

**BEYOND THE GOOD AND THE BAD: A FEMINIST READING
OF ABORTION'S MEDIA REPRESENTATION IN VIETNAMESE
ARTHOUSE FILM, ĐẬP CÁNH GIỮA KHÔNG TRUNG¹**

by

LÊ HOÀNG MINH SƠN

Master's student

*Supervised by Dr Laura Roberts (primary) and
Associate Professor Barbara Baird*

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¹ FLAPPING IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE

For people who have had an abortion, people who need one, and people who are fighting tirelessly across the globe for the shared vision of reproductive justice.

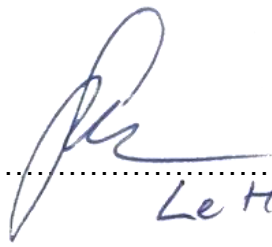
In solidarity.

Declaration of original work

I certify that this thesis:

1. Does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any University; and
2. to the best of my knowledge and belief, does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.”

Signed..... (2213798)



Le Hoang Minh Son

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY



I, Lê Hoàng Minh Sơn, a Women's Studies student, a visitor to the land, acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of this nation. I acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands whom we know as the Kurna people on which Flinders University operates and where I have earned most of my study experiences, enriched by Indigenous knowledge, stories and the practices of resistance against the colonial and capitalist world.

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ABSTRACT

Representations of abortion in the media, particularly film, are criticised predominantly within the binary of 'good' and 'bad' based on the reflections and evidence provided by medical and public health sectors. While I endorse the call for making media representations of abortion more diversely positive in order to combat the stigma surrounding this reproductive healthcare, it is worth looking for the potential to foster feminist media analysis and practices, particularly those produced in the Two-Third World. *Đập cánh giữa không chung (Flapping in the middle of nowhere)*, the film chosen, is an arthouse film directed by a prominent woman director in Vietnam which received many honors and accolades including in the Venice International Film Festival in 2014. Constructing the narrative about the struggle to deal with an unintended pregnancy, the film shows the journey of a young Vietnamese woman living in the capital city navigating her way to having an abortion in the country where it was assumed to be accessible due to liberal abortion policies. In this paper, I argue that this film provides a critical counterhegemonic discourse to show the challenges Vietnamese young women have faced accessing abortions; challenges that include poverty, conscientious objection by medical doctors and the un-named social forces which I call "pro-fetus". Moreover, although the narrative ends up with an ambiguous destination for the protagonist's abortion, this thesis argues that it should not be categorized as a 'bad' media representation of abortion and an anti-abortion product. Instead, it works excellently as an epistemic tool to visualize the feminist relational approach to autonomy which resists the (neo) liberal discourse about accessing abortion from the state, as well as the manipulation of fetal imagery which does not uphold the anti-abortion meaning. By considering this possibility, I also suggest a potential way to looking forward to fostering abortion's right activism in my country.

INTRODUCTION: ACTIVISM, FILMS AND AN “ABORTION” THESIS

The hand-shaped blood stains continue to spread on the wall. The woman sitting on the bed is petrified; her face is pale, bloodless. She looks across and sees it – a ghost in the shape of a little girl clinging to the wall and staring at her filled with resentment. This was the first film I saw about abortion. This story with all of its lively imagery is still there somewhere in my head and I cannot get rid of it. This particular scene obsessed and frightened me throughout my childhood and fuelled my imagination about abortion and its consequences in the 2000s (when I was just a child). The tale of morality behind this horror movie, *Oan hồn* (Unjust Soul), is one among many television series and movies in Vietnam taking up the narratives of abortion and miscarriage. They are used to blur the lines between fiction and reality to constitute cultural and public discourse in contemporary Vietnam regarding the options of pregnancy. They specifically use women’s fears to assert that those who choose different options to having a child could end up, tragically. This thesis is positioned within the paradigm of cultural and feminist media studies suggested by Zoonen (1994). With inspiration from bell hooks (2009) and considering that films and movies are where feminist theories and practices meet; my feminist film critiques are not aiming to “trash” filmic products or the crews behind them. Instead this thesis aims to offer a crucial contribution to discursive opportunities and interventions in order to reimagine and create a counter-hegemonic culture through film. This aims to challenge the dominant politics and stigma against abortion in Vietnam.

