

Singapore Film Festival

An interview with Viet Linh, director of *Collective Flat*

Richard Phillips
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Like many Vietnamese directors Viet Linh started her film training at the Giai Phong Film Studio. She worked as an editor and then, after graduating from a cinematography course at the studio, began writing documentary film scripts. She later travelled to Russia for more advanced cinema studies.

Collective Flat, which was released in 1999, is her sixth feature. Viet Linh's filmography includes: *The birds were singing in the quiet place* (1986), *The trial needs a presiding judge* (1987), *The travelling circus* (1989) and *The devil's mark* (1992).

Richard Phillips: Could you explain where the idea for your film came from?

Viet Linh: *Collective Flat* is drawn from Vietnamese society and, in particular, from a short story by Nguyen Ho. It also comes out of my personal experience. This is how I lived after the war. When I was younger I joined the resistance and fought against the Americans. After victory I returned to the city in a truck, just like the one in the film, and I also lived in a similar building.

RP: Your film deals with changes in Vietnam beginning in 1975 and begins with Tham's concerns at this time. Could you give some more details about this period?

VL: Of course my experiences were not the same as Tham. I was a member of the resistance and my life was somewhat different. I came back into the city from the jungle and just like some of the film's characters I met many people like Tham. It is possible to say that my film is a reflection of real life from this time.

RP: Did you arrive in Saigon on May 1, 1975?

VL: I arrived in the city on April 30. I came straight from the bush, and when I say bush I mean the whole

way of life we had at this time.

RP: Tham doesn't support the old regime but nonetheless he still has difficulties adjusting. Could you explain some of the issues you have tried to explore in your film?

VL: Mr Tham is a symbolic figure. There is no real Mr Tham but he is someone that I have used to look at the whole of Vietnamese society. This is also the case with the hotel. The point is that it is not only Tham who has problems adjusting to the situation but many of the new residents. People in the city had difficulties and so did the resistance fighters—many had trouble adapting.

RP: Your film concludes with Tham unable to make another change—the demolition of the hotel and the dispersal of its residents. Could you comment on this and how it relates changes underway in Vietnam today?

VL: Actually I'm not someone who opposes the market economy, in fact I think it should provide an opportunity to develop the country and overcome some of its problems. Or at least I hope so. I also think it is important to understand what this market economy is and what it should do. We have to be clear about that. Obviously it is going to create some difficulties but perhaps this can be likened in some way to my film, which I describe as a bittersweet story.

The other thing to look at in this context is the behaviour of those who participated in the resistance. Their education was that money and the market was wrong. Now we have this market, which has arrived in Vietnam, and all the money that goes with it, so for them it is difficult to know what to do. It is a very interesting situation but in my view life has its own rules, its own direction, and people will adjust to this.

RP: Are there any concerns in Vietnam about the

rapprochement with the United States?

VL: I don't think there is any resentment about this. The Vietnamese are a people who prefer to forget about these things. They don't dwell on the past and some of the terrible things that took place because it doesn't help or change anything. To be more precise, it is not that they have forgotten the past but would rather think about the future.

RP: Unfortunately I have not seen many Vietnamese films. *The Wild Field* reminds me of early Soviet social realist films and your film reminds me of *To Live*, Zhang Yimou's film. Are there any particular film styles or directors that you favour and is *Collective Flat* a new approach for you?

VL: I don't really like to talk about style. It's something I don't really think about. I have made six films and all of them are different. In fact the style, if that is the right word, comes from the feel or texture of the script and the very process of making the film. I'm not sure which directors have influenced me but Fellini is one person whose work I admire very much. His work has inspired me. Of course I am nowhere near his skill or insight but he is one of my favourite directors.

To go back to your previous question though I don't think about the style of any particular film but develop each film from what I feel for the material.

RP: It's been seven years since your last film. Why has there been such a long break?

VL: The first reason is that I had to find a script that I liked. The second reason is that the government didn't approve the scripts that I did like, so maybe it'll be another seven years before I find another script that will be approved. Film funds are from the government and so they only spend money on films they like. This is the normal process in Vietnam. Of course, [laughter] if you have any money then maybe you might like to see some of the scripts that I like.

RP: What was the budget for *Collective Flat* and have you been able to get international distribution?

VL: The budget was ridiculous. It wasn't even \$200,000. You probably know *Three Seasons* [a US-funded film produced in Vietnam last year]. It had a budget of \$3 million, and you must remember *Three Seasons* was considered a very small film. *Collective Flat* didn't have anywhere near that amount. This is a continuous problem for Vietnamese filmmakers. I've had a script for about ten years that I've wanted to make

but I need \$600,000 to do it. This sum is almost impossible to find in Vietnam.

Making films in Vietnam is very hard because some of the equipment is so old it should be in the museum. The cameras are reasonable but the support equipment is poor and directors don't even have monitors to check what they have shot. For *Collective Flat* we had only one room and had to keep moving the pictures and furnishings around to try and make it look different.

Of course cinema is a unique art form, it's not like painting, it involves money, equipment and skilled people and this requires money. The funds provided by the state are limited and so although there are directors with talent they don't get enough work to improve their skills.

We always joke in Vietnam that making a film is like fighting a war. We have to be very clever. It's a real struggle to overcome all the difficulties. At the same time, working together in these conditions generates a real sense of warmth between those involved.

People working in the film industry—the directors, the writers, editors and actors—do it for love. There is no possibility of making money or a full-time career. Everyone has to have other jobs or other means of support. Our budget was so low that that Ngyuen Minh Trang had to pay for her own flight to Vietnam.

To answer your other question, *Collective Flat* has been bought by the Japanese television corporation, NHK, and has also been shown in two cinemas in Paris and in some cinemas in Vietnam. It has been well received by the intellectuals and critics in Vietnam and particularly appreciated by those who lived through these times. There is no strong film culture in Vietnam and there are only a few cinemas. Unfortunately most people watch kungfu movies, or videos, rather than the sort of movies that I make.



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