Nuoc 2030: Water as a Carrier of Hope and Despair

Trang Dang✉
Department of English, Nottingham Trent University

(Received: 6th May 2025; Revised: 1st October 2025; Accepted: 1st October 2025)

Abstract

This article examines the representation of the changing relationships between coastal communities, multinational corporations, and the sea itself in the first Vietnamese sci-fi film *Nuoc 2030* (2014) directed by Vietnamese-American filmmaker Nghiem-Minh Nguyen-Vo. Set in a near-future Southern Vietnam, where climate change has submerged half of the region under seawater, the film follows a young woman's quest to uncover the truth behind her husband's murder.

Drawing on the Blue Humanities and the Anthropocene discourse, this article explores how the coastal communities in the film adapt to, and coexist with, a world inundated by water and marked by biodiversity loss. At the same time, through close textual analysis and examination of Vietnam's colonial history, it shows how the film highlights the troubling reality of escalating extractive activities of multinational corporations in the country, often masked by the promise of innovative green technologies. *Nuoc 2030* weaves together the present and past through flashbacks; its narrative mirrors the chaotic and messy characteristics of water, which carry both the remnants of what has been lost to global warming and the potential offered by the vast unknown of the sea. With its dynamic depiction of time, *Nuoc 2030* invites reflections on how human actions—past, present, and future—affect the blue planet and the lives of both humans and nonhumans that inhabit and rely on water.

This article contributes to the expanding field of Blue Humanities through its focus on Southeast Asia. It provides a critical perspective on the cultural and artistic representation of sea level rise particularly in Southern Vietnam and its wider implications for global environmental justice by considering where the film positions itself in terms of hope and responsibility.

Keywords: Southeast Asia; Vietnam; sci-fi; Blue Humanities; capitalism; climate change cinema

✉ trang.dang@ntu.ac.uk

Introduction: From Shore to Sea and Back Again

Directed by Vietnamese-American filmmaker Nghiem-Minh Nguyen-Vo, *Nuoc 2030* (2014) opens with a prologue stating: "As a result of the consumption of fossil fuels, solar energy trapped by greenhouse effects has warmed the oceans, raised sea levels, and caused extreme weather anomalies across the globe" (Nguyen-Vo, 2014, 00:15). The prologue warns that in the coming decades, these changes will have "a devastating effect on nations like Vietnam, where half of the land will be submerged" (Nguyen-Vo, 2014, 00:21). Indeed, after transitioning to a computer screen displaying an inundation map of the Mekong Delta, the film continues with its prologue, revealing that in 2030, "80% of the population has been evacuated from South Vietnam" (Nguyen-Vo, 2014, 00:47). The effect created by the thin text slowly appearing against a black background gives *Nuoc 2030* a contemplative yet strong opening showing the confluence between the global and the local. It highlights how the impacts of actions taken in the Global North, insinuated by the mention of fossil fuel consumption, are felt more acutely in vulnerable regions in the Global South. With its long coastline stretching 3,260 kilometres, Vietnam—amongst other countries in the Pacific—faces the immediate threat of rising sea levels, and with it, millions of lives in jeopardy. However, the nation is also one of the world's fastest-growing economies enabled by rapid urbanisation and industrialisation, a repercussion of French colonialism and the Doi Moi ("Renovation") policy. The latter consists of economic reforms introduced after the American War to establish a "socialist-oriented market economy" aimed at addressing economic stagnation and reducing poverty, but at the cost of serious ecological degradation (Heise & Pham, 2024, p. 12). Conjuring up these issues throughout the film, and through its very title—meaning both "water" and "country" in Vietnamese—Nguyen-Vo raises an important question of the extent to which the nation itself is prepared to safeguard its people in the face of impending environmental crises or follow the path of its Western counterparts.

During the American War, the Saigon-born filmmaker sought refuge in the only cinema in town, watching films imported from France showing the world outside war-torn Vietnam. Later settling in the US, he eventually returned to filmmaking, driven by his desire to explore ideas from different perspectives. Nguyen-Vo describes his second film, *Nuoc 2030*, as the first Vietnamese sci-fi film (Hatfull, 2015, para. 5). It was chosen as the opening night feature for the 2014 Panorama section of the Berlin International Film Festival and was subsequently invited to over 50 others. It also received the Sloan Filmmaker Award from the Tribeca Film Institute in New York and won Best Feature Film at the San Pedro International Film Festival. Despite widespread acclaim for *Nuoc 2030* that recognises its significant contribution to global cinema, there remains a surprising scarcity of critical commentaries on the film. Three critics who have examined *Nuoc 2030* at some length are Ursula K. Heise and Chi P. Pham (2024), who focus on the themes of apocalyptic disaster and property, and Giang Cam Hoang (2023), who broadly analyses the film's portrayal of the damaging effects of climate change on Vietnam in a post-socialist context. Others, such as Mark Bould (2023) and Bodhisatta Chattopadhyay (2022), only mention it in passing. Given the continued need for greater academic attention to the Global South, the significance of *Nuoc 2030* as a valuable addition to contemporary representations of climate change, and Vietnam's status as the 16th most populous country in the world with many lives at risk of rising sea levels, this article makes an urgent revisit to *Nuoc 2030*.

It explores in depth the film's representation of the changing relationships between coastal communities, multinational corporations, and the sea itself and the implications of this representation for the futures of Vietnam and its human and nonhuman inhabitants.

