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Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia,
Volume 3, Number 1, March 2019, pp. 235-248 (Review)

Published by NUS Press Pte Ltd

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sen.2019.0018>

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Between Bodily Constraints and Bodily Resistance: Women's Disabled Physicality in *The Way Station*

Hồng Ánh (dir.), *The Way Station* [original title: *Đảo của dân ngụ cư*]. Drama. Colour. 1:33 mins. Produced in Vietnam in 2017.

Qui-Ha Hoang Nguyen

In early November 2018, Nguyễn Phương Khánh became the first Vietnamese woman to win the top title at Miss Earth 2018. Pageant contests and reality shows searching for *the* face, *the* look and *the* model have blossomed in Vietnam in recent years. In this context, Nguyễn's victory at a global contest became "a remarkable achievement of Vietnam (Vietnamese beauty)",¹ as the media enthusiastically acclaimed. Amidst this process of the standardisation of bodies framed by the mainstream media comes *The Way Station* (2017), the directorial debut of Hồng Ánh, whose name has been the signature of many Vietnamese art-house films, such as *Life of Sand* (1999), *Deserted Valley* (2001), *The Female Sleepwalker* (2004), *Little Heart* (2007), *The Moon at the Bottom of the Well* (2008), *Mother's Soul* (2011), and a recent commercial film, *Go Go Sisters* (2018). In her directorial role, Hồng Ánh offers a space to reflect on the female disabled body, beauty and empowerment.

For a long time, feminists have been concerned with women's bodies partly because of their biological and cultural vulnerability, which leads to their subordination. Historically, women's roles have often been reduced to their sexual functions—as sexual objects or reproductive roles—rather than being bona fide subjects. Women's bodies are constructed as the embodiment of cultural values in nationalistic discourses.² In this regard, their existences bear

a symbolic meaning whereas their bodily experiences as a material subject are often ignored.

While women's fully-abled bodies have occupied a central position in much feminist scholarship in the 1990s, women's disabled bodies and disability have not received equal attention in feminist concerns.³ Additionally, whereas studies on disability, especially scholarship on the artistic representations of disability, have increased in recent years, there have been few works on filmic portrayals of disability in non-Anglophone societies.⁴ Within this context, a feminist reading of the cinematic depictions of a disabled woman on a remote island in Vietnam in the 1990s will enrich our understanding of the intertwined issues of gender and disability portrayed in an art-house contemporary movie. Furthermore, this reading sheds light on the female director's effort to capture women's resistance through their bodily vulnerability, which seems overlooked in many domestic film reviews.⁵ At first glance, *The Way Station* seems to adopt the predominant trope of women's victimhood and disability at the hands of the patriarchy. However, moving beyond merely portraying men's sexual violence and abuse, the film displays women's subjectivity through the protagonist's bodily rebellions. In doing so, Hồng Ánh presents feminist values that challenge the conventionally stereotyped image of disabled and female protagonists as victims at the hand of males and abled people.

Women's Oppression

Awarded the top prize at the ASEAN International Film Festival & Awards in 2017 and accolades elsewhere,⁶ *The Way Station* is an adaptation of Đỗ Phước Tiến's 1992 short story "The Island of Aliens".⁷ The film is set in the 1990s in an archaic restaurant called White Night (Đêm Trắng), where the restaurant owner, a Chinese-Vietnamese immigrant, lives with his second wife Xiểm Hoa and his paralysed daughter Chu, who is in her early 20s. Living under the same roof are three male immigrants with different ethnic backgrounds. The White Night restaurant metaphorically refers to an island, a small society in which the inhabitants themselves withdraw from social interactions. Unlike the original story's emphasis on the issues of racism and ethnicity, the film focuses more on gender and patriarchy.

