

Original Article

Natural Landscape of Vietnam in the Documentary Film In the Year of the Pig

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ABSTRACT: *This essay examines the cinematic landscape in Emile de Antonio's 1968 documentary In the Year of the Pig, arguing that the film's recurring sequences of Vietnam's rivers, mountains, and land do more than frame the Vietnam War: they stage a shifting relation between beauty, looking, and military violence. Drawing on W. J. T. Mitchell's theorisation of landscape as a culturally specific medium and John Berger's account of the de-centring movie camera, the analysis traces how the film's opening and closing shots present a harmonious, pre-emancipatory landscape inhabited by Vietnamese boatmen, before this landscape is progressively militarised as American warships, tanks, and refugees enter the frame. Reading the camera eye through Paul Virilio's theory of the sighting device, the essay shows how camera movement mimics the trajectory of a weapon, transforming the act of looking into an act of military reconnaissance and destruction. The essay further situates this militarised looking within a broader problem of visual authority, asking who has the power to determine what counts as beautiful in a documentary about war, and closes by reading the film's landscape imagery alongside the self-narration of ageing and ravaged beauty in Marguerite Duras's The Lover. The essay contends that the minor, subsidiary status of landscape within both the documentary genre and the mainstream art-historical canon makes it a productive site for uncovering the aesthetic and political stakes of colonial and wartime spectatorship, revealing how cinematic landscape carries the collective memory of a colonised nation.*

KEYWORDS: *Documentary Film, Cinematic Landscape, Vietnam War, Visual Culture, Colonial Gaze, Emile De Antonio.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Directed by Emile de Antonio, the 1968 American documentary film *In the Year of the Pig* uses historical footage and interviews to show American involvement in the Vietnam War. Beyond interviews and news footage, the film's opening and ending also show the natural landscape of Vietnam's rivers and mountains. Through intentional montages of the natural landscape alongside war documentation, *In the Year of the Pig* establishes a contrast between nature's beauty and the violence of fierce fighting, heavy injury and political speeches. These natural landscape sequences offer a soothing visual experience and evoke what nature might have been like in Vietnam before the war. Camera movement transforms Vietnam's natural landscape into a cinematic landscape. In this dynamic medium, rivers, mountains and land are reproduced and remodelled in other sequences, such as American intrusion and refugees' escape. Beyond capturing the landscape, the moving camera also mimics moving weapons, imposing a colonial and military perspective on the aesthetic. It shows a military predation and destruction of Vietnam's territory through intentional montage and superimposition of voice-overs on the visual landscape. The militarised relationship between the camera eye and the cinematic landscape further problematises viewership and the perception of beauty in colonial and wartime narration.

2. LANDSCAPE AS A CULTURAL MEDIUM: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Mitchell, "landscape is a medium found in all cultures." [1, p. 5] As opposed to a main western or Chinese tradition of landscape in painting, landscape in Vietnam more fits into the category of what Mitchell refers to as the "other hand" of landscape, in which "nature is pre-emancipatory, prior to the perception of nature as such." [1, p. 12] Although footage of mountains, rivers, trees and lands in the film does not indicate any specific time, they still evoke a sense of history in the black-and-white tone and suggests a local beauty through misty pictorial contrasts among white, grey and black. Shot and produced from an American perspective, *In the Year of the Pig* reduces the possible religious implications of the mystic power of Vietnam's natural landscape and draws attention to that pre-emancipatory state of nature before the Vietnam War. Fast cuts of mountains, rivers, trees and land in the film prevent the viewer from closely observing each landscape and de-centre a semiotic interpretation of the visual elements. The readability of the natural landscape does not rely on its visual elements or their movement. On that account, "the invitation to look at a landscape suggests a look at nothing or a look at looking itself." [1, p. viii]

In film, "the camera and more particularly the movie camera demonstrated that there was no centre." [2, p. 18] The de-centred view produced by the movie camera aligns with a look at the looking of landscape per se to constitute a look at a cinematic landscape and to invite a holistic look at a sequence of several landscape shots. The river's flow, the tree's sway, and the

camera's movement are subjected to a look at the entire natural landscape. This holistic view of the cinematic landscape creates a poetic *découpage* within the documentary narrative while foregrounding historical footage and interview conversations. Shots of each landscape are then reproduced and remoulded as the background of military invasion and refugees' suffering throughout the film, producing a visual narrative that keeps uncovering a contrast between the primitive nature and military destruction during the Vietnam War.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This essay undertakes a close visual analysis of Emile de Antonio's *In the Year of the Pig* (1968), a black-and-white documentary that combines archival footage, interview testimony, and original cinematography of the Vietnamese countryside. The primary materials are six screenshots drawn from the film's opening sequence, its depiction of the American military's arrival, and its imagery of wartime destruction and refugee flight (Figs. 1–6), each read in relation to the film's soundtrack and editing. The analytic method combines formal film analysis attending to camera movement, montage, and the superimposition of voice-over with a theoretical framework drawn from landscape studies (Mitchell), phenomenologies of the moving camera (Berger), the militarisation of vision (Virilio), and the aesthetics of memory and the body (Duras, Benjamin), in order to trace how the film's cinematic landscape shifts from a harmonious, pre-emancipatory register to a colonised and militarised one over the course of the documentary.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. THE HARMONIOUS LANDSCAPE BEFORE THE WAR