In particular, the article first examines how these inhabitants adapt to, and coexist with, a home half-submerged in water. It then investigates how this dire situation is both triggered and intensified by the escalating extractive activities of major companies in Vietnam, which mask their environmental destruction behind the false promise of innovative green technologies. To put *Nuoc 2030* in dialogue with emerging and evolving conversations in the Blue Humanities, this article draws on Vietnam's historical context and employs theoretical perspectives from blue ecocriticism and the Anthropocene discourse. The following elaboration of the said frameworks will provide a valuable springboard for their application in illuminating those important aspects of the film.

In recent years the Blue Humanities has witnessed a surge in academic interest due partly to the fact that we are seeing more and more water with global warming. Foundational to this growing field is the study of the relationship between humans and water and how the latter functions across multiple scales, from local to global. Inspired by Oceanic cultural practices that have also gained scholarly attention in the last decades, it is evolving towards a more transnational, multilingual, and inclusive approach that recognises the interconnectedness and co-influence of all living things (Mentz, 2024, p. 18). From new materialism to speculative philosophy, many theorists have foregrounded the Blue Humanities in their work, developing alternative ways of understanding and situating oneself within the immensity of water. For example, crucial to this article is Serpil Oppermann's notion of storied seas as living metaphors formulated from a new materialist position. Oppermann (2019, p. 453) argues that like all nonhuman species, marine entities project a storied existence conveyed through "signs, colours, sounds, signalling, and codes" that we may or may not yet fully comprehend. Their tales of social practices and cultural forces express the deteriorating water conditions and their own decline caught up in the Anthropocene's rising waves (Oppermann, 2023, p. 13).

At the same time, Oppermann acknowledges the sea as both a physical geographical site and a vast domain of imagination, constantly fluctuating between ontological categories. While Hester Blum (2010, p. 670) famously cautions against reducing the sea to a mere cultural signifier through metaphor, Oppermann defends its use, describing sea matter as living metaphors. For her, they are products of imaginative impulses that visualise terrestrial-aquatic interactions and are thus coextensive with the sea's materiality, inviting critical investigations into marine meanings and their role in knowledge production (Oppermann, 2019, p. 450). Taking a speculative philosophical stance, specifically the philosophy of object-oriented ontology (OOO), I add that the ubiquitous employment of water as metaphor in cultural imaginaries testifies to the limitation of human knowledge and the inseparable human-nonhuman connection. According to OOO, the essence of any entity—animate or inanimate—is inaccessible to all, human or nonhuman. A sunken ship, for instance, may be viewed as a former means of human transport from a human perspective, and simultaneously as a habitat for marine life from various nonhuman perspectives. Yet none of the viewpoints fully capture the sunken ship's being; its ontology now encompasses these interpretations without being reducible to any one of them. This inaccessibility implies that whenever any entity attempts to make sense of another—whether human or nonhuman—it must rely on still other entities to do so. Such reliance, as Sidney I. Dobrin (2021, p. 142) notes, "disrupt[s] anthropocentric driven epistemologies" and demonstrates the profound interconnectedness of all things. Following this insight from OOO and Oppermann's concept of storied water and defence of sea matter as living metaphors, I analyse the representation of water in *Nuoc 2030* as both a narrative of experienced reality of climate change and a potent metaphor serving as a bearer and witness to human impacts on the ocean. This analysis will show how the film dissects human engagement

with the aquatic world in Vietnam and the role of global capitalism in the degradation of the country's oceanic systems.

To further explore these points, I incorporate the scholarly conversations surrounding the Anthropocene, especially the theory of cheap nature. Raj Patel and Jason W. Moore (2018, p. 2) argue that capitalism undervalues the web of life and puts it to work as cheaply as possible, including land, labour, energy, and raw materials, in an effort to maximise trades, profits, and money. This understanding of "capitalist world-ecology" as Moore (2016, p. 97) calls it is useful for unpacking the mindset behind multinational corporations in *Nuoc 2030* that participate in greenwashing. The analysis will be supplemented by a historical consideration of postcolonial Vietnam, particularly its solutions to economic recession and impoverishment following the American War via rapid modernisation and industrialisation. This will help deepen the exploration of the colonial legacy on the country and its past struggles that lead to the resulting socio-environmental challenges in the present.

Potawatomi botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013, p. 246) compares time to the tides of the sea that appear and disappear because, for her people, time is a "turning circle": "All things that were will come again". Borrowing Kimmerer's conception of time as fitting to the aforementioned link between Vietnam's past and current histories, I structure this article in accordance with the constant ebb and flow of water coming to shore and receding back to sea. In the first part, I explore the themes of human resilience and adaptation in *Nuoc 2030*, highlighting the loss of land, food sources, and biodiversity and its effects on the human and nonhuman inhabitants of Southern Vietnam. In the second part, I examine the film's depiction of the exploitation of locals and marine life by big companies and scientists and of a corrupt government that favours the wealthy and neglects the poor. I pay particular attention to how their past actions impinge on the health of the country's ocean and the welfare of its people in the present and future. The article concludes with a critique of the depiction of hope and responsibility in *Nuoc 2030*, examining how its fluid depiction of time and surreal projection of the sea's vast unknown gesture towards alternative ways of thinking and living with water.

