Eco-Trauma and Eco-Recovery in Contemporary Vietnamese Narratives of Extinction and [Post-]Apocalypse

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Abstract

Ecological trauma, although it has always been an underlying and pervasive issue in all environmental creation and criticism, has been an experience that is not easily identified and acknowledged from the very first works of criticism. However, the impacts from the environment, whether direct (such as the effects of natural disasters and climate change) on each individual, or indirect (through news, documentaries, movies) that people receive through the process of participating in communication networks and interacting with mass media, are undeniable. It is also for this reason that the effects of ecological problems on human psychology are increasingly being paid attention to and recognized; among which, eco-anxiety must be mentioned first. In addition, other negative psychological effects can be mentioned such as, eco-melancholia and eco-trauma – a psychological phenomenon will be discussed in more detail here. However, since ecological trauma is a psychological injury, it is necessary to pay adequate attention to how people cope with it and to propose ways to heal such traumas. The article, therefore, analyses these problems in Vietnamese contemporary narratives, especially focuses on extinction and [post-] apocalypse discourses as these are all shocking events that may have happened or are happening, or may not have happened yet, but are associated with our ecological obsession today. The artistic texts examined here are documentaries *The Silence of Summer* (2014) and *On the Body of Four seasons* (2017) by Mai Dinh Khoi, the short film *Who is Alive, Hands Up!* (2015) by Nguyen Hoang Diep, and short story "Post-Apocalyptic Fiction" (2022) by Nguyen Ngoc Tu.

Keywords: Climate change, apocalyptic obsession, ecological grief, species extinction, Vietnamese literature and cinema.

Introduction

Ecological trauma, it can be argued, though an issue that has always been subtly and continuously present in all creative and critical works concerning the environment, remains an experience that was not easily named or acknowledged from the earliest currents of ecocriticism. Nevertheless, the impacts originating from the environment, whether direct (such as the effects of natural disasters, catastrophes, and climate change) on individual human beings, or indirect (via news and media) and received through involvement in communication networks and interaction with mass media, are undeniable. It is for this reason that the influence of ecological issues on human psychology is receiving increasing attention and recognition. Foremost among these psychological effects is eco-anxiety, which is acknowledged as a phenomenon growing significantly, particularly among the youth. A major cause stems from the daily consumption and exposure to news, newspapers, books, and various media outlets. Simply turning on the television or reading an article can expose people to a barrage of "bad news" about the environment. As this source put it, "climate change is damaging more than just the planet's health, it is affecting human health, too" (BBC, 2023). More specifically, eco-anxiety encompasses feelings of "grief, guilt, fear, or hopelessness about the future of the planet due to climate change." According to psychological experts, the direct victims of climate change will naturally be those who "suffer most." For instance, "flood survivors experience depression and anxiety, and people breathing polluted air are at a higher risk of dementia" (BBC, 2023). However, according to psychologists, the psychological impacts on individuals who indirectly receive information about disasters and climate change news should not be understated: "just reading about the state of the planet in the news is causing stress and anxiety," simply because "with so much bad news, it sometimes hard to feel optimistic about the future" (BBC, 2023). Furthermore, other negative psychological effects can be cited, which may be said to be driven or pushed to a more severe extreme, such as eco-melancholia and its accompanying eco-trauma—psychological phenomena that will be discussed in more detail here.

In the introduction to the subgenre of eco-trauma cinema, Anil Narine immediately draws attention to the two aforementioned types of trauma experience (direct and indirect). This is because while the psychological burdens on those who directly suffer a catastrophe are readily apparent, indirect traumas seem to take significantly longer for psychology itself to acknowledge. According to Narine, whether we confront ecological disasters directly as our own personal experiences, or indirectly, such as through images circulating in the media, these horrific events tend to "confound us, stifle us and even paralyze us politically and psychologically" (Narine, 2015, p. 1). Narine further contends that the sheer grandeur of nature, coupled with the nearly overwhelming sublimity of natural degradation events, is the core reason leading to a sense of both awe and a paralysis of human will and action in the face of the ecological crisis. In other words, nature—whether it threatens us, we become a threat to it, or we view ourselves as a part of it—remains "sublime in this way: something too vast in its beauty and power to comprehend" (Narine, 2015, p. 1). This incomprehensibility, as Narine (2015) notes, can evoke a sense of awe, but it can also hinder practical human responses to ecological crises. Specifically, contemporary media is saturated with news reports and

documentaries on glacial decline, oil spills, and the severe impacts of deforestation. Paradoxically, however, these very accounts often "elicit tentative responses from the viewer" (Narine, 2015, p. 1), resulting in a backlash effect that prevents people from making necessary adjustments or taking required action. In ọther words, now more than ever, with the global popularization of mass media in the age of communication, we are living moment by moment amidst news and narratives concerning the environment. Furthermore, as Narine (2015) suggests, all these channels and media company series are fiercely competing for viewers and revenue by generating the most sensational and even shocking footage of human-induced ecological crises and of people facing precarious survival situations that filmmakers can find. The hypertrophy of all these stories and realities has, inadvertently, stimulated reactions that are both fiercely activist and, paradoxically, can lead to response paralysis. While they may propel our attention toward change, their sheer intensity can also blind, overwhelm, and inhibit us from undertaking any concrete action. This very experience, according to Anil Narine (2015), constitutes an aspect of eco-trauma.