In the oppressive world of the restaurant, Chu's father exercises unquestioned power on his entourage, especially the women, who are financially dependent on and bound to him. The film opens with an ambiguous image of an unidentified hand lying on the sand in the foreground at the right corner of the frame. In the background, we see a woman sitting into a round-shaped boat in the blue sea. Soon after this opening scene, the film cuts to the restaurant

FIGURE 1: Xiém Hoa and her husband in the bath scene where he brutally demands sexual intercourse.

to which Phước, the main male character, has just moved. Audiences then encounter a middle-aged, austere-looking woman in the bathroom. The woman is bathing a man half-submerged in a wooden bathtub. As the film progresses, we learn that the woman is Xiém Hoa, the restaurant owner's second wife. Her oppression is revealed as she seems to be a sex labourer and an unpaid worker for her own husband. Her rituals in the evening are focused on her chores: working, calculating the restaurant's earnings, putting the money in a box, locking the box and hanging the key on the sleeping husband's neck, then lying next to him.

The visual motif of the key speaks to the restaurant owner's financial power and symbolic authority over his wife and his daughter. Loving his paralysed daughter in a cruel manner, the restaurant owner buys her many toys but always locks her up on the second floor, hiding her from public view. Chu's paralysis is depicted as her father's hidden shame. In one scene, Chu, dressed in white like a ghostly figure, moves her wheelchair to the balcony. A guest sees her and screams. The father immediately rushes in and brutally beats her up. Everyone in the house knows of the violence, but no one shows up to protect her. Through the fates of Chu and Xiém Hoa, the film lays bare women's bodily and mental suffering resulting from not only the husband's violence but also the other men's lack of concern.

Disabled Bodily Rebellion and Sexual Unconformity

While Đỗ Phước Tiến's story treats Chu's sexuality as a substitute for Phước's search for happiness, Hồng Ánh's film moves this man's journey to the background to highlight Chu's sexual rebellion. The film subverts traditional female sexual morals as Chu has sex with both Miên and Phước, the two young men working for her father, and finds sexual satisfaction with both of them. Although Chu seems to be romantically interested in Phước, she never rejects Miên. Interestingly, Phước never challenges Chu's sexual involvement with Miên, even though he witnesses Chu's sexual intercourse with Miên. From Phước's perspective, Chu appears to be enjoying sex with Miên. We only learn about his repressed jealousy in the form of a voiceover while he has sex with Chu. In this regard, the two men conform without questioning to the unwritten rule laid down by Chu. Like her father, while at the same time rebelling against him, Chu controls other men in a different but no less powerful way. Unlike her father who exercises his privileges of gender, a non-disabled body, parental status and age, Chu uses her disabled body, her corporeal disadvantages and her being the cause of her father's shame, to play a game against her father's patriarchy and the social norms of women's sexuality.

In her rebellion against her father, Chu is not alone. A silent supporter of Chu is her stepmother Xiém Hoa, whose appearance typifies a submissive and docile woman. In contrast to her appearance, Xiém Hoa's rebellion operates in a subtle but no less wilful way than Chu's. Xiém Hoa knows about the sexual intercourse between Chu and the men, and she voluntarily plays guard for her stepdaughter. Using a small bell hidden in her closet as a signal, she lets Chu know when her father is about to go up to the second floor to check on her. Having no child of her own, Xiém Hoa helps Chu, as she believes Chu has the "needs of a child". Xiém Hoa's belief reflects a patriarchal expectation that reduces women's desires to the reproductive function. Ironically, this traditionally confined belief equips Xiém Hoa with the mental strength to confront her husband. In secretly assisting Chu to interact with other men, she carves out a way for her stepdaughter to pursue a sexually free life, which Xiém Hoa herself never attains.

While not adopting the sexual freedom like her stepdaughter, Xiém Hoa is far more sexually conforming than she looks. Xiém Hoa challenges her husband in an affirmative way in the guise of her skinny, elderly and pitiful-looking body. In the bath scene mentioned earlier, she rejects her husband's sexual request on the pretext that she is having her period. There are no clues to verify if she is telling the truth, but by using menstruation as an excuse, she uses the female body to resist the male sexual desire. It is worth noting that Xiém Hoa is infertile, which equates to a dysfunctional feminine body from

FIGURE 2: Chu's beautifully smiling face bruised by her father's cruel beatings.