The Vietnam War disrupts the pre-emancipatory local landscape and affects the relationship between humans and nature, and between the self and the other, in the cinematic landscape. In both shots from the opening (Fig. 1) and the ending (Fig. 2) of the film, the landscape of mountains and rivers also includes wooden boats and Vietnamese boatmen, suggesting a harmonious interaction between the landscape and the people within it. The organic environment of mountains and rivers reflects a traditional aesthetic of the local community, despite its poverty and underdevelopment in reality. These two parallel shots create a circular narrative in the film, stressing the Vietnamese people's dependence on nature. As an agricultural country, water and land provide essential resources for the Vietnamese people to grow rice. Each square foot of land in Vietnam is more valuable than gold, because that small piece of land can feed many people.



FIGURE 1 Screenshots from 0:06:26 of the Film *In the Year of the Pig*

(Source: *In the Year of the Pig*, dir. Emile de Antonio, Turin Film Corporation, 1968)



FIGURE 2 Screenshots from 1:40:48 of the Film *In the Year of the Pig*

(Source: *In the Year of the Pig*, dir. Emile de Antonio, Turin Film Corporation, 1968)

4.2. THE MILITARISED LANDSCAPE AND THE COLONIAL GAZE

Yet both the landscape and the relation were affected as soon as the US army came ashore in Vietnam (Fig. 3). A warship numbered 136 berths by the river, with multiple warship berths on the other side as well. Albert also shot against the river; wooden boats are replaced by advanced military vehicles, and the American navy replaces Vietnamese boatmen. The natural landscape in the sequence loses its holistic representation of local beauty and undisturbed tranquillity, yielding instead as a platform for the US military to go ashore and open the curtain on the Vietnam War. Foreign invasion dissolves the traditional landscape and transforms it into a colonial landscape that integrates foreign countries' involvement in Vietnam into part of the natural landscape. For instance, consider another sequence of the Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh on the river (Fig. 4). The foreign warship visually replaces the natural landscape. It becomes the platform for Ho Chi Minh and foreign leaders. Because Ho Chi Minh mostly stayed abroad and remained ironically unfamiliar with the Vietnamese landscape, his presence alienates him from the Vietnamese landscape in the background, shifts focus to colonial interrelations on the warship, and disintegrates the pre-emancipatory local landscape.



FIGURE 3 Screenshots from 0:11:48 of the Film *In the Year of the Pig*

(Source: *In the Year of the Pig*, dir. Emile de Antonio, Turin Film Corporation, 1968)



FIGURE 4 Screenshots from 0:13:17 of the Film *In the Year of the Pig*

(Source: *In the Year of the Pig*, dir. Emile de Antonio, Turin Film Corporation, 1968)

As soon as war begins, the colonial landscape immediately becomes associated with bombs and slaughter. A clash between American military invasion and Vietnamese resistance extends the colonial landscape to a representation of destruction and suffering in the social landscape. A military perspective is therefore imposed on the aesthetic and colonial look, further militarising the relation between nature and humans, between the landscape and the camera eye, and between beauty and spectatorship. A close-up of a tank's tracks and gears (Fig. 5) on the grass indexes American military power over Vietnam and signals victory from the American point of view. Suffering from war-ridden destruction, local cottages and lands are devoured by flames in the background. A shot of the escape of panic-stricken Vietnamese refugees (Fig. 6), on the other hand, shows their fear, despair and powerlessness. As smoke in the background indicates newly dropped bombs, the local landscape falls into colonial and military domination, and Vietnamese people have to escape from the place they live in. Comparing these shots not only reveals the changed relationship between humans and Vietnam's natural landscape, but also highlights the unequal power between the US army and Vietnamese people in relation to the same landscape. Whereas the US army is

equipped with advanced military weapons and vehicles, Vietnamese refugees comprise disadvantaged groups such as children, old people and women, and most of them still wear rags and suffer from starvation.



FIGURE 5 Screenshots from 0:15:33 of the Film *In the Year of the Pig*

(Source: *In the Year of the Pig*, dir. Emile de Antonio, Turin Film Corporation, 1968)



FIGURE 6 Screenshots from 0:15:51 of the Film *In the Year of the Pig*

(Source: *In the Year of the Pig*, dir. Emile de Antonio, Turin Film Corporation, 1968)

4.3. THE CAMERA AS WEAPON

Under such wartime circumstances, the military perspective analogises the camera eye to the vision of militants and analogises the camera movement to the movement of military weapons. "For men at war, the function of the weapon is the function of the eye." [3, p. 20] Given this interrelation between looking and military conquest at war, the camera eye then similarly carries on a military obligation to reconnoitre the enemy, producing a military aggression through the action of looking. The scope of vision hence indicates the scale of conquerable territory. In *In the Year of the Pig*, the military looking elicits a predatory view through intentional montage of Vietnam's natural landscape and a superimposition of voice-overs on the landscape sequence. The cinematic landscape lends itself to sequences of machine guns, tanks and bombs as conquerable visual prey and victimises itself through mechanical reproductions of the camera eye.

