



FESTIVAL DE CANNES
2024 OFFICIAL SELECTION
UN CERTAIN REGARD

VIET AND NAM

a film by
Trương Minh Quý



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PRESENTS



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Nam and Viet love each other. Both are miners, working 1000 meters below ground where danger awaits and darkness prevails. Coal earns them a living, while polluting the land and the sea. Black sea. Black coal. Burnt coal. Wet coal. Dusty coal. When Nam decides to leave the country via an agent who smuggles people in shipping containers, it causes a rift between his love for Viet and the desires for his own future.

INTERVIEW WITH MINH QUÝ TRUONG

On October 23, 2019 in Essex, 39 Vietnamese migrants were found dead in a refrigerated truck. Despite the country's economic development, the issue of exile and emigration still remains contemporary as far as Vietnam is concerned. To what extent was this event at the origin of *Viêt and Nam*?

There are several points of departure for *Viêt and Nam*, and this event is one of them. I was living in Belgium at the time, and it was precisely where these people got on the truck that would later arrive in the UK. I had a very strange feeling, because all this was happening so close to me. It was surreal, and it made me question my condition as a Vietnamese temporarily resident in Europe. During this period, winter 2019, I was between Belgium and France. Far from Vietnam and in the wake of this tragedy, I felt the need to prepare a film on the question of home and exile, which I had already explored in my previous documentary work.

How do you see *Viêt and Nam* in relation to your previous films? Where does it fit in?

It's a bit tricky. When people ask me to describe my film, I don't know where to start, because there are so many stories in *Viêt and Nam*. Because the film brings together so many of the things you can imagine about Vietnam. In a way, someone looking for a Vietnamese film wouldn't be surprised by what's in it, such as the question of war trauma. But I wanted to make this film - it makes sense to me, at least - in order to "liberate" myself from Vietnam. To get rid of it. As a filmmaker who grew up in Vietnam, I consider myself privileged and lucky, and at the same time my origins are also a kind of burden: you carry

these themes and expectations on your shoulders, and you try to detach yourself from them. At the same time, when we make films after living in the West, we also feel the need to tell our story. Deep down, we feel compelled to tell the story of our country, but as artists, we want to be free... When I made *Viêt and Nam*, I wanted to tackle subjects specific to Vietnam to free myself. Now that I have done it, I feel free and I don't feel the need to make anything on that subject anymore. It was a way of gaining my freedom as a filmmaker.

***The City of Mirrors* already demonstrated the close link between filmic material and the recollection of personal and family memories. In *The Tree House*, the central character was a filmmaker. *Viêt and Nam* is also a film about how we interact with our past, and more specifically with our family history. Is this a question that haunts you?**

Yes, more specifically the question of home and the places we live in, of our conditions of existence and of "being there". I've always been very attentive to that. I think it comes from where I spent my childhood: I grew up in a house in a small provincial town that was under constant threat of demolition. It was demolished three years ago now. Me and my family had to live in a state of constant waiting. We lived in fear of having to leave at any moment. When you live in that state, you know that at any moment your life as you know it could come to an end. It makes you nostalgic even in the present, before the demolition has taken place, because you live with the idea that you'll soon be gone. This is undoubtedly why I'm so driven by the question of the past and the traces it leaves behind.

From North to South, Viêt and Nam's journey follows the trajectory of the South Vietnamese National Liberation Front during the war...

Yes, and the character who guides Viêt and Nam is a veteran. They follow him to the places he and Nam's father passed through during the war. Following in the footsteps of the past means reproducing its movement. This also has to do with the film's structure, which works with echoes. The second part, in which Viêt and Nam set out to find the remains of their dead father, is a kind of "re-enactment". This also refers to the rehearsals in which the two characters participate prior to Viet's exile, when they enter a container as if they were about to set sail. This recourse to re-enactment stems from the fact that I didn't want to show anything of the past or the future, but only the present.