FIGURE 3: Phước massages Chu's legs as she requests.

the perspective of many people in Vietnamese society, even in current times. In this sense, Xiém Hoa and Chu are not totally trapped by their physical disabilities; instead, they both exercise their sexual autonomy and resistance through their disabled bodies.

Moving beyond uncovering women's subjectivity through the control of their disabled bodies, *The Way Station* goes further in its commitment to feminist values by resisting the normative view of beauty. The increase in the number of beauty pageants and the popularity of cosmetic surgery have been covered by the media to saturation point and have led to the celebration of a standardised physical appearance. Within this context, Hồng Ánh offers an alternative beauty ideology by highlighting a paralysed woman like Chu as "beautiful". In one scene, Phước looks passionately at Chu sitting in a wheelchair and says, "You are so beautiful." Chu replies half-ironically and half-happily, "Hmm, beautiful, but only one half [referring to her body] is beautiful." The scene can be easily read as an example of a patriarchal ideology in which a woman is the bearer of the male (spectator's) gaze, as in Laura Mulvey's observation of Hollywood narrative cinema.⁸ However, by responding and redirecting Phước's gaze to the disabled part of her body, Chu refuses to be objectified by a male's gaze in the conventional way. More importantly, Chu's response speaks back to the conventional definition of beauty. While Phước actually referred to her white skin and bright smiling face, Chu reminds him of the fact that such a compliment ignores her immobile legs. Her response turns Phước and the audience's attention to the disabled part of her body, reminding us of her paralysis. It prompts the viewers to reflect on the ethics of their gaze that might, like Phước, neglect the differences between a non-disabled and disabled body.

This awareness of her disability defines Chu's feminist consciousness as she always reminds Phước of her corporeal existence. In one scene, Chu requests that Phước massage her legs. Phước is hesitant at first but complies after Chu asks, "Are you afraid?" In another scene, Phước is filmed while kissing Chu's paralysed legs. The kissing, a more loving gesture compared to the massage in the previous scene, signifies not only Phước's acceptance of Chu's imperfect body but also Chu's subjectivity in making him acknowledge and love her disabled body. The acceptance of physical disability marks the emotional intimacy between Phước and Chu, which is absent from the love scene between Miên and Chu. In underscoring bodily affection, Chu's character escapes from a role of mere sexual function. Her body becomes an affective site, not an abjected deviant, as is usually featured in the media and in many commercial films, especially very well-known ones about prostitutes such as *Bar Girls* (Lê Hoàng, 2003) and a recent popular drama series

FIGURE 4: The framing focuses on Chu's bodily feminine perfection while her paralysed legs are not displayed.

Quỳnh Doll (Mai Hồng Phong, 2018). Furthermore, Chu's intimate relationship with Phước dismisses reductive readings of her sexual rebellion as being simply rooted in sexual impulses (*ấn ức tình dục*).⁹ Although sexual desire is an important aspect of Chu's characteristics, her empowerment should be recognised and emphasised in her sexual pleasure and social relationship with Phước.¹⁰

Yet the treatment of the sex scenes between Phước and Chu are problematic, as the film does not consistently foreground her physical differences. While not totally eradicating the existence of Chu's disability, the sex scenes are normatively portrayed in a passionate and aesthetic sense. The camera slowly pans along the two bodies and shows their sexual poses from a high angle. At some point, Chu's naked body lying on one side is captured from behind her back while her face turns to Phước. This camera position and low angle seem to erase Chu's disabled body, confining the audience's view to her upper body. Moreover, the sexual experiences of Chu's disabled body are normalised, as the film does not show her physical difficulties in making love.