In the opening of the film, a sequence of Vietnam's landscape is superimposed with the interview with Professor Paul Mus from Yale University. In the interview, he discusses Ho Chi Minh's ironic alienation from his own country and recounts his emphasis on the significance of village life and agriculture to Vietnamese. However, rather than insert historical footage of Ho Chi Minh's speech, the film appropriates local landscape footage to fill the visual gap in the narrative. As Paul Mus's voice-over superimposes Vietnam's landscape, the soundtrack further alienates the irreverent footage and overwhelms it with Mus's loud, uplifting tone. Almost consumed by the soundtrack, the cinematic landscape loses its visual power to evoke an aesthetic look and instead serves only to suggest a connection with Vietnam.

Beyond a predatory view, the military look also signals military destruction. As W.J. Perry, the former US Under-Secretary of State for defence, proclaims, "Once you can see the target, you can expect to destroy it" [3, p. 4]; the camera eye therefore becomes a surrogate for a military weapon, destroying what it can see. "The camera's peephole [serves] as an indirect sighting

device complementing those attached to the weapons of mass destruction. It thus prefigured a symptomatic shift in target-location and a growing derealisation of military engagement." [3, p. 1] Intentional montage of natural landscape then not only discloses a possible territory for military conquest, but also suggests a lost view that has been destroyed by the looking and the war. Thus, "What is perceived is already lost." [3, p. 4] The lost landscape embodies a double perception of the cinematic landscape a juxtaposition of the military dominance of the American army with the powerlessness of Vietnamese refugees. "In Vietnamese, the word for *water* and the word for *a nation, a country, and a homeland* are the same: nước." [6, p. 1] To Vietnamese people, natural elements, water, for instance, not only serve as the basis of the agricultural society and pre-emancipatory living environment, but also constitute a spiritual force that glues the local community. In this regard, the militarised camera eye aims to destroy both the visible and invisible or the spiritual and to interweave the principle of deterrence with the filmic narrative.

4.4. VISUAL AUTHORITY AND THE POLITICS OF BEAUTY

Furthermore, since "*the history of battle is primarily the history of radically changing fields of perception*," [3, p. 7] the analogy between a movie camera and a military sighting device not only militarises the way of looking, but also affects human reaction and perception of identification and differentiation of objects. In *In the Year of the Pig*, the camera also militarises the relation between viewership and the perception of natural beauty. The definition of what can be considered beautiful in a documentary film about war requires the determination of a visual authority selected among the director or the viewers (American, Vietnamese or a neutral perspective of neither). Who decides what counts as beautiful, thus suggesting another form of power relation in looking. Beyond visual authority, a distinctive aesthetic standard between foreign and local Vietnamese audiences also raises doubts about whether indigenous beauty can be perceived by and transmitted to foreign viewers, and whether foreign viewers recognise the cinematic landscape as beautiful. It remains ambivalent whether the beauty of the cinematic landscape relies on its own sequence per se or on the main documentation of war. Given that Benjamin considers war a culmination of "politics aesthetic," [4, p. 241] the film offers the viewer a dialectical perspective to see beauty through war or war through beauty.

The cinematic landscape of local nature remains a subsidiary part of a documentary film like *In the Year of the Pig*, and the Vietnamese landscape remains a secondary part of mainstream landscape discourse in Western and Chinese traditions. Yet a close examination of the minor landscape reveals an aesthetic perspective for approaching the superimposed colonial and military narrative in the representation of Vietnam. A filmic narrative of the loss, wound and beauty of Vietnam's landscape in *In the Year of the Pig* reminds me of the self-narration of female beauty in the opening of Duras' *The Lover*:

- One day, I was already old; at the entrance of a public place, a man came up to me. He introduced himself and said, "I've known you for years. Everyone says you were beautiful when you were young, but I want to tell you I think you're more beautiful now than then. Rather than your face as a young woman, I prefer your face as it is now. Ravaged." [5, p. 3]

5. CONCLUSION

The passage offers a possible analogy between the beauty of nature and female beauty, between the body of a nation and that of a female. The aged and ravaged beauty of the female protagonist elicits a look not at the present or the surface. However, it associates a coexistence of beauty and trauma with a relation of her childhood, the war and her pubescent romance. Like her face, the body of a city or of Vietnam also endures the ravage of war, time and human interaction, and forms a collective experience of the people therein. The natural landscape, a look at the city per se, distils the collective memory of colonised Vietnam and renders a distinctive beauty, whether primitive or ravaged, with traces of history.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest concerning the publication of this paper.

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