In the West, where you recently lived, the Vietnam War is often shown in the same way, from an obviously biased point of view. How do you view the way the Vietnam War is portrayed on screen?

I grew up with a knowledge of the war that came mainly from the cinema. But I had access to both "sides": on the one hand, Vietnamese films about the war, which are propaganda films, and on the other, Western films, mainly Hollywood films. So I've always had a two-sided view: I watched both, even if as a child I preferred to watch American films, which were more entertaining. In any case, I don't feel I have enough authority to judge these two perspectives, even though I'm Vietnamese. I didn't take part in the conflict, and I come from a family that didn't take sides during the war. Above all, my view is that of someone who wants to try and understand the past, without making any particular judgments. I'm interested in this question without being a specialist, simply drawing inspiration from books or other films. In *Viêt and Nam*, several scenes and images are inspired by war films from both sides:

some sequences refer directly to Hollywood films, such as the shot coming out of a hole in the rock, which echoes the vision one would have of a shot coming from a bunker during the World War II landings in Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*; other sequences are reminiscent of propaganda films, such as the very last scene, where the two characters hold each other inside the mine, which cites *Dat Me* (Motherland), a Vietnamese propaganda film made in 1980 by the Vietnam Feature Film Studio (VFS). I've also made a found footage film, *Death of Soldier*, which gathers together a wealth of images on the subject, including many extracts from propaganda films.

Is it common, in Vietnam or in Vietnamese cinema, to stage the war or refer to it directly as you do?

No, not at all. And that's probably a problem. *Viêt and Nam* is a post-war film, which examines trauma and the aftermath of war, such as the fortune-telling ceremonies that are very common and popular in North Vietnam, where many families call on clairvoyants to search for or pay homage to the dead. Furthermore, the veteran's confession at the end of the film would be impossible in a propaganda film. I had the chance to make this film freely. I don't have to answer to anyone, nor do I have any obligation or commitment to any side. I wanted to explore the emotional impact of war through the medium of cinema, nothing more, nothing less.

Speaking of your direction, *Viêt and Nam* shows the conflicting relationship between below and above, underground and surface, inside and outside, as a metaphorical confrontation between what is alive and what is dead. The two characters work in a mine, and their gesture could be summed up as an exhumation of the past...

Yes, I think I like the idea of a general duality of things, with the prospect of overcoming it. In this film, as in my previous ones, there's always this competition between two things:



in this case, the home and the mine, the surface and the underground, but also the mountain and the sea. The process of exhumation involves bringing up what's underground, and *Viêt and Nam* shows two characters searching for something at the bottom of the earth: ore or a body. At the same time, it's the story of a character who wants to leave the land and go to sea...

We can also think of the partition of the title, *Viêt and Nam*, or even that of the country, with North and South. But it has more to do with the structure of the film, cut in two, with the title in the middle. At what point did this dual structure become apparent to you?

Initially, the script was very linear. The two-part structure was found during editing. When we wrote the script, we didn't choose this two-part structure right away: we needed the images to come to us so that we could see it more clearly. In fact, it was at the very end of the editing process that we decided to adopt this structure.

***Viêt and Nam* can also be described very simply as a melodrama, a love story between two men with different aspirations...**

I didn't want to make a film specifically about homosexual relationships, as many stereotypical stories do. In the film, it's something quite ordinary. We don't question their love. But it's undeniably a central point of *Viêt and Nam*. In reality, it's still difficult to be gay, although in Vietnam, homosexual relationships are quite accepted. For example, it's possible to show affection in public without being threatened or attacked. The problem comes more from the way in which, as a gay man, you are internally invited to conceal yourself, to hide. It's a very real fear, and reflects the environment in which we live. In the film, I wanted to bear witness to this while remaining quite subtle. Most of the time, when we see *Viêt and Nam* showing

their love, they only do so when they're isolated. I obviously wanted to talk about that, but without overdramatizing their story either.