Death and Its Ambiguity

Many film reviews, however, have not paid close attention to the film's inadequate engagement with Chu's sexual experiences as a paralysed person.¹¹ Instead, *The Way Station* has faced some criticism for its apparent lack of feminist empathy implied by Chu's death, as Hồng Ánh has revealed.¹² After finding a cigarette lighter in Chu's room and discovering his wife's complicity

in his daughter's sexual relationships, the father decides to kill Chu. The film plays with the audience's expectations by showing a sequence of the father taking Chu out to sea and leaving her on the boat. This sequence appears ambiguous as it seems dream-like. We then see Chu and her father in her room. The father feeds her a bowl of poisoned noodles. The film seems to suggest that Chu anticipates her father's murderous punishment through a close-up of her smiling calmly while looking directly at him and opening her mouth.¹³ It is tempting to read Chu's death as a punishment because she has dared to cross the sexual boundary set by patriarchy, as Mulvey (1989) observes in many Hollywood films.¹⁴ Moreover, her death can be interpreted as the victimisation of a disabled woman and irresolution caused by prejudice against the disabled.

But Chu's voluntary death yields a more complicated reading than simply illustrating male abuse and murder. Her death, while revealing her inability to escape from her father's punishment, simultaneously speaks to men's impotence. During the Q&A that followed the screening of the film at the Viet Fest Film in October 2018 in Orange County, California, Hồng Ánh said that many critics and audiences felt so sorry for the death of the protagonist. In fact, one of the options presented to Hồng Ánh was that Chu and Phước run away after burning the house. Hồng Ánh did not go for this solution; instead, she stuck faithfully to the drama of the short story, because she was committed to preserving the character's isolation and loneliness. The film, in its faithfulness in portraying women's suffering, rejects a happy ending—the manifestation of male fantasy embedded in romance stories with a formulaic structure that conforms to a normative division of gender roles: man meets woman, man loses woman, man gets woman.¹⁵ The rejection of this fantasy sheds light on reading the agency of the protagonist in her choice of death when she has no way to get back (sexual) pleasure and intimacy once her father discovers her secret. The act of letting her father poison her dismantles the fantasy of men as empowered beings. Without resisting, her death speaks to the father's evil. Eventually he cannot fight her in an honourable battle as she, the victim, does not even mean to fight back. More importantly, her death points to the other men's cowardice—their inability to resist and their lack of desire to escape from an oppressive life. Men in this film are anything but saviours; at worst, they are all complicit in the crime of Chu's death.

Chu's death, read in conjunction with the visually repeated killing of goats for food, questions the meaning of being. The close-ups of the animals' slaughter predict and parallel the violence inflicted on and death of the female protagonist. Moreover, all the men can relate to the act of killing—of goats in this case—without a thought about their work and existence. Their financial

FIGURE 5: Hồng Ánh directs Ngọc Thanh Tâm's acting in the sunbathing scene.

precariousness and low social status also turn them into subordinates of the boss. At one point, Miên explains to Phước that before being killed, the goats are fed sugarcane honey (*mật mía*). The goats are then hung with metal cans and chased around. The sound from the cans keep the goats running until they sweat heavily. By sweating, the goats will smell less foul and are thus tastier. Chu's death echoes the trajectory of the animals' fate: trapped, enjoy (sexual) pleasure, then killed. The difference that reveals her subjectivity is her acceptance of death as a way to escape rather than live a subservient life like the animals and other men around her, who do not dare to challenge the power structure.

On the surface, Chu's death serves as a solution for Hồng Ánh to simultaneously connote the reality of entrapment and a form of escape for women's bodily experiences. But going beyond that, the director creates a space for her female character to escape through visual cues created by the lighting. Throughout the film, female characters seem to be trapped in the house. They are filmed in low lighting and a dark-grain wood colour that mirrors the interior of the space. Film critic Lê Hồng Lâm expresses his regret that Hồng Ánh portrays women locked up in the same way as the stereotyped traditional characters that the director used to play as an actress.¹⁶ However, towards the end of the film, all three men either leave or are about to leave the restaurant. At that point, the idea of entrapment seems to reverse, because we suddenly

notice that the men are visually associated with the dark and narrow space of the kitchen. Ironically, the disabled Chu is the character most associated with the blue sky and light as she often sunbathes and looks up to the sky out of her window. She appears in a dream-like sequence in which she enjoys the open and fresh space of the ocean. Even in dark nights, Hồng Ánh portrays Chu in front of lit candles and repeatedly films Xiểm Hoa raising a red lantern in front of the gate of the White Night restaurant, a visual motif resonating with Zhang Yimou's *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991). On the other side, the visual lighting motif of Phước's zippo lighter, which is sold to Miên and then discovered in Chu's room by the father, links them all to a fatal murder. In this artistic way, the film tells another story about Chu and Xiểm Hoa's search for escape and hope, despite their physical immobility and spatial constraints.

