

CRISTINA NUALART

Audiovisual Art Review: *Nắng Bằng Phẳng* [Flat Sunlight] and *Day by Day*

Free-spirited children's voices and giggles are the last sounds heard in the closing scenes of two films that invoke a reframing of self-reliance. Nguyễn Thị Thanh Mai is the director of *Day by Day* (2015), and Bùi Lêna—or Lêna Bùi, as she is better known—is the screenwriter and director of the 2016 film *Nắng Bằng Phẳng* [Flat Sunlight]. The art production of these two young artists encompasses diverse media, including audiovisual pieces of remarkable quality, such as these two films of ethnographic substance and artistic construction. My reason for contrasting these two works, in particular, lies in the sophisticated ways in which both engage with documentary perspectives on the everyday life of people in Vietnam and Cambodia—whose livelihoods mirror some universal patterns of human survival—while indirectly exposing the traps of commodification in the digital age, such as the disconnect from physical forms of knowledge and corporeal skills.

Lêna Bùi's *Nắng Bằng Phẳng* was filmed in Tiền Giang, not far from Mỹ Tho, in the Mekong Delta. Song Bình is the hamlet where Giang, a young woman from the city, arrives to spend time with her aunt. In their company, life on screen slows to the sway of papaya trees and coconut palms, cicada songs, and folk music, a gentle rhythm that Giang has no problem adapting to. Like a fish in water, she immerses herself in a rural livelihood dependent

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FIGURE 1: Film still from *Nắng Bàng Phẳng*, courtesy of Lêna Bùi.

on nonhuman animals and plants and where success is reaped under the sunlight of local knowledge. Felled green coconuts thud into damp earth and cockerels crow high notes above Aunt Mười's descriptions of routine tasks involving fertilizer, biogas containers, and water supplies. Giang listens to all the advice that her rural counterparts give her as she joins in cleaning the pigsty, feeding the livestock, plucking boiled ducks, or even hunting frogs at night. There is nothing else to do after dark in the countryside because everyone goes to bed early, she tells her mother on the phone. For an instant, jolted by this reminder that life outside the countryside is fast and bright, urban viewers realize that they had suspended their disbelief and had fallen into the tranquil pace of the film, a pace that remains constant for the almost fifty-minute duration. If Giang had a former life, she seems to miss nothing about it, apparently quite at one with her new environment. In the evening, the family gathers between the open front door and the wall fan: a child does homework, Aunt Mười gets a honey facial treatment, her husband laughs at this from the hammock, and others join in the banter from wooden beds, stools, and chairs.

At the farmhouse, work is unceasing but seemingly effortless, even when oinking pigs keep Aunt Mười awake after dark. Giang dislikes the smell of pig farm on her hair, but the proximity of the animals to the human abode

is due to irreproachably practical wisdom: pens are built close to the house in case the sows give birth at night. Knowledge of natural life cycles is unpretentious. Piglets get neutered, beehives are scraped, and farmers sell their livestock when it is “ripe.” Aunt Muồi negotiates with as many pork traders as it takes to obtain a fair price for her pigs. Everybody knows that prices fall when other farmers fatten their animals with illegal substances, but Aunt Muồi is steadfast in her pursuit of an adequate retribution for the months of work involved in raising the little piglets into one-hundred-kilo beasts.

Giang’s apprenticeship in the countryside teaches her a great deal, including the conscious unlearning of her fear of ghosts when in the proximity of field tombs. Before she is due to return to school back in the city, she takes time off to go with her young relatives to the local fair. Boxes of children swirl through the air at the mercy of the mechanical arms of a theme park attraction while Giang looks up and thinks, “Maybe life just needs to be flat and even.”

Unable to afford piglets to raise, let alone a brick-and-mortar house with a covered porch like Aunt Muồi’s, a woman with eyes the color of Tonle Sap Lake lived off collecting water hyacinths from the river until local authorities sprayed chemicals to destroy the plants. This is one of the stories of rural life presented in Nguyễn Thị Thanh Mai’s documentary *Day by Day*. Captioned in English and Khmer, with audio in Vietnamese, the film captures the struggles faced “day by day” by a community of undocumented ethnic Vietnamese whose livelihoods have shifted between Vietnam and Cambodia, trapped in a geopolitical impasse.