Eco-trauma, as Narine argues, emerges from the “a paradox that characterizes our age of anxiety”: “We know our ecosystem is imperilled, but we respond in contradictory ways. On the one hand, we want to take action to protect the natural world”; but on the other, it cannot be denied that we simultaneously “disavow our knowledge of climate change and dwindling natural resources in order to function more happily in a global economic context replete with unsustainable practices” (Narine, 2015, p. 2). This paradox of ecological trauma (or the refusal to accept ecological knowledge and act to change), according to Narine, can be summarized under the dilemma posed by Jacques Lacan (Lacan, cited in Narine, 2015, p. 2): “Je sais bien mais quand même”. Furthermore, sensory overload is both a manifestation and a cause of trauma. In his essay, Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Freud (1920, cited in Narine, 2015, p. 2) defined trauma as a consequence of “any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield of the ego”. Starting with his studies on melancholy, Freud essentially proposed a foundational definition of trauma: it occurs when the psychological shields or coping strategies that individuals (or even communities/collectives) erect to protect themselves collapse, forcing them to confront their pain directly. Ecological narratives, therefore, often expose these traumas by presenting undeniable realities through a mode of expression that compels witness, acknowledgment, and consequently, makes the resolution of the trauma possible.

In the work Trauma and Recovery, Judith Herman (1992, cited in Narine, 2015, p. 3) also provides another pertinent definition of trauma, viewing it as “threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death.” These events are “beyond the realm of everyday experience” because “they overwhelm our faculties”; and it is for this reason that they are capable of calling “into question basic human relationships” while simultaneously shattering “the construction of self that is formed and sustained in relation to others” (Narine, 2015, p. 3). More specifically, in the case of ecological trauma, these are events the experience of which compels us to rethink our

very existence, to question the illusory power of the human subject as well as the inherent incompleteness of humanity, and furthermore, to re-examine not only social relationships but also our own relationship with the natural world.

Regardless, the pivotal question posed by psychologists is whether trauma (including ecological trauma) can be viewed as a psychological impact at the communal level. Stated differently, "whether trauma as a primarily individual experience can describe a society-wide experience" (Narine, 2015, p. 2). This has been a long-standing controversial issue within the field of psychology, and it must be reiterated that, from the outset, experiences of collective trauma have not been adequately recognized, if not outright minimized. Judith Herman (1992, as cited in Narine, 2015, p.3) once asserted that "only a victim who directly experienced the original event would qualify as traumatized". Furthermore, the fourth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV), published by the American Psychiatric Association (2014, as cited in Narine, 2015, p.3), clearly specified that "natural disasters are a common cause of psychological trauma, but only for those victimized first hand." Evidently, these definitions themselves have excluded onlookers, viewers, and other witnesses from the psychological impact of traumatic events, as if they do not undergo distressing effects from these occurrences. However, as Narine (2015) points out, many scholars challenge the aforementioned definitions by arguing that various types of trauma exist, and we are not allowed to turn a blind eye as if they did not exist. One of the clearest pieces of evidence presented is: "Witnesses and even media viewers report feeling traumatized after seeing catastrophes unfold in their midst or on screen" (Narine, 2015, p.3). Building upon this line of reasoning, E. Ann Kaplan (2008, as cited in Narine, 2015, p.4) proposes five distinct types of trauma: 1. Directly experienced trauma (the trauma victim); 2. A close relative or friend of the trauma victim or a medical professional brought in to assist the victim (closest to the subject's trauma, but one step removed from direct experience); 3. A bystander who directly witnesses and observes the trauma of another person (also one step removed from direct experience); 4. The clinician who hears the patient's trauma story—this is a complex position involving both visual and semantic channels, associated with a face-to-face meeting with the survivor or witness in, for instance, the intimate space of a consultation session (also one step removed from direct experience); and finally 5. Trauma mediated through images and words, which means viewing/seeing trauma in film, print media, or other forms of communication, or reading a trauma narrative and visualizing/imagining the images through that linguistic data (two steps removed from direct experience). This article will focus on the intermediate trauma phenotype described above, a form of trauma conveyed to the reader/viewer through verbal and visual narratives. The collective nature (the recipient community, a community that is constantly expanding) of this trauma phenotype is also particularly pronounced. And this, of course, as Narine (2015) asserts, must be a distinctly different form of trauma that also has its own specific psychological effects:

"When we see traumatic events represented in the mass media, including

> fictionalized accounts or re-creations, we are not true "witnesses" but rather viewers of visually mediated trauma. We are two or more steps removed from the "event" and thus cannot claim to be traumatized in the same way a victim or physically present witness may be. Still, as anyone who has wanted to "unsee" a photograph from the Holocaust or a news report of the recent genocide in Sudan can attest, viewing images of "distant suffering" can be traumatic" (p. 4).