In depicting disabled women's experiences of disability, Hồng Ánh captures a diversity of bodily experiences, stretching from corporeal suffering to sexual satisfaction. Moreover, inspired by feminist insight, the film underscores the female characters' agency and selfhood in relationships with other men, who enjoy more privileges than themselves. The layers of power structure encompass gender, age and bodies, which oppress a disabled woman like Chu to the point that death is an ending for her, in line with the realist style the director has committed to. While still sustaining her goal of depicting disabled women's abuse and death through the use of lighting, Hồng Ánh creates an aesthetic world within which her female characters can escape the confines of male oppression. Yet Hồng Ánh's artistic interventions do not seem radical enough in terms of feminist concerns with women's body, as the film still lingers on the symbolism of women's bodies in the original story. By ending the film with Phước's voiceover saying "Never again in this life will I taste happiness, never", *The Way Station* restores the predominant symbolic meaning of women's trauma to speak for everyone in an inhumane society. This restoration reveals a limitation inherent in the social realist perspective of the short story, which Hồng Ánh has not boldly transgressed in making a radical representation of women's corporeal experiences.

BIOGRAPHY

Qui-Ha Hoang Nguyen is a PhD candidate in the Cinema and Media Studies Department, University of Southern California. She has published in *Visual Anthropology* and *VNU Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*. She is currently writing a dissertation on "Socialist Womanhood and Modernity in Vietnamese Revolutionary Cinema During Wartime (1945–75)".

NOTES

- ¹ “Mi Ly. Nguyễn Phương Khánh đăng quang hoa hậu Trái đất là kỳ tích của Việt Nam” [Nguyễn Phương Khánh’s crowning is a remarkable achievement of Vietnam], 4 Nov. 2018, <https://news.zing.vn/phuong-khanh-dang-quang-hoa-hau-trai-dat-la-ky-tich-cua-viet-nam-post889666.html> [accessed Nov. 2018].
- ² For discussion on the female symbolic body in nationalist discourse and imagination, see Lydia Liu, “The Female Body and Nationalist Discourse: *The Field of Life and Death* Revisited”, in *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*, ed. Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), pp. 37–62. Liu points out how nationalists view rape as a cultural invasion of a nation rather than sexual violence. For discussions of feminist views on women’s corporeal bodies, see Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994). For an extensive research on technologies and the body represented in literary works, films and the media, see Anne Marie Balsamo, *Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women* (Duke University Press, 1996).
- ³ Helen Meekosha, “Body Battles: Bodies, Gender and Disability”, in *The Disability Reader: Social Science Perspectives*, ed. Tom Shakespeare (London: Cassell, 1998), pp. 166–7.
- ⁴ See Benjamin Fraser, ed., *Cultures of Representation: Disability in World Cinema Contexts* (New York: Wallflower, 2016), pp. 2–3.
- ⁵ For example, the film’s artistic style and the father’s cruelty are highlighted in the review of Minh Khue, “Đảo của dân ngụ cư thơ mộng và khốc liệt” [*The Way Station* poetic and violent], 8 June 2017, <https://nld.com.vn/van-hoa-van-nghe/dao-cua-dan-ngu-cu-tho-mong-va-khoc-liet-20170608114729221.htm>; and Phuc Du, “Đừng sống như những chú dê trên đảo” [Don’t live like the goats on the island], 18 June 2017, <http://kenh14.vn/dung-song-nhu-nhung-chu-de-tren-dao-cua-dan-ngu-cu-20170608180245011.chn>. [both accessed Dec. 2018]. Meanwhile, women’s entrapment and sexual desires are the focus in Le Hong Lam’s review, “*The Way Station*. 101 bộ phim Việt Nam hay nhất” [101 Best Vietnamese Films] (Nha Nam, Hanoi, 2018), pp. 442–9.
- ⁶ The film also won other prestigious prizes such as Best Story at the 58th Asia-Pacific Film Festival and Best Film Based on a Book at the Efebo d’Oro International held in Palermo, Italy in 2018, and it was honoured with a Special Jury Prize at the Eurasia International Film Festival 2017. However, the film was not awarded any prizes, except for its supporting male actor and cinematography, at the 2017 Vietnam Film Festival, one of the two most prestigious Vietnamese domestic festivals. *Jailbait (Em chưa 18)*, the most successfully commercial film of the year, won The Golden Lotus, the first prize.