Flood Current: Loss of Connection and the Echo of What Was

As *Nuoc 2030* finishes with its prologue informing viewers of its near-future setting 100 kilometres from Ho Chi Minh City, we see a close-up dead body slowly sinking to the bottom of a beautiful turquoise sea. This roughly 30-second clip, I argue, sets the stage for, and therefore encompasses, the key themes the film explores. The deceased body belongs to Thi, the husband of the female protagonist, Sao, and it marks the first loss we witness in *Nuoc 2030*—a loss that opens the way for the film to reveal others, whether of deep human connection, of home, or of essential food resources. The glare of the sun in the water captured by the camera—momentarily washing the screen in white—combined with the slow pacing of the shot and the gradual reveal of a face with closed eyes, is perhaps designed to evoke the pain of death and the passing of a life. In *Nuoc 2030*, pain borne from repeated losses is another focus that underscores the harsh reality of life amidst rising seas. Simultaneously, the brief sequence shows a striking sense of beauty and calm. Thi's lifeless body, arms outstretched, appears at ease in the water, yet with the sea enveloping him entirely, it becomes clear that this environment is equally perilous. As Steve Mentz (2024, p. 3) observes, humans and water share an awkward relationship: "we depend upon it and love it, but it cannot be our home". Given this difficult cohabitation, Nguyen-Vo asks how we might navigate the sea when it is (re)claiming the land inch by inch. Another theme implied in this short scene, which the second part of this article will explore in detail, is the tension between truth and lie, for questions surrounding the cause of Thi's death surface as his body slowly descends into the ocean.

For now, I turn to the topic of loss and adaptation in *Nuoc 2030* to examine what it means for the poor population of Southern Vietnam to make a living and survive in a time of planetary unravelling.

To further emphasise the sorrow accompanying Thi's death, the film revisits the time shortly before the tragedy in 2030, conveying the life of the married couple as it once was. Introduced by the title card "Sao & Thi", the sequence opens with the couple aboard a boat, gathering their meagre catch and spotting a particular fish species which, according to Thi, symbolises the ancestral blessing of having both a son and a daughter. The camera then pulls back to reveal a picturesque panoramic shot of Thi returning to their makeshift stilt house where his land used to be, standing in the calm sea against the blue sky. While the imagery may appear idyllic, visual details suggest something else. Thi and Sao wear worn-out clothes, and later scenes show them tending to a single pot of vegetables, their access to fresh water so limited that it must be used sparingly, and their failed attempts to conceive a child after two years of marriage. In his discussion of mainstream Western cinema, J. P. Telotte (2023, p. 12) argues that through their visual effects, science fiction films are capable of visualising what could be and in that process illustrate the real possibility of other worlds, different forms of life, and alternative ways of existing. However, despite *Nuoc 2030*'s near-future setting, this sequence, as Heise (2021, p. 29) observes, rather portrays an ordinary life of a young couple living in poverty in the Global South. Nguyen-Vo, Heise (2021, p. 29) continues, cinematically projects a theoretical argument made by Indigenous and postcolonial scholars: what is often imagined in the Global North as a future climate dystopia is, for many in the Global South, an ongoing present shaped by colonial legacies seen through poverty, displacement, food insecurity, and unstable futures. The scene's tranquil beauty masks a second loss—the loss of Thi's land—and the couple's daily struggles. Their adaptations to survive—primitive in appearance despite the futuristic backdrop—do not romanticise resilience but reveal a deep layer of material hardship, highlighting the lived precarity that climate change continues to expose.

Nonetheless, joy and happiness are not entirely absent from Sao and Thi's lives despite their difficult circumstances. Throughout the "Sao & Thi" part, moments of frustration and worry are interwoven with those of love, laughter, and tenderness, for *Nuoc 2030* is also a romance, and it is within these intimate moments that the uneasy relationship between humans and water that Mentz discusses unfolds. One notable scene occurs when it begins to rain and Sao rushes out of their hut to revel in the fresh water. A series of close-up shots captures her glistening eyes and an expression of deep gratitude as she jumps, washes her face, and reaches out to feel the falling droplets. This scene conjures up the repeated phrase "water is life" in Chamorro poet Craig Santos Perez's powerful poem "Chanting the Waters" (2016) where he articulates the spiritual and cultural significance of water in various cultures and traditions and the importance of protecting it for future generations. It also brings to mind Mentz's observation that "watery parts of the world allure human bodies" (Mentz, 2024, p. 3). Sao clearly yearns for the freshness and a sense of renewal that the rain often brings and is grateful for it—as though the rain might wash away her disappointment over her inability to conceive and the consequent tension with her husband, which are shown in the preceding scene. This sentiment is further amplified when she is joined by Thi who comes to embrace her from behind, an embrace she now welcomes. In this sense, water becomes a binding force, a source of connection and delight in a time of scarcity. Donna Haraway asserts that joy is an act of "openness to caring" (Mittman, 2019, p. 19), to the capacity to live in troubling times, and Métis anthropologist Zoe Todd (2015, p. 252) similarly affirms that we need it for both survival and critical engagement with climate change. Through the brief yet radiant moment of childlike happiness of the couple beneath the rain, Nguyen-Vo suggests that resilience and adaptation

are not sustained by hardship alone, but by instants of joy that inspire one to carry on. However, in the same breath, Mentz (2024, p. 3) reminds us that the very waters that allure can also endanger. It is this life-giving compound that concurrently brings about the third loss in the film—once again forcing the couple to confront their grief and navigate their survival in an unforgiving world.