Last but not least, the final typical reactions to trauma (including eco-trauma), as summarized by Narine, are: "First, we want to combat the trauma but relent because we feel overwhelmed by its magnitude; second, we want to disavow the trauma; and third, we want to make meaning from traumatic events, primarily as a coping strategy" (Narine, 2015, p. 5). Beyond the first two reactions, Žižek (2009, as cited in Narine, 2015, p. 5) terms this third reaction the "temptation of meaning" - a psychological response to the cosmic chaos unveiled by ecological catastrophe: "As a way of coping, we impose meaning and even narrative formations onto chaotic events". For instance, persistent phenomena like storms and droughts are continuously interpreted as punishments for certain sins that humans have committed (though occasionally, they are not particularly interpreted as the ecological sins they ought to be understood as). Although the temptation of meaning is nowhere more evident than in contemporary mass media products, or specifically, in Narine's (2015) words, in attributing ecological events and trauma to narrative motifs and interpretations such as cause-and-effect relationships, "God's law", or the stark opposition between greedy corporations and communal well-being, along with familiar story endings (immoral villains are punished, polluters are brought to justice, the collective recovery of ecological trauma victims, the world regaining equilibrium, etc.); the shortcoming is that this complete narrative model causes the violations to appear merely as isolated incidents or as something already resolved by environmental activists. Consequently, many different nuances of ecological trauma are too frequently lost in the age of news media (Narine, 2015, p. 5).

The challenge for creative narratives lies precisely there. Though they are contemporary narratives, works of art must reach deeper levels to "engage us seriously, and unnervingly, in the work of mapping real ecological crises and their unpredictable effects on us as social and ethical beings" (Narine, 2015, p.9). In other words, a successful narrative is one that transcends hackneyed story frameworks to "prompt us to consider our quickly evolving subject positions, characterized by oscillating feelings of agency and helplessness in the face of contemporary ecological traumas" (Narine, 2015, p.9). Consequently, the examination and analysis of contemporary Vietnamese narratives in this article (creative genres spanning literature, cinema, and documentaries) will focus on exploring both the damage that we, as a species, inflict upon the non-human natural world, and conversely, the injuries that we are compelled to endure from nature in its endless and unforgiving reciprocation. This trauma, as can be seen, is always two-sided because, as Narine (2015) states, our relationship with ecology is perpetually a "symbiotic" one. The narratives we have chosen to survey, therefore, revolve around: (1) narratives concerning individuals harmed by the natural

world, (2) narratives recounting people or social processes that inflict damage upon the environment and/or other species, and (3) narratives describing the aftermath of ecological disaster, often focusing on human trauma and survival efforts. Literary and cinematic works that address extinction and envision (post-)apocalyptic scenarios will consequently be prioritized for analysis as narratives that profoundly express the trauma of non-human species in particular and the natural environment in general, human reflection and anguish over their own culpability, and finally, the efforts to survive and the ecological wounds that persist even in post-apocalyptic imaginings. The works to be analyzed in depth include Mai Dinh Khoi's documentaries *(The Silence of Summer, On the Body of Four Seasons)*, Nguyen Hoang Diep's short film *Who is Alive, Hands Up!*, and Nguyen Ngoc Tu's prose work "Post-Apocalyptic Fiction".

Results and Discussion

1. Documentary Film and the Narrative of Nature's Disappearance: An Approach from the Perspective of Eco-trauma

One of the typical narrative patterns associated with ecological loss and trauma is the narrative concerning the fragile survival of planet Earth and the disappearance (extinction) of natural species. In the final chapter on the future of the Earth, Greg Garrard cites Wallace Stevens' poem "The Planet on the Table" (2000, as cited in Garrard, 2004, p.160) as a means of reminding the reader of a familiar, lyrical vision of the Earth. This poem is conveyed by Wallace Stevens (2000, as cited in Garrard, 2004) alongside an earnest plea to the readership:

> "As you read the poem, hold in your mind's eye a photograph of the Earth taken from space: green and blue, smudged with the motion of clouds… so small in the surrounding darkness that you could imagine cupping it with your hands. A planet that is fragile, a planet of which we are a part but which we do not possess" (p.160)

This image of Earth taken from a spacecraft has become so ubiquitous that it is reproduced across nearly every medium, simultaneously evoking a sense of mysterious beauty and the finite solitude of our living planet. As John Hannigan (1995, as cited in Garrard, 2004, p.160) observes, this photograph, while undeniable, implicitly suggests a "God's-eye view" looking down on Earth as a transcendental power uniquely held by humanity. In a completely contingent manner, it has consequently become the most effective environmental message of the twentieth century. A different, more haunting conceptualization of Earth, as summarized by Andrew Ross (1994, as cited in Garrard,

2004, p.161), is increasingly cited by ecologists to remind us of a "dying planet" marked by "belching smokestacks, seabirds mire in petrochemical sludge, fish floating belly-up, traffic jam (...) and clear-cut forest…" These 'wounds' or 'scars', in Narine's terminology, on the Earth's surface and in the survival of the planet's organisms become a central theme in ecological narratives, imbuing these narratives with a profound sense of elegy, loss, and lamentation.