In 2014, Sa Sa Bassac, an experimental artist-run space in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, invited visual artist Nguyễn Thị Thanh Mai for a two-month research art residency, a stay that led her to discover the plight of the largely undocumented community of people she spent considerable time getting to know. She translated the knowledge gained into exhibition pieces created with their old clothes and photographs, as well as recorded on camera for this hour-long film, *Day by Day*, which is also the title of the art exhibition of this body of work, shown in 2015 in Phnom Penh and Hồ Chí Minh City.



FIGURE 2: Film still from *Day by Day*, courtesy of Nguyễn Thị Thanh Mai.

There is no indication, aside from the on-screen captions, that half the footage was filmed in Cambodia and the other half in Vietnam. Just as the landscape looks no different on either side of a frontier, so the stories have a common ground, since the numerous narrators all share the experience of transience across borders. One grandmother is a living testimony of embodied transnationalism, her past rooted like gnarled mangroves over the two neighboring countries, former enemies, which deny basic services to the people who have insufficient proof, or no material proof at all, of nationality or residency. Children without a birth certificate cannot access public education. Documents in Khmer are ignored by Vietnamese authorities because they cannot read them, says one father who has been waiting four years for his children's birth certificates. He has no *hộ khẩu*—household registration—nor any other residency card for them. Even if the disadvantages of the *hộ khẩu* system prevent his family from accessing some basic services, he explains how much better off they are now that they live in Vietnam because working conditions are better and markets are closer and stock more goods than those in Cambodia.

Tales from the other side of the border further delineate the undefined existence of stateless peoples. In a floating village of boathouses in Cambodia, a voice speaks for the whole community: “no one has any birth certificates or any kind of papers.” One man has heard that officials are

preparing to issue identity cards and estimates that a population census must be underway, for he believes that they are counting the few hundred households of overseas Vietnamese in Cambodia. Even if this were to happen, each identity card would cost approximately sixty US dollars, he has heard, a figure higher than the monthly income of most of these families, who can afford to eat only twice a day.

Confiding to the camera a hopelessness beyond repair, fisherfolk share their memories of theft, shipwreck, having to surrender to corruption and bribery, and not having food. Even though the first-hand stories unambiguously articulate the hardship of surviving during wartime and the decades since, the overall sensation *Day by Day* transmits is not one of despair. Perhaps the artist chose to insert enough dialogue of hopeful and positive views to counterbalance the expressions of anguish about difficulties hard to overcome. If indeed that was a conscious editorial decision, it is a commendable one, not so much for giving spectators a very welcome feel-good factor, but for refraining from perpetuating conceptualizations of penury and struggle that are paralyzing and unsurmountable. The film leisurely crams in many different voices, and some compare their present situation with their own dramatic past experiences of poverty and scarcity, from which they emerged content with their lot in life, conscious, it must be said, of their own capacity to work hard and get by. If we consider that many young people worldwide may not be capable of conceiving of such a forward-looking attitude, curtailed as they are by the impending doom of planetary crises, the film *Day by Day* should be praised for bringing awareness to and denouncing unjust situations, stimulating the viewing public to respond with emotional and imaginative fortitude.

That said, Nguyễn Thị Thanh Mai's film is intended as a critique of political inertia, a critical message worth revisiting in the light of the argument that curator Iola Lenzi makes about art practices of Southeast Asia, alleging that aesthetic appeal is a strategy to hit deeper. Like a sugar-coated pill, unpalatable truths are more readily consumed under the seductive allure of beauty. In contrast to this use of beauty in art, Erik Harms finds that notions of beauty in urbanism have helped to legitimize the spatial cleansing and control that has been underway to expand the built-up areas of urban Vietnam.¹ Both arguments on beauty overlap in *Day by Day* in as

much as, on the one hand, the film's execution is crafted beautifully, while on the other hand, the images of human settlement captured on the film, with no trace of the type of fashionable housing design hegemonically positioned as beautiful, imply that the area stands immune to the coercive discourse of beauty used elsewhere as a form of territorial control.