Following the couple's embrace in the rain, *Nuoc 2030* shifts to Sao's discovery of their potted vegetables ruined by snails and to a close-up shot of Thi solemnly watching grey clouds swallow the blue sky. Viewers are then abruptly confronted with the aftermath of a downpour: their stilt house with only the roof above the water. Not only have they lost their arable land to the encroaching ocean, but also their fragile shelter now rendered uninhabitable. Forced to pack what little they have onto their boat, Sao and Thi become climate refugees adrift on the rising sea. As they adapt to their new life afloat, Thi places a floating sign that reads "Private Property" to mark what was once his land. The gesture is met with resistance from nearby fishers, who tell him, "It used to be your land—now the water belongs to everybody," which subsequently sparks a physical confrontation between them (Nguyen-Vo, 2014, 17:36). Heise (2021, p. 30) notes that this scene, amongst others, raises critical questions about property rights and ownership in a world of dwindling resources. Dobrin (2023, pp. 2–3) would go as far as to argue that Thi's insistence on ownership reflects a problematic application of land-based logics "on the fluid space of ocean". On one hand, Thi's sign could symbolise such a mindset. When Thi later discovers holes in his fishing net and his catch devoured—revenge from the fishers he had chased away—he reluctantly paints over the sign with a "For Sale" message and phone number. This moment may be read as Thi learning a lesson from the sea: territorial boundaries are arbitrary human constructs, not worth defending at the cost of losing his already limited food supplies. On the other hand, I add to Heise's reading that Thi's attachment to the land runs deeper than mere possession. When Sao encourages him to sell it following the altercation, Thi replies, "This land was passed down many generations. Mum just passed away. It would be a sin if we sell it now" (Nguyen-Vo, 2014, 18:49). His reluctance stems from the ancestral connection he has with his land—one rooted in Vietnam's Confucian tradition of filial piety and reverence for ancestors. For Thi, to relinquish the land, even submerged, would be to disrespect his family and sever a sacred tie. Nguyen-Vo offers a nuanced angle to Dobrin's critique of land-based ideologies. While the film questions rigid territoriality, it also acknowledges that, for some, land-based attachments are spiritual and historical—a cultural means of honouring lineage and identity.

Through this scene of the couple's struggle to adapt to life on a boat, *Nuoc 2030* highlights, as implied above, another form of loss: the depletion of food stocks and biodiversity. Scattered throughout the film are moments that call to attention the diminishing fish population. In one scene, Thi tells Sao, "Every day there are fewer fish—no more land, people all go fishing to survive" (Nguyen-Vo, 2014, 18:10). In another, Sao casts her net only to pull in plastic waste. In his study of Global South infrastructures in future fiction, Bodhisatta Chattopadhyay (2022, p. 305) observes that food security becomes a central concern under conditions of overpopulation, compounded by climate challenges like flooding and the loss of cultivable land. This observation mirrors findings from Phung Phi Tran's review of climate change impacts on food security in Vietnam, which highlights the vulnerability of the Mekong Delta—Vietnam's key region for rice and seafood production—to severe flooding and subsequent agricultural decline (Tran 2024, paras. 12–13). By projecting these familiar scenes of food scarcity, already unfolding today, into a near-future setting, Nguyen-Vo illustrates a worsening trajectory, where the poor—those relying on traditional fishing methods—are increasingly displaced by commercial trawlers and competition amongst fellow subsistence

fishers. This trajectory becomes more evident in a later segment of the film, set a decade earlier, where viewers are offered glimpses of a more biodiverse ocean. In beautifully shot underwater scenes, sea urchins and tiny fish swim between murky currents, and the presence of human-made ropes tied around rocks symbolises the inextricable entanglement and shared vulnerability between humans and marine life. The contrast between these life-filled waters of the past and the fish-depleted future accentuates what we have lost due to anthropogenic global warming. Water and its materialities in this sense become both medium and witness that hold memory and tell stories of not only the disappearance of biodiversity but also of vanishing food sources that the ocean has so generously offered humankind.

In addition to these losses, what follows Thi's repainting the sign marks Nguyen-Vo's strongest emphasis on how rising sea levels push individuals to their limits in coping with deteriorating socio-environmental consequences. He once again gives the couple a momentary reprieve of happiness only to more dramatically reintroduce pain and suffering so as to convey their relentless struggles. The repainted sign brings Thi a well-paying job at a floating farm operated by a large corporation, which consequently enables him to buy ample food for himself and his wife. Using close-up shots, the film captures the couple's joyous expressions as they celebrate the occasion—playing on their small boat, laughing, and singing beneath a bright blue sky. The composition of the open sky, their simple clothing, and their radiant smiles evokes a sense of innocence and purity—a portrait of a poor couple in the Global South fighting to survive, one day at a time, and their joy coming from something as basic, yet profound, as having enough to get by. The image of Sao resting her face on Thi's chest and gently caressing it marks the end of the "Sao & Thi" section, which abruptly shifts back to the present: Sao now caresses her husband's chest for the last time before his body is buried at sea. The sudden transition from past to present together with the imagery serve as a stark reminder of their resilience and the depth of their shared life, and importantly, of all that has been taken from them by climate change and the deepening inequalities it fuels.