In this thesis, I am going to examine a contemporary Vietnamese independent film *Đập cánh giữa không trung* (*Flapping in the middle of nowhere*) directed by Nguyễn Hoàng Điệp in order to deconstruct the representations of abortion. This work is, proudly, my first academic attempt to initially address the question of how differently the discourses of abortion are articulated and will suggest a feminist reading that critiques the local politics of abortion in the film. I expect, through this thesis, to contribute to and enrich the cultural space for feminist scholarship and abortion-rights activism in my country and across the world. Equally important among its contribution, this thesis is the first feminist research that pays attention to films and abortion in Vietnam.

Following this introduction, the second chapter will provide a synthesis and review of the global literature regarding abortion, media representation and film. As Vietnamese literature about abortion and media is scant, this literature review focuses on presenting different understandings and interpretations about the association between abortion, media representation and film in the scope of international academia. After that, the third chapter will present an overview of abortion politics in Vietnam, which will help audiences understand the socio-political and cultural background of reproductive healthcare before analysing the chosen film. In the main chapter of the thesis, chapter four, I will critically analyze the film using feminist and media theories. Lastly, in chapter five I will explore the connections between such feminist film theories and my practical abortion activism.

The political situation in Vietnam is unique, it is a communist country which alienates it from countries in the West and it is also slightly different from the other countries in the Asia- Pacific region. It is thus vital to recognize the way of seeing and treating abortion in Vietnam is embedded in the complexity of our *tam giáo* (three teachings - Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism), as well as our culture and post-colonial, *Đổi mới* (Renovation) political dynamics. While abortion is legally recognized, it is still perceived as an undesirable and stigmatizing practice. This firstly affects the women who are in need of or have had one; secondly, health workers who provide and perform services, and lastly the general public and abortion advocates. I believe it is important to note that, living in a society where discussions of or the practice of abortion are kept in silence, or even fear, this once made me feel this practice was wrong. While this paper is not an autobiography about my life and how my ideas of abortion have evolved and changed, it is essential to note that I did go through a rapid transformation in my own views in my 20s during my early involvement with activism. These reflections keep me aware of how I became very aggressive towards the media and popular culture that represented not only abortion in a bad way, but also generally the topic of gender in my country. Since this transformative experience, I have become much more aware of the emergence of gender and media critiques within the gender equality movement in Vietnam. It seems to me that the significant effort from those who are committed to

advocating for equality in the media align with the claims for better and diverse representations of women on the screen including in advertisements overall.

Since undertaking Women's Studies, I have developed a deeper understanding of feminism and feminist politics; a subject I had not had much exposure to in my education or political understandings in Vietnam. I have now been influenced by the approach of intersectionality, anti-capitalist and de-colonial theories and activism through many feminist scholars and activists such as bell hooks, Chandra Mohanty, Sara Ahmed, Indigenous scholar - Irene Watson and the Feminism for the 99% collective². Feminist theories have given me a platform to recognize that Vietnamese activism for gender equality has been strongly influenced by the contradictory complexity of Marxist and (neo)liberal ideologies regarding self-determination and self-reliance in order to make local women thrive in both public and private sectors. Therefore the concerns of Vietnamese women remain similar to the 1970s western feminist 'wave' which paid attention to gender-based violence, the gender pay gap, media representation, and importantly bodily autonomy but not specifically abortion rights.