***Viêt and Nam* cultivates a form of expressionism, with particular care given to framing and set elements that depict the characters' interiority in space, sometimes even tending towards surrealism and the representation of dreams or fantasies. How do you explain the fact that your film is as much a documentary as a fable or tale?**

I'm glad you recognized all these elements in the film. I wanted a lot of things in *Viêt and Nam*, and I'm pretty greedy! The part in the mine with the workers resembles a documentary, while the love story produces scenes that are visually more elaborate, even fantastical. I'm thinking of the scene at the barber's, with the sparks seeming to fly out of a skull in slow motion... And when the film moves south, it gains in strangeness. There's even talk of a dream, with frogs and corpses haunting the characters. The coexistence of documentary and surrealism is in fact apparent in my previous work: even when I make a documentary, there are always stranger, more fictional elements. For me, the aim here was not to distinguish between these two poles, but to interweave them, because as I mentioned earlier, I don't really differentiate the two.

How did you go about interweaving these two directions in your staging, which alternates languorous scenes with long shots, highly formalized sequences and others more focused on dialogue?

I work on a case-by-case basis, depending on the scene. I choose a staging style based on the specific needs of each sequence: if a certain event requires or implies a certain way of filming, then I'll adopt it. And if it only concerns one scene, it's not a problem at all. That's why *Viêt and Nam* brings

together several very distinct styles. I also work a lot with cinematographic references. Sometimes there are scenes with very long, very simple shots, other times quite rich frames, with effects and artifice, and then more classic sequences, with close-up shot-reverse shot. I pay a great deal of attention to how the scenes should move the audience in the most direct way possible. In the scene at the barber's, for example, there's a highly stylized, cinematic form that exalts and romanticizes the affection between the two characters. And then there are the long-shot scenes, because in my opinion they require a kind of mystery produced by the stretching of time, by the waiting, and so on. That's why I allow myself to alternate, to change the process from one scene to the next.

What film references did you use to achieve this raw, contemplative style, somewhere between simplicity and expressionism?

Again, I'd cite Ingmar Bergman's *Persona*. But there's also Andreï Tarkovski, obviously *The Mirror*. I'm also very fond of Alain Resnais and the way he uses editing to confuse our apprehension of time. In general, I'm very fond of filmmakers who have a singular style of editing, in whose films editing plays a central role.

Last year, *Inside the Yellow Cocoon Shell* won the Caméra d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival. Your film is being shown there this year, and has several notable links with Pham Thiên An's work. Are we witnessing the emergence of a young Vietnamese cinema on the international scene? How do you view your country's cinema?

Pham Thiên An and I are roughly the same age as Lê Bảo, Pham Ngoc Lan, Duong Dieu Linh, etc., other young Vietnamese filmmakers who have also gained access to leading festivals in recent years. We're all part of the same generation. But from a personal point of view, the success of these filmmakers

remains an individual achievement. Each of us has found our own way and asserted ourselves independently - the fact that we're the same age is a coincidence. I point this out because we are not supported. Pham Thiên An received funding for his first short film, *Stay Awake, Be Ready*, which enabled him to go on and make his first feature. But it's still quite limited, especially as this fund doesn't even come from the government but from the CJ, a South Korean foundation for audiovisual creation which is quite active in Vietnam. Of course, we are also subject to censorship, but this is also the case in many other countries. So we're lucky to see these films having a certain success... But we have to remain vigilant: if we want to continue making films in Vietnam, it's possible that all these obstacles will eventually tire us out and dissuade us from continuing.

Can *Inside the Yellow Cocoon Shell* and *Viêt and Nam*, by being shown internationally, contribute to the government's recognition of the vitality and richness of young Vietnamese cinema today?

I'd like to be optimistic, but I'm afraid I'd have to say no. Films are not enough, I think. The undeniable success of *Inside the Yellow Cocoon Shell*, for example, was not echoed by the government, which took no action or made no changes despite what the film achieved and won. I also hope that *Viêt and Nam*, in addition to being presented at Cannes, will be released in Vietnam. The film has yet to be assessed by the censorship board.