Indeed, after Sao's funeral for her husband, Nguyen-Vo employs long shots to reveal looming container ships and skyscrapers in the distance—symbols of affluence and corporate power—rising starkly against the horizon. Gradually, the film cuts from Sao walking to the camera to a close-up of her face: her eyes looking straight at the lens, her expression marked by a solemn, quiet grief, tinged with a hint of resignation. Firstly, the scene draws a striking visual and economic divide between the rich and the poor: while Sao and, by extension, the marginalised communities, strive to survive amidst environmental collapse, the distant skyline suggests that business continues undisturbed elsewhere. The built environment of the elite remains untouched by the ravages of climate change that have devastated Sao's world. Secondly, the close-up of Sao's face confronts the viewer directly. Her gaze demands that we bear witness to her suffering, to look her in the eye and reckon with the disproportionate toll climate change exacts on the poor, who are left to endure the results of actions largely driven by the wealthy, a theme which will be shortly addressed below. The loss of Thi and Sao's confrontational misery accentuates how adaptation, for those in their position, often means throwing themselves into dangerous, uncertain opportunities simply to survive. In a world where options are few, the lives of the poor are rendered expendable.

Ebb Current: Truth and Falsehood in the Tide of Normalcy

Chattopadhyay (2022, p. 298) is correct in pointing out that Global South narratives often centre on "infrastructural stressors that accompany transitions to further technologised futures," and on depictions of "collapsed infrastructures, or uneven infrastructural developments, set against questions of economic inequalities and social discord". If we recall

the juxtaposition between Sao's modest, weathered boat and the distant silhouettes of towering skyscrapers, this is only one of the many instances in *Nuoc 2030* that foreground symbolic representations of social disparity and hierarchy in Vietnam. The frequent visual recurrence of dykes and wind turbines, state-built infrastructures intended for hydroelectric power, further underlines these inequalities. Standing as emblems of national development and progress, they ironically do not appear to benefit the majority like Sao and Thi who live without electricity in precarious stilt houses, but to serve only a privileged few. The contrast is captured, for example, in a snapshot of a well-dressed couple relaxing in a chic Ho Chi Minh City's coffee shop. These subtle details of "uneven infrastructural developments" act as visual metaphors for the arbitrary and exclusionary demarcation of social boundaries. They compel viewers to reflect on the growing rift between the rich and the poor in Vietnam, as technological advancement and environmental degradation intersect in unequal and often unjust ways.

These symbolic representations of inequalities through infrastructures become literal in two pivotal scenes where Sao and Thanh, Thi's brother, confront the local authorities about the truth behind Thi's death. In the first scene, an official coldly declares that Thi drowns and dismisses any further questioning, asserting that their version of the event is final. In the second, Sao rushes to the county hall upon hearing that Thanh has been beaten, and though initially denied access, she is allowed to speak to him immediately after slipping money into an official's hand. Thanh then gives an alternate account: Giang, a former researcher (later revealed to be Sao's ex-lover), now married to the daughter of a corporate magnate to secure his position within the floating farm enterprise, orchestrates Thi's murder for stealing genetically modified seeds for black market resale. Drawing on Vietnam's history under French colonial rule and subsequent wars, Yen Duong (2015, p. 23) contends that as colonial governance centralised power in the hands of the authorities who took hold of all economic and bureaucratic procedures, it laid the groundwork for enduring corruption in the country, where bribery and nepotism have become systemic in public administration. *Nuoc 2030* further visualises this corruption through a powerful spatial and visual metaphor involving water. In an interview with the Centre for Asian American Media (CAAM), Nguyen-Vo explains that the film's outdoor scenes are often bathed in vibrant colours, featuring a horizontal line separating sea and sky, which symbolises openness, freedom, and the pursuit of truth (CAAM, 2015, para. 11). In contrast, the indoor scenes at the floating farm are cloaked in darkness and mystery, full of vertical and diagonal lines but devoid of the horizontal. These shadowy interiors represent opacity, restriction, and deceit—figurative imageries for the absence of truth and the suffocating power of corporate interests. In these spaces, truth is not only hidden but actively suppressed in service of private gain.

The pursuit of market-driven self-interests, particularly in the context of what Thi allegedly does, brings us back to the question of property and ownership in *Nuoc 2030*. It raises the broader question of whether knowledge (or products of knowledge)—especially that which emerges from shared or communal experience—should be accessible to all rather than monopolised by a select few. When Giang presents his research findings to the board of Dai Thanh, the powerful corporation he works for, he proudly claims personal credit: "*I* discovered a type of seaweed originating in fresh water but now growing in the estuary to adapt to the new condition" (emphasis added; Nguyen-Vo, 2014, 1:08:35). However, we know previously that it is Sao's place-based understanding of the land and sea that leads him to this discovery. With Giang later developing genetically engineered crop plants from this seaweed, and the corporation claiming exclusive ownership over it and commodifying it for profit, Heise and Pham (2024, p. 27) contend that the film poses a fundamental ethical dilemma. It asks whether the development should belong to Dai Thanh or be made available for collective cultivation

and consumption, given that the discovery is indebted to Sao's indigenous knowledge. Heise and Pham (2024, p. 27) assert that such conflicts over property rights "begin to signal the tenuous hold that old institutions of law and justice" have on the watery, climate-changed world of Southern Vietnam. The issue resonates with Vietnam's historical trajectory where postcolonial Vietnamese state-building has long relied on colonial modes of producing scientific and ethnic knowledge for the purposes of social engineering (Pham 2024, p. 321). Nevertheless, it simultaneously discredits and pushes local ecological knowledge to the margin of the country's post-war pursuit of development and industrial socialism (McElwee, 2016, p. 92). In this context, the killing of Thi—purportedly for stealing seeds that arguably belong to the commons—underscores the film's central provocation of who the real thief is, and if the knowledge behind the seeds originates in shared, lived experiences, whether it should be treated as proprietary at all. Nguyen-Vo challenges viewers to reconsider the ownership of both material and intellectual resources in a world where knowledge is inherently relational—formed through human and nonhuman entanglements.