One of feminism's motives concerning media representation and gender at the time, was understanding and unraveling the ways that 'images and cultural constructions' are connected with structural 'inequality, domination and oppression', bringing the importance of women's representation into the discussion (Gill 2007, p. 7). Gill (2007, pp. 9 - 10) notes that it was these second-wave feminists who encountered the many stereotypes around womanhood every day in the media including in the news, magazines, television, on radio, and various forms of advertisement. From their original observations and the struggle to eliminate these stereotypes, it became a movement that continues to confront the media, right up to the present, particularly in the United States. Thus, following the commitment towards better media representation in the local landscape, in Vietnam, many organisations and local scholars have taken this focus for

² including Angela Davis, Barbara Ransby, Cinzia Arruzza, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, Linda Martin Alcoff, Nancy Fraser, Rasmea Yousef Odeh and Tithi Bhattacharya

their activism and research. Moreover, the weight of media literature and activism in the country regarding gender-equality is still concentrated in the news media and advertising; meanwhile other forms like films, television series and other art-based products are scarcely touched. Furthermore, film studies in Vietnam have not had the attention of mainstream academia, even in the space where studies on gender and women are almost exclusively controlled. Even though the literature by local scholars' is scant, some common themes including war memories, nationalism, patriotism, gender and the government's power, have typically been observed by media researchers like Nguyen-Thu (2018), Duong (2014, 2015, 2016, 2020), and Hamilton (2009). Specifically, Duong's (2015) article is a rare one among a collective of Vietnamese film studies, exploring sexuality and the aesthetics of the female gaze in Vietnamese films. However, themes which focus on maternity, reproduction justice and rights including abortion on media and film, are mostly overlooked in the academic analysis.

The focus has thus far dealt only with advertisements where representations of gender are distorted, gender-stereotyped and harmful for women. Significantly in 2014, the Authority of Press from the Ministry of Communication and Information endorsed the Gender Indicators in Media and Communication made by local professional collectives with the support from Oxfam and UNESCO in Vietnam. However, this guidebook, which aspires to replace the existing gender-biased representation, continues following the cisgendered binary of how women and men should be portrayed and is problematic in terms of establishing another fixed, gendered representation of women in media. . Consequently, a cisgendered binary is persistent and normalized. This is a concern voiced by Bui (2018) when she explores the representations of transgendered persons in Vietnam. In her paper, she argues that transgender representation in Vietnam is stuck within the gendered dichotomy therefore excluding those 'who do not conform to conventional norms of gender' (Bui 2018, pp. 85 - 6). The author calls this a reproduction of trans-normativity in which online media continues to reproduce cisgendered norms on transgender bodies.

My first experience with film critique links with my activism for abortion rights in Vietnam. It started with a passion to collect and desensitize myself and other young activists with

films and media that featured accurate information about abortion and pregnancy. The two goals I followed included criticising films that made abortion appear disgusting, and collecting films where the portrayals of abortion were positive. Beginning with *4 luni, 3 saptamâni si 2 zile (4 months, 3 weeks, and 2 days)*, my journey continued with an older movie, *Dirty Dancing*; then expanded to more recent films and movies such as *Obvious Child*, and two Netflix originals' *13 Reasons Why* and *Sex Education*. I took specific actions, such as organizing film sessions with these young people, so we could watch together and try to take advantage of the films as educative tools for change. While it was not my dream to use media as a means of education, as bell hooks (2009, p. 2) notes, this assumption exists 'in the lives of many people'. hooks (2009), indeed, has extended the pedagogical roles of cinema in a much more insightful and sophisticated way than our activism believed or has achieved. When I started reading her book, *Reel to Real*, just the introduction alone was enlightening in that she expresses the acknowledgment that 'movies make magic. They change things' (hooks 2009, p. 1). At the same time, bell hooks (2009, p. 1) rejects the idea that movies are showing reality, instead, '[t]hey give the reimagined, reinvented version of the real' (hooks 2009, p. 1). bell hooks' book has given me a great opportunity to reflect on my activism and made me realize that it is not unproblematic. Indeed, it should not rest in the simple assumption that a movie in and of itself could become the tool for educational purposes, in which a dichotomy is created to distinguish between bad films for criticism and good films for learning. Moreover, we cannot assume that audiences are always passive learners, who are expected to learn the lessons in particular movies – those we may believe are more "real" than other versions. In academic work, the critique of films is distinct from merely apportioning negative/ positive dichotomies or "real"/ "unreal" in their representations of abortion. Differing approaches to such critiques are dependent upon the specific circumstance or lens through which the film is discussed. These ideas will be discussed further in the second chapter. bell hooks (2009, p. 3) uses film as a medium - not to teach people but to open discussions, to create opportunities for critique and as learning experiences that counter the hegemonic discourse as well as the narratives of race, gender, and class. Indeed, abortion-rights activists who are using films or movies should do the same to foster a counterhegemonic discussion in order to