To illustrate, let us picture the film starting in darkness, as a black background upon which the film credits roll in to the liturgical rhythm of a woman chanting phrases, repeated by a chorus of children's voices. Aurally, the film's opening has captivated us in seconds, as we recognize the familiar pattern of rote learning in a classroom we cannot see. Then the screen awakens to frame a dirt-track village of shacks assembled from corrugated metal, wooden poles, and palm leaves. The camera enters a hut where a couple busily prepares food in banana leaves. Far from a glamorous suburb, the opening scene situates us in a place deprived of "beautiful" architecture. Candidly, the representations of beauty in the film are to be found in the earnest personalities of the characters. A woman tells us that only one of the children outside the house goes to school and the other children do not attend regularly because their night class in another commune is far and evening traffic is dangerous. Real life stories like this, told by the people who own them, bring us into the community until the end, when the film again goes dark, like it began. At twilight, the final scene pans the boathouses bobbing on the river as if dancing with the chirpy children who chant a prayer of gratitude to their village. Before uttering the amen, the children repeat as one: "Banish illiteracy."

Day by Day never shows children in school, as *Nắng Bàng Phẳng* projects no images of city life. The absences speak as loud as the two key statements uttered: "Banish illiteracy" and "Maybe life just needs to be flat and even." Of the two, Lêna Bùi's film is perhaps more visually seductive, threaded as it is with shots of undulating palm leaves, glistening spiderwebs, and ponds, but it does not directly critique ineffectual administration and displaced people in the way that Nguyễn Thị Thanh Mai's film does. *Nắng Bàng Phẳng*, a semi-fictional piece, is for that reason more poetic, as can be seen in a performance staged within the film, a tableau in which Giang, standing upright at the far end of the pigsty, reads aloud a text by Thích Nhất Hạnh. Opposite the young woman, Aunt Mười stands transfixed,

listening to the Buddhist wisdom on life and death and the interrelated nature of all beings.

In different ways, both films reflect on the experience of territorial belonging. *Day by Day* collects the historical memory of a community of undocumented ethnic Vietnamese, and by extension, tells narratives of displacement and the consequent loss of opportunities for educational attainment known to peoples across the world. *Nắng Bàng Phẳng* touches on ecological illiteracy, a theme that Lêna Búi arrived at from earlier explorations in her career. As artist-in-residence for the “Art in Global Health” Wellcome Trust initiative in 2012, Lêna Búi teamed up with scientists studying zoonoses, illnesses that humans develop from contact with other animals. She became interested in the handling of animals for human consumption, a theme that broadens into species’ interdependency in *Nắng Bàng Phẳng*.

Both films accurately reflect the current confused state of planetary belonging, aptly reminding us that individuals from any territorial marker—the nation-state, the country, the precolonial frontiers, the city, the hẻm—can be just as distanced from the experiences of their peers as they are from peoples located further afield. An urban Vietnamese may struggle to adapt and learn knowledge integral to rural industries more than a pig farmer halfway across the earth who has never set foot in Asia. In their presentation of geographically bound but diversified knowledge systems, these two audiovisual creations do the work of cultural translation that approximates viewers to processes of relocation. The films underscore the widespread contemporary disconnect with ways of life that enable self-sufficiency, which is not to say that self-reliance is an individualistic capability, as both films place social relations as essential instruments to succeed in a joint survival project.

Lêna Búi’s film *Nắng Bàng Phẳng* and Nguyễn Thị Thanh Mai’s film *Day by Day* are art pieces that are not currently distributed on the main commercial platforms. The trailer of *Nắng Bàng Phẳng* can be viewed online: <https://vimeo.com/176916861>. For information on Nguyễn Thị Thanh Mai’s first exhibition on this project see http://sasabassac.com/exhibitions/30_day_by_day/daybyday_daybyday.htm.

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Note

1. Erik Harms, “Beauty as Control in the New Saigon: Eviction, New Urban Zones, and Atomized Dissent in a Southeast Asian City,” *American Ethnologist* 39, no. 4 (2012): 735–750.