That is why narratives of ecological trauma are perhaps most closely associated with what Ursula Heise (2017) terms the tragic sensibility or elegy. However, Heise (2017) emphasizes that mourning must first be viewed as a political act. As she points out, over the past half-century, the heightened awareness of species loss has been transformed into countless popular science books, travel writing, novels, poetry, films, documentaries, photography, paintings, murals, musical compositions, and websites. These are narratives of the trauma/injury the environment is enduring, and simultaneously, the trauma experienced by humans who are at once witnesses to these traumas and the perpetrators inflicting these injuries upon nature, yet who are also victims—victims of themselves—in their capacity as a living part of nature. Moreover, the lamentation within these narratives is also a mourning for relational ruptures, for permanent losses that can never be recovered. This is perhaps why Heise (2017) observes that stories of decline commonly seek to affect readers' emotions through mournful and somber laments—a characteristic of the elegy (traditionally a type of poem commemorating a deceased lover) and, in a different way, of tragedy. While Freud (cited in Heise, 2017, p. 34) considered melancholy a pathological state to be overcome, contemporary thinkers seek to rehabilitate it. Mourning for people or things often deemed unworthy of such suffering and publicly expressing sorrow can serve as a form of political response.

In this section, the article selects Mai Dinh Khoi's documentary film as a prime example illustrating how the tragic paradigm governs Vietnamese cultural narratives concerning nature's continuous confrontation with the threat of disappearance. In *The Silence of Summer* (2012), Mai Dinh Khoi begins with footage capturing the suffocating confinement of contemporary Hanoi's summer: images of hustling, traffic-laden roads, overcrowded public buses with people pressed together, unfinished construction sites, and the exhaust pipes of vehicles relentlessly spewing thick plumes of black smoke. This fast-paced cinematography both recreates the hectic rhythm of modern urban life and serves as a metaphor for the dizzying transformation of the living space to which these organisms are compelled to adapt. The pervasive presence of humanity is overwhelming, virtually strangling any other form of natural life. In this environment, the very first shot is dominated by the overpowering sound of running engines, car horns, and operating traffic. Subsequent shots are slower-paced, focusing on individual entities seemingly attempting to isolate themselves from the noise and heat, seeking a private, verdant space beneath the city's sparse tree canopies. The image of a bird standing bewildered on a power line, a tiny insect slowly traversing a tree trunk, a snail lying motionless on a branch, a black butterfly perched on a rough, patchy wall—these

are all images that convey solitude and alienation, suggesting they do not belong to this city at all. Natural life gradually comes into view, but if not isolated and alienated, it is cramped and confined: birds in cages, fish swimming aimlessly within plastic bags containing water.

Although other species are visibly present in the frame (birds, a beetle climbing up a trunk, a few ants circling a cicada shell left on a tree), the authentic sound of nature is almost entirely absent. Dominating the soundscape are anthropogenic noises, such as the whirring of a lawnmower and the clamor of traffic. Even the single instance of birdsong that emerges is produced by birds confined to large cages at a streetside shop. The individuals choosing a 'slow life' in this setting are those who, in one way or another, are attempting to reconnect with nature. These include a motorcycle-taxi driver taking a midday rest under the cool canopy of an old tree, an elderly person seated at a sidewalk barbershop (also catering to the elderly), and a young boy wandering beneath the trees and collecting a discarded cicada shell. The film segment depicting the boy collecting the shed cicada exoskeleton and presenting it to his grandfather seems to subtly imply a rupture in the perception and experience of nature for subsequent generations, as elements of the natural world progressively vanish. In Mai Dinh Khoi's film (2012), the young male character can visualize the form of the insect whose discarded outer shell he holds, but he is completely unable to experience its sound—the cry that was once a characteristic herald of summer. This is because, as the narrator of this documentary says, "the cicada larvae have emerged from the earth, but then quickly vanished into the tree canopy. The cicada's cry—the first and most familiar sign of summer—seems to have disappeared into a chaotic jumble of street noise." The person who possesses these complete experiences is the grandfather, but it is precisely for this reason that he is now undergoing a different, less pleasant emotion: a feeling of nostalgia and regret, which is quite successfully conveyed by the close-up shot of his anxious gaze directed towards the canopy.

The camera angles in Mai (2012) increasingly elevate, yet they persistently depict a landscape belonging exclusively to humanity—a space fully occupied by people with no intention of sharing it with other creatures. This is represented by densely packed rooftops and the adjacent security bars of old collective housing units, where the lives of urban dwellers seem little different from that of birds confined to cages, utterly ignorant of the taste of freedom. The panorama also includes ongoing large-scale urban development projects and unfinished towering high-rise apartment complexes. Viewed from above, the city conveys no sense other than the "disorder of perpetual construction sites". This condition is, indisputably, the consequence of a gradual process of suffocating the city's green spaces. Consequently, nostalgia, as specifically characterized by Mai (2012), becomes a defining feature of the urban residents' narrative:

> "The apartment complex where I live had many trees around it ten years ago. I could easily hear the birds singing in the morning and every afternoon when I returned from school. However, in the last five years, I no longer hear those

seemingly simple things. Now, every time I open the window, all I see are walls."