challenge the conventional discourse of this practice. Therefore, this research project is crucial not only in terms of narrowing the gap between feminist theories and activism but also critically, to help instigate actions that Vietnamese advocates and scholars can take for a vision of stigma-free, accessible and safe abortion.

There is not a dearth of films and television series in this country that portray abortion. By selecting *Đập cánh giữa không trung* (*Flapping in the middle of nowhere*, thereafter, is called *Flapping*) my attempt is to pay attention to an aesthetic and independent division of the 'arthouse' film industry in Vietnam which is vastly distinctive from the popular commercial one. Often arthouse is considered a more difficult genre for the 'general public' due to the confusing messages it may convey. Rather than an expectation of an explicit and fixed message, the director of *Flapping* is against the idea of perceiving a single message through an artistic product. She wants films to become a personal experience for each spectator through which messages can be interpreted differently (Yan News 2015). While *Đập cánh giữa không trung* was not planned for general screening, it officially came to Vietnamese public audiences through one of the most famous movie exhibitors, CGV Vietnam, on January 2015 after auspiciously achieving different honorable nominations and awards in various international and national film festivals in 2014. Written and directed by prominent Vietnamese independent female director, Nguyễn Hoàng Điệp (one among very few filmmakers in Vietnam) got awarded the Knight of Arts and Letter title for her contribution to the arts and literature of the world by the French government in 2016; and *Flapping* is her debut (Vũ 2016). Without great ticket sales or a long cinema-time run like other commercial films in the same year, online news recorded that the outcome it achieved exceeded the expectations of the production and distribution teams including our talented director, *Điệp* (Nguyễn-Minh 2014, 2015). From the beginning of its dissemination internationally, *Flapping* did not disappoint film critics and received mostly favorable reviews. While *Điệp* never confirms feminist attribution to her work, Lodge (2014) notes that '[t]hrough it's steeped in a rich, particularly cultural and spiritual milieu, there's a universal feminist resonance to this story of a pregnant teen whose plans for abortion are repeatedly obstructed by financial and romantic complications'. Interestingly, the film came to my attention because my colleague in the abortion-right collective who saw the film, urged

me to watch it but I did not have the chance to do so in 2015. Unfortunately, in 2020 when I began this project and expressed the aspiration to watch this film, I found it was not available to the public at the time. However, after being introduced to her by my former university lecturer, Điệp granted me an exclusive access. During my research, I noticed that the version of the film that I use in this thesis has been cut before launching as the final version. There were four cut scenes uploaded on YouTube by the authorised distribution company in Vietnam in 2015. Given that these four cut scenes might affect the interpretation of the film, especially in narrative, I decided not to include them or their interpretation in the scope of my thesis but use the version that was shown in film festivals and cinemas, sent to me by Điệp.



Figure 1: Two posters of 'Flapping in the middle of nowhere' in English (left) and in Vietnamese (right).

CHAPTER 2: REPRESENTING ABORTION IN MEDIA AND FILMS

There is a thematic debate regarding the representations of abortion and media, and many feminists as well as media scholars will see these representations as puzzles with socio-political consequences that need ‘unpacking’ (Conti & Cahill 2017; O’Shaughnessy & Stadler 2008; Turner 2006). By exploring the existing literature, this chapter identifies and presents two paradigms of media representations of abortion. The first paradigm rests in the dichotomy of good and bad judgements, in which media forms are seen as *good* or *bad* based on the extent to which depictions of abortion conform to knowledge and evidence in medicine and public health. The second lens, which is usually overlooked, engages more deeply with media forms in cultural studies, and explores the meanings and the socio-political and cultural interpretations that films, per se, can offer regarding reproduction and abortion. Thus, in my thesis the understanding of these two paradigms guides me to focus on the film *Flapping in the middle of nowhere*, following an in-depth discussion of the second paradigm’s scholarship and its examples.