What accompanies the privatisation of resources and the oppression of marginalised groups in *Nuoc 2030* is the persistent force of capitalist exploitation and environmental extractivism—an issue implied above by Vietnam's quest for modernisation. Chattopadhyay (2022, p. 300) observes that in Global South contexts the reality of uneven development demands a dual response: on one hand, systemic investments in sustainable growth for marginalised populations, and on the other, a move towards degrowth and slower, more equitable resource use. But this double requirement of growth and restraint is a challenge to Vietnam, a country longing for the former after centuries of colonialisation and wars. As mentioned at the outset, in its effort to lift the nation out of post-war poverty and economic stagnation, the Vietnamese Communist Party has aggressively striven for industrialisation and urbanisation, and this direction reflects both a postcolonial aspiration for development and once again a lingering colonial legacy. Heise and Pham (2024, p. 6) argue that French colonial ideology—framing nonhuman life as property to be controlled and commodified—continues to shape Vietnam's current political economy, now reconfigured through both socialist and capitalist logics. This inherited approach and the dominant narrative of national advancement have made it difficult for ecological issues to gain meaningful traction in public and policy discourse in the country, as they are often considered secondary to economic growth (Ortmann 2017, pp. 99–100). In light of this, Vietnam's developmental strategies mirror the short-term, industrial-era thinking that largely defines the Global North. Its aim to rescue itself from socioeconomic deprivation has paradoxically introduced new risks to already vulnerable human and nonhuman communities (Heise and Pham 2024, p. 6). *Nuoc 2030* quietly underlines the lasting impacts of colonialism and the disproportionate role of the Global North in the climate crisis, while emphatically offering a complex perspective where the Global South is not exempt from scrutiny. The film calls attention to how Vietnam has contributed, though to a lesser degree, to the degradation of the Earth, how it is complicit in systems of extraction and environmental harm.

This is vividly demonstrated in the "Sao & Giang" act set around 2020, where Thanh leads Giang to a location to find a seaweed species that can thrive in both freshwater and saltwater for Giang's research project. On the way, Thanh voices his suspicion about Giang's intentions, pointedly asking if he plans to "bring new technology to this area" as part of the project (Nguyen-Vo, 2024, 1:04:00). When Giang asks him to elaborate on his question, Thanh explains, "After the pollution at Xoai Rap River, people here are very concerned about big companies and scientists" (Nguyen-Vo, 2024, 1:04:15). This brief but loaded exchange encapsulates the distrust amongst local communities towards corporate and scientific

interventions that have historically resulted in environmental degradation. The "big companies and scientists" are portrayed as arriving in vulnerable regions, carrying out experiments in the name of progress and sustainability, and leaving devastation in their wake as they disregard the lives of local people and the integrity of nonhuman ecosystems. Bould (2023, pp. 60–61) identifies this pattern within the discourse of apocalyptic environmentalism, wherein crises are treated not as warnings but as "crisis-deepening opportunities" for capital accumulation, often achieved through "accumulation by dispossession". Although Giang insists that not all corporations or technologies are harmful and claims that he personally seeks to avoid contributing to environmental destruction, his subsequent actions betray his words, rendering his statements both ironic and hollow. Nguyen-Vo uses this irony to powerful effect, exposing the performative nature of corporate environmentalism and the superficiality of so-called green technologies. Far from bringing ethical developments to local areas, Dai Thanh, exemplifying the exploitative logic Bould describes, seizes the problems posed by rising sea levels as a profitable venture. Through this portrayal, the film urges viewers to remain critical of corporate greenwashing and to question the seductive narratives of technological salvation that obscure the deeper systems of exploitation at play.

The actions of multinational corporations—their wilful ignorance of the suffering they inflict on both human and nonhuman lives—are further highlighted when Giang reveals that the genetically engineered crops developed from the seaweed are, in fact, harmful to human health. Nevertheless, we are told that the Dai Thanh corporation actively suppresses this information as they prioritise profit over safety. This moment evokes Patel and Moore's concept of "cheap nature", whereby capitalism includes certain humans and nonhuman entities as devalued resources within its world-ecology system. Moore (2016, p. 79) argues that capitalism has been constructed by systematically "excluding most humans from Humanity", treating them—and the nonhuman—as expendable. Dai Thanh epitomises this logic: both the nonhuman seaweed and the people who consume or cultivate it are reduced to mere instruments of economic gain, valuable only in their capacity to serve capital. Set against the backdrop of climate collapse, where rising sea levels have reclaimed vast portions of land, the film depicts these corporations as clinging desperately to the status quo, seeking only to extract and preserve their own power. Once again, via the temporal layering of flashbacks—particularly the decade-old conversation between Giang and Thanh in 2020 discussed above—and scenes set in the near future (2030), now dominated by floating farms, Nguyen-Vo emphasises how corporate actions in the past continue to shape and damage the future. Crucially, this is not framed as a sudden disaster narrative typical of many North American apocalyptic films; as Heise and Pham (2024, p. 27) assert, individual and social prospects of climate change in *Nuoc 2030* unfold at a "slow, meditative pace". This reverberates Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence", which foregrounds the incremental, often invisible nature of environmental harm that unfolds over extended periods (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). *Nuoc 2030*'s languid pacing and long temporal shifts between different acts—its unusual approach to disaster portrayals in cinema—not only constitute an important contribution to the global canon of climate films; they also reflect the cumulative and compounding consequences of Vietnam's pursuit of industrialisation and modernisation that would eventually seal its own fate.