For immigrants arriving from other areas, this sentiment is echoed: "The countryside is still much cooler than it is here. It's hot here, often steaming; the gust of wind that hits your face is both stinging and hot". For the immigrant population, a marginalized group within the city, the urban space is often viewed as the antithesis of the fresh, cool air of the countryside. Hanoi, in this sense, constantly becomes a point of reference for people to dream of a contrasting space—whether it is the city's own past or a distant rural area. Mai Dinh Khoi's film functions similarly to a sound project, recording the city's various sonic environments at different times of the day, across different areas, and under varying weather conditions. Yet, a monotonous, disheartening uniformity pervades: almost the entire initial segment of the film bombards the listener with the clamor of motor engines, car horns, and the drilling and cutting sounds from aluminum and glass shops. In Mai's film, a close-up shot of a misting system pointed directly into the air portrays a desperate attempt to salvage a city's stifling heat, a city that has lost an excessive amount of its greenery. However, all this imagery evokes a sense of futility and temporariness. Despite the mist being sprayed at full capacity into the atmosphere, it seems incapable of counterbalancing the fiery hot exhaust pipes under the intense summer sun. The seasonal auditory experience is almost completely eradicated: "now, in this city, the sign of summer is recognized first by the heat, by the crowds at sidewalk iced-tea stalls, rather than by the sounds of crickets, cicadas, or the calls of birds in the cool, green canopy". Elderly figures repeatedly appear in Mai''s film as the custodians of memory for a bygone Hanoi, when the urban area was still a space of co-existence where people shared their habitat with numerous other species. The clearest sound of flapping wings throughout the entire film is that of a plastic bird. The scarce green spaces remaining in the heart of the city are now parks. However, "even in the city's most expansive parks now, only a few sparrows remain, flitting among the branches or on stone edges, seeking insects, grasshoppers, and locusts within the neatly manicured lawns, their calls ultimately lost in the city's din". The original text discusses how urban parks, despite being green spaces, often fail to provide a true respite from the city's noise, and how human activities within them make them unsuitable for wildlife. Although parks stand out as prominent green spaces within the city, they are nevertheless sites where the sounds of nature are suppressed and obscured. Rejecting the very space they inhabit, people seek out these parks to spend their rare moments of daily rest. Furthermore, as depicted in Mai's 2012 film, this artificial "green space", filled with the clamor of human conversation and loudspeakers, is not a viable habitat for other natural organisms: "The city's parks are crowded with people, preventing birds from congregating. Even sparrows are absent, and birds like the red-whiskered bulbul or others do not dare to fly there, because the people are so numerous."

The gradual disappearance of insects from urban centers renders the insects of the Tam Dao region seemingly exotic and unique in the eyes of city-dwelling tourists. Paradoxically, this very perception is the root cause of the loss of these species within

their native habitat, as locals engage in mass-scale hunting of the insects, often using neon lights as a method of capture. This resulting scarcity elevates the search for the familiar, natural sounds of summer into a poetic endeavor: "What remains for the sound of summer, where do we find a moment of tranquility amidst the summer city?" The imagery of a bustling, noisy Hanoi, day and night, recurs throughout the film like a refrain, sometimes juxtaposed with the serene, lush landscapes of rural villages—places featuring beggar-ticks (hoa cỏ may), leisurely grazing cows, pristine lotus ponds, and children flying kites or catching crickets in vast rice fields. Mai Dinh Khoi's 2012 film appears to re-enact the familiar narrative pattern of the pastoral genre by invoking a picturesque countryside of "spacious fields, barefoot children running on the grass mixed with the staccato sounds of crickets and grasshoppers". However, his film quickly transcends these romantic "traps" to confront a much harsher reality of the countryside: the present sound over those fields is the creaking of a manual pesticide pump, ushering in another kind of deadly silence. These details make it difficult for viewers not to recall Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962). Carson's work also begins with a pastoral fable about a land where seemingly all forms of life coexist harmoniously with everything around it—a rural scene featuring fertile farms, green fields, foxes calling on the hills, silent deer, ferns and wild flowers, and schools of fish quietly swimming beneath cool, clear streams. However, a deadly silence then descends upon the entire region. The cause of this terrifying quiet is not a supernatural force but the hand of man—specifically, the widespread and long-term use of pesticides. This, too, is a key message that *The Silence of Summer* aims to convey to its audience. While Carson (1962) was most concerned with the sound of birds greeting spring, Mai (2012) reminds people of the absence of the sounds of the small insects that once bustled across the fields in summer.