TRƯƠNG MINH QUÝ

VIET AND NAM (2024)

Cannes Film Festival, Un Certain Regard.

THE TREE HOUSE (2019)

Locarno Film Festival, Filmmakers of The Present Competition / New York Film Festival / Viennale / Rotterdam International Film Festival / Goteborg Film Festival / CPH: Dox/DMZ International Documentary Film Festival / Valladolid International Film Festival / Festival Des 3 Continents/Singapore International Film Festival / International Film Festival of Kerala / Vilnius Film Festival Taiwan International Documentary Film Festival/ DocumentaMadrid / Beijing International Film Festival

THE CITY OF MIRRORS: A FICTIONAL BIOGRAPHY (2016)

21st Busan International Film Festival / 27th Singapore International Film Festival / 19th Taipei International Film Festival / Transcinema International Film Festival

Trương Minh Quý was born in Buon Ma Thuot, a small city in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. Quý lives and works, here and there, in the vibrancy of memories and present moments, his narratives and images, lying between documentary and fiction, personal and impersonal, draw on the landscape of his homeland, childhood memories, and the historical context of Vietnam. In his films, he has experimented with combining abstract concepts-images with realistic improvisations during shooting.

He is the alumnus of 2012 Asian Film Academy (Busan International Film Festival) and 2016 Berlinale Talents (Berlin International Film Festival). His films have been selected for international film festivals and exhibitions such as Locarno, New York, Clermont-Ferrand, Oberhausen, Rotterdam, Busan, Les Rencontres Internationales Paris&Berlin. He won the main Art Prize at the 20th VideoBrasil (Sao Paulo) in 2017.

His second feature film, **The Tree House**, premiered in 72nd Locarno Film Festival (Filmmakers of The Present Competition), where it was called as “*Three of the festival’s best premieres*” by Mubi and “*a singular entrancing ode to memory and filmmaking*” by The Film Stage. The film continued to screen in 57th New York Film Festival (Projection), Viennale, Festival Des 3 Continents (Competition), Rotterdam International Film Festival (Bright Future Main Program), CPH:Dox (Artist &Auteur), Goteborg International Film Festival, and others. In 2021, his French language film **Les Attendants**, competed for the Berlinale Golden Bear shorts.

In 2024, Quy premieres his third feature film, **Viet and Nam**, at the Festival de Cannes in Un Certain Regard.

CAST

Phạm Thanh Hải – **NAM**
Đào Duy Bảo Định – **VIET**
Nguyễn Thị Nga – **HOA**
Lê Viết Tụng – **BA**

CREW

Directed and Written by
Produced by
Co-Produced by

TRƯƠNG MINH QUÝ
BIANCA BALBUENA & BRADLEY LIEW (Epicmedia Productions, Inc - Philippines)
LAI WEIJIE (E&W Films, Singapore),
MARIE DUBAS (Deuxième Ligne Films, France),
LORNA TEE & JOOST DE VRIES (An Original Picture, Netherlands),
STEFANO CENTINI (Volos Films Italia, Italy),
CHRISTIAN JILKA (Scarlet Visions, Germany),
NGUYEN THI XUAN TRANG (Lagi Limited, Vietnam)
ALEX C. LO (Cinema Inutile, USA),
GLEN GOEI (Tiger Tiger Pictures),
TEH SU CHING (Purple Tree Pictures),
CHI K TRẦN,
ANTHONY DE GUZMAN
ELIZABETH WIJAYA, MAI NGUYEN, LOY TE
SON DOAN
TRƯƠNG TRUNG ĐẠO
FÉLIX REHM
VINCENT VILLA

Executive Produced by

Associate Producers
Cinematography by
Production Design by
Editing by
Sound Design and Mix by

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