Conclusion: The Ebb and Flow of Hope and Responsibility

Nuoc 2030 offers a nuanced and multilayered representation of life for the poor in the Global South, capturing in vivid detail not only the many losses they endure but also the ways they continuously adapt to a world half-inundated with water. Through the use of temporal shifts, flashbacks and fast-forwards, as well as sweeping panoramic shots of the stunning yet

treacherous seascape and intimate close-ups of the characters' expressions, Nguyen-Vo renders a powerful visual grammar of survival and grief but not without joy and frivolity, to which water bears witness. The film provides moments of happiness, followed by sorrow, and this rhythm repeats—a cyclical structure that illustrates how, long accustomed to adversity, marginalised people have developed the resilience to endure. Yet, the film does not suggest that because the poor have historically coped with hardship, they should continue to bear the burden of a crisis they did not create. *Nuoc 2030* juxtaposes the daily struggles of characters like Sao and Thi with scenes of institutional corruption and systemic exploitation. Multinational corporations, echoing colonial attitudes, treat both nonhuman entities and local epistemologies as extractive assets to be commodified; their presence exacerbates existing inequalities. Nguyen-Vo lays bare these dynamics—from the dismissive treatment of Sao and Thanh by local authorities and Giang's upward mobility through nepotism, to Dai Thanh's appropriation and monetisation of indigenous knowledge. These depictions reveal how extractive capitalism, state complicity, and postcolonial structures of power collude to further sideline already marginalised communities. Ultimately, the film makes a forceful argument: while French colonialism and the American War have left a devastating legacy, Vietnam cannot absolve itself of responsibility for its ecological degradation or the suffering of its people. It calls for introspection within the Global South—highlighting how internal systems of corruption, unchecked industrialisation, and the prioritisation of economic growth over environmental justice contribute to the very conditions from which developing countries seek to recover.

Portraying the dominance of private interests and their far-reaching influence over Southern Vietnam, *Nuoc 2030* could easily be read as a pessimistic vision of the future—one where socio-environmental hope is scarce. This reading holds weight, particularly in the film's final sequence when Giang and Sao descend in a submersible to view a submerged Ho Chi Minh City through a fish-eye lens, where skyscrapers still flicker with light beneath the water as though they are still in use. This surreal image visualises what Oppermann (2023, p. 3) describes as water's "geopolitical agency" capable of erasing human-made infrastructures and boundaries, as opposed to a passive backdrop for human economic and political pursuits. From a non-anthropocentric perspective, the scene then offers a different layer of interpretation. Dobrin (2021, 66) compellingly argues that "[l]and underwater is no longer human habitable land, yet its value is altered and maintained in ecological systems". In this magical underwater moment, fish glide through a sunken bookshop and at one point swim past a book titled *2022*. These details—the bookshop and the book—actually appear earlier in the film's "Sao & Giang" section, set ten years before *Nuoc 2030* starts. Back then, the bookshop was above water, and Sao worked there as a waitress and showed the book *2022* to Giang. When asked what he would write about the future, Giang replies: "I will write that the sea level will rise and submerge this coffee shop and this bookshelf too", to which Sao adds: "Then the fish will come and read the books too, just like archaeologists trying to study lost civilisations" (Nguyen-Vo, 2014, 55:00). This jarring moment where the future collides with the past reverses the anthropocentric gaze: Sao's recognition of nonhuman agency and her and Giang's imagination of what lies ahead materialise, how it is indeed now the nonhuman that observes the remnants of human civilisation, rather than the human studying it. The scene projects an unnerving vision of near-future Vietnam as it shows submerged human infrastructures, a haunting emblem of human hubris, rendered obsolete by rising seas. In their praise of *Nuoc 2030* as possibly one of the most innovative and original climate narratives to date, Heise and Pham (2024, pp. 27–28) comment that Nguyen-Vo conveys both "Vietnam's ecological specificity and its global significance" as a frontline of climate transformation. In this view, Vietnamese ecologies do

not merely reflect local issues but serve as a portent of global futures—an evocative warning of the time to come as the Anthropocene continues to unfold.

