
URL:  http://tiny.cc/AR618

Review by Catherine Calloway, Arkansas State University

The article “Which Mirror Is ‘Truer’? Portrayal of the Vietnam War in Apocalypse Now and Cánh Đòng Hoàng” by Nguyet Nguyen provides an insightful analysis that offers readers a different perspective on the films that have emerged from what Americans call the Vietnam War and what Vietnamese refer to as the American War. Using Francis Ford Coppola’s Apocalypse Now and Hông-Sên Nguyễn’s Cánh Đòng Hoàng (which means Wild Rice Field or Abandoned Field), as representative examples, Nguyet Nguyen demonstrates how the Vietnamese people have been stereotyped and marginalized and their perspective of the war overlooked. Both award-winning films appeared in 1979, with Apocalypse Now winning two Oscars and Cánh Đòng Hoàng receiving the Golden Prize at the Moscow International Film Festival. Significantly, “[t]hey were the first major movies that filmmakers produced soon after the end of the war” (51).

The author provides a thorough overview of the two films, pointing out that both involve missions of termination, feature the image of the American helicopter, and “illustrate contrasting or absent representation of the ‘enemy’ and nationalism” (50). In Apocalypse Now the enemy lacks a face, a name, and a voice and is considered uncivilized, but in Cánh Đòng Hoàng the American enemy is depicted as more of a human being with a personal storyline. Thus the American film “reflects much of the imperialistic approach to and hegemonic notion of the other or Orient in a superficial, stereotyped representation of the Vietnamese people” (51), while the Vietnamese movie “attempt[s] in a post-colonial world to redefine [the Vietnamese people’s] identity, but without diminishing and ‘othering’ their enemy” (51). Nguyen demonstrates that the Vietnamese receive a “bipolar portrayal” (52) from Coppola, who includes a number of Vietnamese people in the film, but leaves out their personal history, their land, and their individuality and “depict[s] the Vietnamese through the lens of a superior looking down on an inferior” (53). In contrast, while Cánh Đòng Hoàng is an hour shorter than Apocalypse Now, it still manages to portray the American enemy closely, to characterize the individuals, to depict them as humane, and to assign them a personal story. Nguyen’s intent is not to privilege one film over the other, but instead “to show the large gap that exists in each side’s understanding of its counterpart” (70). In order to bridge this gap and to move toward more than a superficial relationship, the United States and Vietnam must work toward “a better appreciation of each side’s historical, political, social, and cultural background and perspectives” (70). The author concludes that as a
hegemonic power America especially must gain a better knowledge and understanding of the Vietnamese people and their country.

This gap results in part from the issue of nationalism, which Nguyen treats in the essay, first examining Apocalypse Now and then turning to Cánh Đồng Hoàng. Coppola’s film never indicates why young American soldiers are involved in a war in Southeast Asia and why they behave as bizarrely as they do while they are there; instead it focuses on Willard’s individual mission to locate Kurtz and avoids issues of patriotism and nationalism. Cánh Đồng Hoàng focuses on an individual Vietnamese family, but uses that family as representative and “conspicuously depicts nationalism through the community life of the Vietnamese and the way they relate to one another in the army” (62). As Nguyen points out in the important historical context the essay provides, the Vietnamese people have frequently been at war with one invader or another, especially with the Chinese, whom they have had to resist for centuries.

In focusing so closely on a film that considers the Vietnamese perspective on the war, this article makes an original contribution to the field. Few studies exist on this topic, although occasionally an article surfaces on the subject. One that comes to mind is Pierre Asselin’s useful 2009 essay that treats Dang Nhat Minh’s When the Tenth Month Comes, released in 1984.1 Overall, Nguyen’s essay is well researched and references the standard American studies on Vietnam War film, especially those published in the 1990s.2 The author assumes, though, that “there were only a handful” (46) of American films produced on the war, and while it is true that some films may have been more popular than others and thus better known to the public, many American films about Vietnam exist. Overlooked is the information provided in Jean-Jacques Malo and Tony Williams’s Vietnam War Films, which is considered the best filmography on the war and which lists not only numerous American films, but also 137 Vietnamese films as well as other movies from around the globe.3 References to two other studies would also enhance Nguyen’s essay. While the author cites the studies of Edward Said and other scholars on Orientalism and Eurocentrism, John Kleinen’s 2004 study, “Framing ‘the Other’. A Critical Review of Vietnam War Movies and Their Representation of Asians and Vietnamese” is not mentioned.4 While Kleinen primarily examines American films and discusses Apocalypse Now only briefly, Nguyen’s study overlaps with his in some respects.

---


History and the Cliché of Vietnam” does not mention Apocalypse Now, but would be a useful source as well for contextualizing the American film response to the war.⁵

In 2009, Nguyen’s wrote a semiological thesis, “Representation of Vietnam in Vietnamese and U.S. War Films: A Comparative Semiotic Study of Canh Dong Hoang and Apocalypse Now.”⁶ A substantial contribution to the field would be made if the author would expand this thesis to include other Vietnamese films about the war and then publish the work as a monograph. This reviewer hopes to see such a groundbreaking study by Nguyen surface in the near future.

Catherine Calloway received a doctorate from the University of South Florida and is Professor of English at Arkansas State University. She has published widely on Vietnam War literature and film and is a regular contributor to American Literary Scholarship, An Annual and Oxford University Press’s Online Bibliography series. In addition, she is the co-editor of Approaches to Teaching the Works of Tim O’Brien (2010) and has published in Critique: Studies in Contemporary Literature, Arkansas Review, War, Literature, and the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities, Tampa Review, and other academic forums.

© 2016 The Authors
Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 United States License

---