- ⁷ “*Đảo của dân ngụ cư*” [literally, The Island of Aliens] was first published in *Văn học và dư luận* [Literature and Public Opinion] in 1992. The story was translated into English and appears in the collection entitled *Night, Again*. See Linh Dinh, ed., *Night, Again: Contemporary Fiction from Vietnam* (Seven Stories Press, 2006). I read Đỗ Phước Tiến’s story in Vietnamese online at talachu.org, a popular website on literature and culture. Đỗ Phước Tiến gave his permission for online publication as announced on the website, <http://www.talachu.org/truyen.php?bai=2>. [accessed Nov. 2018].
- ⁸ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 1989), pp. 14–26.
- ⁹ Lê Hồng Lâm, “*The Way Station*”.
- ¹⁰ Hồng Ánh stated in an interview that she did not like the phrase “sexual desire”, because it connotes a nuance of “instinction”. Meanwhile, she portrays her characters in conflict with themselves and others around them, and with their inner feelings and outer reality. See Toàn Dương, “Three Beautiful Women Came to *The Way Station*. An Interview with Hồng Ánh”, 28 Jan. 2017.
- ¹¹ Minh Khuê, “*Đảo của dân ngụ cư thơ mộng và khốc liệt*” [*The Way Station Poetic and Violent*], 8 June 2017 and Phuc Du, “*Đừng sống như những chú dê trên đảo*” [Don’t Live like the Goats on the Island], 18 June 2017.
- ¹² Hồng Ánh in the Q&A session following a screening at the Viet Film Festival in Orange County, California in October 2018.
- ¹³ In the Q&A mentioned above, Hồng Ánh stated that Chu knows her father is going to murder her.
- ¹⁴ Laura Mulvey, “Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ inspired by King Vidor’s *Duel in the Sun* (1946)”, in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), pp. 29–38.
- ¹⁵ For discussion on love and romance portrayed in literature and films, see David Shumway, *Modern Love, Romance, Intimacy, and the Marriage Crisis* (New York: NYU Press, 2003).
- ¹⁶ Lê Hồng Lâm, “*The Way Station*”, pp. 444–6 reads Chu’s character as a “continuity of Hồng Ánh’s entrapped muses”, an over-generalisation with which I do not agree. On the contrary, I find empowerment in many characters played by Hồng Ánh, as mentioned in Le’s essay. In Nhuệ Giang’s *Deserted Valley* (2001), Giao, the protagonist, a teacher, temporarily lives in a mountainous province. She ignores rigid regulation and social stigma and has a sexual relationship with a young man, who abandons her. In *Moon at the Bottom of the Well* (2008), Hồng Ánh’s character Hanh is an infertile and docile wife to a school headmaster. Hanh finds another woman to impregnate with her husband’s child. However, the husband soon abandons her for that woman. Meanwhile, following a necromancer’s advice, Hanh gets ‘married’ to

a shaman. Committing to this new marriage, she rejects her husband. Unsurprisingly, the narrative and motif of women's abandonment are often read as women's victimisation. Still, women's unconventional sexuality and confrontations provide Hồng Anh's characters with feminist valences, as they dare to challenge conventional frameworks imposed on them and seek a space of subjectivity for themselves.

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