Nuoc 2030 is cautiously optimistic. For the future of the nonhuman, despite the challenges posed by anthropogenic global warming, it may find ways to survive and adapt. For that of humanity, if it is to survive, the current structures and behaviours that define its relationship to the planet must fundamentally change. This message is seemingly reinforced in the ambiguous panoramic final scene, when Giang and Sao lie together on the sand after the water has receded. Considering Giang's alleged involvement in the demise of Sao's husband, it suggests a reconciliation between the two, and more broadly, gestures towards the possibility of hope grounded in the necessity of reckoning, compromise, and a shared commitment to transformation. *Nuoc 2030* subtly critiques the exploitative legacy of the Global North and its share in driving ecological collapse, yet it also turns a critical eye inwards, highlighting the internal issues within the Global South that must be addressed. As the film emphasises, environmental justice cannot be achieved without confronting local corruption, systemic inequality, and the misuse of power within postcolonial states like Vietnam. It is crucial to hold all actors accountable across geopolitical boundaries—acknowledging the historical and structural limitations that shape the Global South's responses to climate change, while simultaneously recognising the urgent need for internal reform. From this perspective, *Nuoc 2030* makes a powerful call for a collective, transnational response to our shared ecological future.

References

Blum, H. (2010). The Prospect of Oceanic Studies. *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, *125*(3), 670–77. https://10.1632/pmla.2010.125.3.670.

Bould, M. (2023). Cli-Fi Cinema. In J. P. Telotte (Ed), *The Oxford Handbook of New Science Fiction Cinemas*. (pp. 52–70). Oxford University Press.

CAAM. (2015, June 1). *Minh Nguyen-Vo Talks "Nuoc 2030" and Futuristic Storytelling*. CAAM. https://caamedia.org/blog/2015/06/01/minh-nguyen-vo-talks-nuoc-2030-and-futuristic-storytelling/.

Chattopadhyay, B. (2022). Speculative Futures of Global South Infrastructures. In D. Iossifova et al. (Eds), *Urban Infrastructuring: Reconfigurations, Transformations and Sustainability in the Global South*. (pp. 297–308). Springer Nature.

Dobrin, S. I. (2021). *Blue Ecocriticism and the Oceanic Imperative*. Routledge.

Duong, Y. (2015). Corruption in Vietnam: causes and culprits. *Cultural Relations Quarterly Review*, *2*(2), 20–29.

Hatfull, J. (2015, March 3). *Nuoc 2030 is "the first Vietnamese sci-fi film"*. SciFiNow. https://www.scifinow.co.uk/interviews/nuoc-2030-is-the-first-vietnamese-sci-fi-film/.

Heise, U. K. (2021). Thinking about Transcultural Ecocriticism: Space, Scale and Translation. In S. Cooke and P. Denney (Eds), *Transcultural Ecocriticism: Global, Romantic and Decolonial Perspectives*. (pp. 1–18). Bloomsbury.

Heise, U. K., & Pham, C. P. (2024). Introduction: Environment and Narrative in Vietnam. In U. K. Heise & C. P. Pham (Eds), *Environment and Narrative in Vietnam* (317–341). Palgrave Macmillan.

Hoang, G. C. (2023). Screening eco-trauma in the context of post-socialism: "The Great Flood" and local identity crisis in Chinese and Vietnamese independent films (the cases of Taking Father Home and 2030). *Journal of Narrative and Language Studies*, *11*(21), 70–84. https://doi.org/10.59045/nalans.2023.16.

Kimmerer, R. W. (2013). *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed Editions.

McElwee, P. D. (2016). *Forests Are Gold: Trees, People, and Environmental Rule in Vietnam*. University of Washington Press.

Mentz, S. (2024). *An Introduction to the Blue Humanities*. Routledge.

Mittman, G. (2019, June 18). Reflections on the Plantionocene: A Conversation with Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing. *Edge Effects*. https://edgeeffects.net/haraway-tsing-plantationocene/.

Moore, J. W. (2016). The Rise of Cheap Nature', in Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism. In J. Moore (Ed), *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*. (pp, 78–115). PM Press.

Nguyen-Vo, N. M. (Director). (2014). *Nuoc 2030* [Film]. Green Snapper Productions.

Nixon, R. (2011). *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press.

Oppermann, S. (2019). Storied Seas and Living Metaphors in the Blue Humanities. *Configurations*, *27*(4), 443–461. https://doi.org/10.1353/con.2019.0030.

Perez, S. C. (2016, March 11). *Chanting the Waters*. Craig Santos Perez. https://craigsantosperez.wordpress.com/2016/11/03/new-poem-water-is-life/.

Oppermann, S. (2023). *Blue Humanities: Storied Waterscapes in the Anthropocene*. Cambridge University Press.

Ortmann, S. (2017). *Environmental Governance in Vietnam: Institutional Reforms and Failures*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Patel, R., & Moore, J. W. (2018). *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things*. Verso.

Pham, C. P. (2024). Political Dimension ins in Vietnamese Ecofiction. In U. K. Heise & C. P. Pham (Eds), *Environment and Narrative in Vietnam* (pp. 1–31). Palgrave Macmillan.

Tran, P. P. (2024, September 12). *Climate Change Impacts on Food Security in Vietnam: A Comprehensive Review*. Asian Impact Management Review. https://www.aimr.asia/environmental-impact/climate-change-impacts-on-food-security-in-vietnam-a-comprehensive-review/.

Telotte, J. P. (2023). Introduction: Slant Screens/Slant Screenings. In J. P. Telotte (Ed), *The Oxford Handbook of New Science Fiction Cinemas*. (pp. 3–20). Oxford University Press.

Todd, Z. (2015). Indigenising the Anthropocene. In H. Davis and E. Turpin (Eds), *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*. (pp. 241–254). Open Humanities Press.