodnar, foreword to *Country of Memory*, by Hue Tam-Ho Tai, x.
61. Ibid.
62. Martin Tsamenyi, “The ‘Boat People’: Are They Refugees?” *Human Rights Quarterly* 5 (1983): 348–373.
63. Cẩm Vinh, “Sống trong sợ hãi chiếu trong . . . sợ hãi!” [Living in Fear Is Shown . . . In Fear], *Tuổi Trẻ*, December 31, 1983, <http://tuoitre.vn/Van-hoa-Giai-tri/Dien-anh/116265/Song-trong-so-hai-chieu-trong-so-hai.html> (accessed April 19, 2011).

64. Ronnie Scheib, "Living in Fear: Song Trong So Hai," *Variety*, September 7, 2006, <http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117931503?refcatid=31> (accessed April 19, 2011).
65. Thu-Hương Nguyễn-Võ, "Forking Paths: How Shall We Mourn the Dead?" *Amerasia* 31, no. 2 (2005): 161.
66. Ibid.
67. Schwenkel, *American War in Contemporary Vietnam*, 36.
68. Jacqueline Desbarats, "Population Redistribution in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam," *Population and Development Review* 13, no. 1 (1987): 47.
69. Edward Miguel and Gérard Roland, "The Long-Run Impact of Bombing Vietnam," *Journal of Development Economics* 96, no. 1 (2011): 2.
70. The film's nude and sex scenes created media debates about the appropriateness of such material. Nevertheless, the decision of the government to allow such scenes reveals the loosening of regulatory standards in the central governmental apparatus responsible for vetting such crude images.
71. Eileen Vo, "Examining Postwar Issues of Male Identity Crisis and Disenfranchisement in Vietnamese Film: The Wild Reed and Living in Fear" (master's thesis, Cornell University, 2010).
72. Natalie Huynh Chau Nguyen, "South Vietnamese Women in Uniform: Narratives of Wartime and Post War Lives," *Minerva Journal of Women and War* 3, no. 2 (2009): 8–33.
73. The business of land mine clearance involves mostly women, as shown in the film, but the text's focus on the social plight of men and male soldiers whittles down women to the status of mere assistants, even though women have historically been central to fighting in the war and rebuilding efforts.
74. Scheib, "Living in Fear," 65.
75. Heonik Kwon, *Ghosts of War in Vietnam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 103.
76. Lisa Yoneyama, *Hiroshima Traces: Time, Space, and the Dialectics of Memory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 78.
77. Tiểu Linh, "Đạo diễn Bùi Thạc Chuyên: Những tâm sự trong nghề" [Director Bùi Thạc Chuyên: Sharing Career Insights], *Tinmoi*, January 1, 2010, <http://www.tinmoi.vn/Dao-dien-Bui-Thac-Chuyen-Nhung-tam-su-trong-nghe-04100742.html> (accessed May 4, 2011).
78. Kay Schriener, "Still Cleaning Up after 25 Years: Vietnam Focuses on Landmines, Unexploded Ordnance and Rehabilitation of War-Related Disability," *Disability World* 17 (January–March 2003).
79. Susan Hammond, "Redefining Agent Orange, Mitigating Its Impacts," in Pholsena and Tappe, *Interactions with a Violent Past*, 187, 201.
80. Project Renew, <https://landmines.org.vn/> (accessed May 5, 2019).

81. Stocking, "Movie Spans Vietnam's North-South Divide."
82. The promoters are Vietnam Media Corp. and the Japanese media outlet NHK, which has had an interest in promoting and publicizing Vietnamese film (there remains no international distributor for the film as a DVD).
83. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1994), 87.
84. Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Country of Memory*, 2.
85. Thu-Hương Nguyễn-Võ, "History Interrupted: Life after Material Death in South Vietnamese and Diasporic Works of Fiction," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 3, no. 1 (2008): 31.
86. Hue-Tam Ho Tai, introduction, *Country of Memory*, 7.
87. Stocking, "Movie Spans Vietnam's North-South Divide."
88. VN Express, "Bùi Thạc Chuyên không muốn làm hỏng hình ảnh của vợ" [Bùi Thạc Chuyên Does Not Want to Ruin His Wife's Image], August 12, 2006, *VN Express*, <http://vnexpress.net/gl/van-hoa/guong-mat-nghe-sy/2006/08/3b9edo88/> (accessed July 4, 2011).
89. Do, "Bargirls and Street Cinderella," 175.