The Body of the Four Seasons (2016) is another documentary by Mai Dinh Khoi. Ursula often highlights a characteristic feature of this century's environmental activists' approach: the public expression of grief for non-human existences—species, places, and even operational processes (certain weather patterns, the changing of the seasons, animal migration)—that are typically considered inappropriate subjects for mourning. Mai Dinh Khoi's film, although largely resembling a poem about the beauty and wonder of the annual seasonal transitions across the land, harbors a vague anxiety regarding the potential disappearance and disruption of this perennial law. The body of the four seasons bears within it this lamentation against the foreseen dangers, suggesting that the beautiful, poetic, and vibrant cinematic depictions, following the seasonal rhythm, may very well become merely an attempt to record the memory of a past that has been, and is currently, vanishing. And the pervasive obsession throughout Mai Dinh Khoi's (2016) film is also the trauma and haunting of wounds and injuries:

> "But I want to tell you about another season: About how the birds that herald the season are trapped in the fields, about the rivers whose waters rise and fall to a different rhythm, about the lands where the four seasons no longer appear, where the scenery has nothing left to change. And spring, summer, autumn, winter—all are

exposed like a wound".

The work, to use Narine's (2015) formulation, serves as a testimony to the scars, and also to the gaping wounds that have yet to heal and still ache on the "body" of nature, on the body of the homeland, of the very cherished land to which we are connected; in it, we witness the pain of the traumatized subject, of the witness—who is simultaneously a sharer of the enduring trauma. Coupled with the desire to expose the 'truths' of pain, documentaries such as those by Mai Dinh Khoi compel people to reflect upon their own ways of thinking, their acceptance, and their everyday life practices.

2. Eco-Trauma and Eco-Recovery in Vietnamese Contemporary Fictional and Cinematic Narratives

In this section, the article proceeds to analyze the more fictional narratives that touch upon ecotrauma, specifically selecting narratives that present visions of the apocalypse (or post-apocalypse). This choice is based on the argument by Barbara Creed (2015) that such visions represent one of the main concerns in cinema and art regarding ecotrauma. These anti-utopian conceptions of the apocalypse and post-apocalyptic life do not stem from a root of nihilism or pure mythical fantasy. On the contrary, they are intimately tied to an awareness of contemporary destruction and the bleak premonitions for the future, not only of humanity but of the entire Earth.

One particularly striking contemporary narrative on this theme is the prose work "Post-Apocalyptic Fiction", published in the collection *Hong tay khói lạnh (Warming hands on cold smoke)* by writer Nguyen Ngoc Tu. Right from the opening lines, Nguyen Ngoc Tu (2021, p.7) paints a scene of a future Earth surface that is utterly damaged and exhausted, to the point that it has become a dead organism itself. It can no longer sustain life for any living creature, including humans: "the earth's surface had no life, no green, only leaden grey dust coating the soil, pale as baked salt. And the sun, a fiery sun that annihilated any creature directly confronting it, with its destructive heat." It can be argued that this vision of Earth's future does not merely arise from daily news reports concerning climate change and global warming, the ever-enlarging ozone hole, and the ongoing, seemingly irreversible process of glacial melt. Instead, it also serves as the fundamental source of our increasingly pronounced anxiety and psychological trauma when confronting the question of the future of the Earth, our own future, and the future of succeeding generations. Consequently, post-apocalyptic visions and projections are not distant concepts; rather, they exist perpetually in our minds, lying at the heart of our anxiety and psychological trauma when contemplating the environment and life.

In this post-apocalyptic world, the shared experience of trauma between humanity and the Earth and all life/organisms on the planet is vividly depicted. In the imagery presented by Nguyen Ngoc Tu (2021, p. 9), both humans and other organisms, under the scorching heat of the sun and the planet's surface, must confront extinction and the most visceral physical suffering and destruction: "Your hair will burst into flames first,

smelling exactly like burning plastic." This is the father's warning to his son, who is over forty years old, as they evacuate the Earth's surface to escape the incinerating sun and winds in an extreme state of climate change. This is because the father himself had once undergone that very trauma, that pain and destruction of the body, when he was unfortunately exposed to that fierce sunlight; his own hair and skin had been incinerated by the sun, scorching patches of his scalp. "Two long scars draped across his shoulders: Back then, they opened the door at the Sublevel 27 to reinforce the dome, and the old man, completely drunk, wandered outside. The moment lasted only a few minutes but was enough to create those deep, cooked burns on his skin and flesh" (Nguyen, 2021, p. 10). Humanity, at this juncture, is arguably no longer just the witness who self-reflects on its own ecological culpability, but one that shares a common fate and a collective trauma with all living species, even the smallest.

Nguyen Ngoc Tu's work presents a speculative world (one entirely plausible to become reality) where human actions have resulted in catastrophic climate change, leading to the destruction of all life on the planet. Yet, humanity is simultaneously desperate in its failed quest to find a destination for inter-planetary migration (directly paralleling the current, unsuccessful efforts of present-day humanity, which is already exploring every possibility for a new extra-terrestrial habitat). Ultimately, Earth remains humanity's refuge, though no longer on the surface, but underground. The Great Migration that all characters in the narrative undergo is a descent into this subterranean realm, a world named "The Underworld" (Ngầm). This world is designed and constructed with every convenience and is sustained by virtual reality technology, which replicates and reconstructs every image that once existed on the surface of the Earth (with oceans, green trees, and even sophisticated sunlight and artificial "'sun-lamps" that are raised and lowered daily). All individuals within this Underworld are, in effect, in a state of post-traumatic stress. This trauma is not merely the aftermath of a catastrophic event where survival hung in a delicate balance; it is a protracted trauma resulting from the permanent severance from their homeland and the eternal separation from everything they were once connected to. And if, as Amorok (2007) posits, trauma originates from the rupture of relationships, then in the work of Nguyễn Ngọc Tư (2021, p. 11), this rupture manifests as a break with the native land's surface and the loss of a harmonious relationship with nature. This relationship is exemplified by sunlight, which remains the fundamental source that nurtures life, offering warmth, beauty, and splendor, thereby granting people scenes of peaceful and concordant life: "The old man knew it was difficult to prevent the nostalgic memories of someone who had once bathed in the September sun, a sun that, once encountered, would never be forgotten until death." Furthermore, if the term "nostalgia" originated as a designation for a psycho-physiological illness affecting Swiss mercenary soldiers fighting far from home—an illness complete with distressing symptoms (fatigue, insomnia, abnormal heart rate, high fever) arising from their intense longing to return to their homeland; then the people in the Underground (Ngầm) settlement described by Nguyễn Ngọc Tư (2021, pp. 12-13) are undergoing precisely this ailment, in a powerful yearning for their original home on the Surface: "every September, a group of people in the Underground would

become so intensely nostalgic for the old sun that they would feel faint, losing all desire to work, climbing onto the dome to look back at the former sky." Amidst a harsh world with dwindling oxygen, where humans must continue to employ the most pragmatic thinking to sustain and prolong life, and where all existing inter-strata social injustices are meticulously replicated; each small human life embraces its own trauma of nostalgia. For instance, this is the sorrowful longing for the Surface experienced by a housewife whose time and energy are utterly depleted by domestic care work:

> "I recall the markets on "the Surface" were characterized by an absolute lack of structure. One could observe microbial life proliferating between bowls of crab vermicelli, sugar, eggs, and sweet red bean dessert. A single stop afforded the procurement of all necessities, for instance, one might acquire sausages, yogurt, flashlight batteries, and an ancestral herbal cure for rhinitis from a vendor specializing in pianos". (Nguyen, 2021, pp. 21-22).

The overly perfect and highly structured and organized reconstruction in the new place, therefore, only served to further highlight the discrepancies with the old homeland to which return is impossible. Yet, this nostalgia does not merely dwell on a yearning for an old order; rather, it is a longing for a former symbiosis, not only in human relationships but also with other life forms (like bacteria crackling in the air). Nguyễn Ngọc Tư, arguably, has written brilliantly about how such mundane things become invaluable when they are forever lost and irrecoverable. It is not just that woman; many individuals in the Underworld have been and continue to attend psychological therapy sessions. Nguyễn (2021, pp. 40-41) directly names them as "sullen invalids" or "melancholy sufferers". And this sorrow, as described, haunted them even before the Great Exodus, as they faced, day by day, hour by hour, a dying world, and simultaneously, the physical and psychological distress caused by the throes of climate change:

> "Then the symptoms re-occupied the sullen invalid, fueled by the scorching sun, by a planetary surface in its death throes [...] Xuyến Chi sobbed incessantly, her sparse hair matted to her neck, dripping wet; the towel she carried under her arm to wipe herself was now running with water. Cumbersome in her build, the old woman had but one sole desire: to be dry for just a moment. Believing that only in death would her sweat glands stop over-functioning, she had, on multiple occasions, wanted to throw herself from a height to end it all" (Nguyễn, 2021, p. 40).

Despair and a tragic sensibility concerning the Earth's future and one's continued survival are vividly depicted. Yet, the most representative manifestation of the post-traumatic state following the Great Evacuation is the "paralysis" of emotion and response, an outcome of a massive, overwhelming event (Narine (2015) and Amorok (2017) both consider this a defensive reaction, a coping strategy for continued survival): "The entire group sat inert, silent like dark pieces of furniture. Their faces were clearly darkened by depression, yet no one complained even a single word. It seemed they

were too exhausted to speak, or they were adrift in the thought that there was nothing left worth complaining about after this apocalypse. There is a certain threshold, and once crossed, people suddenly become numb…" (Nguyen, 2021, p. 44). Nguyen Ngoc Tu, though writing about post-apocalyptic fantasy, appears to touch upon the very psychological reaction/strategy that contemporary humanity is undergoing in the face of ecological trauma, as eco-anxieties have profoundly permeated our very cells, and as overwhelming crisis news about catastrophes, disseminated through mass media, leaves us psychologically paralyzed and stripped of the motivation to act.

However, in the final analysis, the ultimate direction of Nguyen Ngoc Tu's work remains the possibility of healing. Fleeing the surface world for the "Ngầm" (The Underworld/ Underground) world to preserve survival, accepting a separation that may never afford a return to the homeland of 'the Surface', Nguyen Ngoc Tu's anti-utopian work seems to echo 1984 (George Orwell, 1949). It depicts an Underground world structured not only upon pre-existing social injustice but one where, despite being profoundly intervened by technological advancements, human life becomes increasingly constrained and suffocating—due to the depletion of oxygen and the tyranny of those in power. The Ngầm (Underworld) is a world that prohibits the existence of multilingualism; everyone is only permitted to speak a single language, the Common Tongue (tiếng-Chung). By rejecting all native languages, the Common Tongue serves as a powerful instrument of control. Such a replacement language is also the quickest way to erase all attachments or links to former relationships. Nevertheless, the young mother in the work's final chapter makes the decision to escape, carrying her unborn child to a secluded corner of the Underground. This is an act of resistance against the community's scorn and the state's punishment. It is a way for her to speak the ancient language, to sing lullabies to her child with fervent words, and to transmit to her little one an image of the Surface of the past. This act reconnects the succeeding generation with relationships that seemed destined to be lost forever, offering the child a dream and a love for the Surface—a promise of potential return and healing in the future.

Ultimately, this essay seeks to explore one further work of art that also addresses the dystopian counter-futures of Earth—a world where humanity is driven to despair by the scarcity of food, water, and clean air, pushing the brutal relationship between people, and between humanity and nature, to its absolute extreme: the short film Ai còn sống, Giơ tay lên! (Who is Alive, Hands Up!) by director Nguyễn Hoàng Điệp (2015). The undeniable, disheartening information concerning current environmental crises and climate change has provided the fertile ground for these somber imaginings and the pervasive anxiety about apocalyptic threats, about the seemingly inevitable confrontation of Earth and humankind with the precipice of annihilation. The work opens with a scene of a hunt on arid, barren land, where the hunter must accept even the smallest, toughest insects as sustenance within a strictly limited timeframe. All relationships surrounding humanity in this epoch are steeped in violence: the relentless pursuit of any trace of life in nature, the desperate search for anything edible to sustain existence. They are perpetually besieged by the "Vultures"—cannibalistic predators who

hunt down the frail and sick within families, forcing them to surrender the weak to alleviate the "burden on society." (Once taken, this sick person ceases to be a useless consumer of food, drink, and clean air; instead, they 'contribute' to society by becoming food for the famished, dehumanized masses.) As one of the film's female protagonists states, in this savage, inhumane society, people are left with only three choices: to become the hunter, to become the hunted but possess the strength to flee, or to become the food. And in the context of the slaughterous pursuit of supreme power and dominion over all species, a bleak prospect unfolds before humanity itself: humankind becomes the solitary species, and thus, the absolutely isolated one. The darker side of human nature and the anxiety surrounding the dormant seeds of violence inherent in individuals and their relationships become a profound obsession for the film. For Amorok, violence (directed at the self, the other, and nature) is also presented as a reaction to debilitation and trauma, propelling humanity from one injury to the next, into a perpetual extension of breakdowns and ruptures in all connective relationships. Amidst this backdrop where violence reigns, the two sisters in the film resolutely cling to their mother, who has been bedridden for two years, refusing to surrender her to the vultures. In the eyes of a savage and tyrannical society, this is an unacceptable act. Yet, keeping her alive (a mother in a two-year coma, unable to move or communicate) is perhaps precisely the way the two daughters soothe their own traumas, following the violent interactions with nature and society they face daily. In Nguyễn Hoàng Điệp's 2016 short film, the encounter with the girl from the future's future—a "witness" to utter decline and exhaustion, yet also a bearer of hope for continued survival and ecological restoration of humanity itself (through re-establishing connection with natural organisms, beginning with the grafting of human tissue cells onto plant cells, creating human-plant organisms):

> "Having consumed every species, Earth became uninhabitable. Prolonged saline rains forced us to attempt an alteration of our destiny by grafting plant spores onto our bodies. We named this the seed of life, for without it, we could not draw breath in the wild."

The girl from "the future of future" in this film, therefore, offers not just a narrative of dark and fraught survival but also a promising possibility. When broken relationships are sought to be reconnected, when symbiosis returns, and when humanity is composed enough to confront its own ecological guilt, the promise of life, though still exceedingly fragile, is not impossible. This, in essence, is the open potentiality of recovery from ecological trauma that Vietnamese fictional narratives seem to be embracing and in which they are sowing hope.

Conclusion

In essence, the article analyzes the conception of ecological trauma and recovery as expressed through contemporary Vietnamese fictional and non-fictional narratives. Beginning with documentary films and then expanding to more imaginative, artistic

narratives, the paper aims to demonstrate an increasingly pronounced ecological sensibility in contemporary cultural life. Operating in parallel with daily environmental news updates, these narratives offer a more profound, ecological depth perspective, simultaneously introducing possibilities intimately tied to the psychological anxieties of contemporary individuals. The political dimension and the impetus for action are, therefore, particularly evident in these narratives (especially within the documentary genre), yet they also open up deep-seated hopes concerning alternative possibilities of healing, reconnection, restoration, and repair.

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