2.1. *Good and Bad* representations of abortion

A particular body of literature in this section looks at the representations of abortion in news media, television, films and social media to assess whether they are negative or positive based on the reflections of “reality” provided by medical and public health knowledge. Within this body of work, Baird and Millar (2019, p. 1112) outline the predominance of specific literature which pays attention to the bad representations of abortion in the media. Here abortion is typically attached to ‘selfishness, irresponsibility, danger, emotional trauma, morality, class differences, political controversy and/or sensationalism’. The review by Conti and Cahill (2017) is an example of the scholarship that criticises such media practices including in the news, television, films and social media, distorting the representations of abortion. Their analysis stays within a ‘distortion’ paradigm suggested by Zoonen (1994) that typically compares media representations and medical knowledge alongside ‘public health significance’; these will be discussed below.

News media and Abortion

In news media, citing Sisson, Herold and Woodruff (2017) there is an acknowledgement of the difficulties of covering this topic by progressive journalists and reporters. These authors as well as Conti and Cahill (2017, p. 427) argue that the representative aspect of 'neutrality' in the publishing of news media remains a 're-occurring challenge', and also means the appearance of many instances of unscientific evidence about abortion. Moreover, they note that the representation of abortion through news is more often politically motivated. However, a 2010 study in Great Britain demonstrates that abortion is more predominantly framed and represented *negatively* (Purcell, Hilton & McDaid 2014). This study confers that the risks of physical and mental damage and the social complications of abortion on women are overrepresented in newspapers. Thus, they assert that the information covered by the news does not reflect the public health evidence that nonetheless recognises that abortion is one among the most common reproductive procedures in Britain (Purcell, Hilton & McDaid 2014, p. 1144). It is believed therefore, that abortion is stigmatised, attached to impoverishment and sexual taboos in these kinds of representations. Consequently, it is very rare to see any women's positive experiences on news (Purcell, Hilton & McDaid 2014, pp. 1150 - 2). Furthermore, the concern is that news media is '(re)producing social norms', and negative representations of abortion and these will continue restraining women's reproductive agency, reinforce stigma and limit access to safe abortion services (Purcell, Hilton & McDaid 2014, p. 1153).

Social Media and Abortion

The concern therefore, is that further negative public discourse against abortion on social media will emerge. Conti and Cahill (2017) believe it is even more dangerous as social media sites are open access. Anyone can receive and reproduce content, in which 'credibility is far more difficult to discern and verify' (Conti & Cahill 2017, p. 429). Several studies examine Facebook and Twitter and claim that while these sites have become a health information hub (including about abortion) that young people rely on, information on both sites is vastly unreliable. This includes texts from those self-

identified as health experts (Alnemer et al. 2015; Altshuler, Gerns Storey & Prager 2015; Lee, JL et al. 2014). While it is challenging to capture representations of abortion on social media due to its rapidly transformative nature, researchers can still observe the political movements regarding abortion (Conti & Cahill 2017; CREA 2019; Whaley & Brandt 2017). From the Planned Parenthood controversy with #defundPP as one among many anti-abortion movements, to #standwithPP or #standwithWendy to support the organisation, many attempts are by abortion advocates and organisations to put forward conversations regarding abortion. They aim to repel “bad” representations and bring more “positive” representations about abortion into social media. One example is #shoutyourabortion, aiming to normalise abortion, further public awareness, and give information about accessible ways for women to get medical abortions in the cybersphere (Whaley & Brandt 2018, pp. 164 – 167). Baird and Millar (2019) have observed particularly positive ways abortion information is represented in their online analysis of Australian clinics’ websites and online first-person testimonies, which have proven helpful in combatting misinformation and abortion-related stigma. However, the authors have concerns that a focus on ‘choice’ and individual experience is not unproblematic because the neoliberal individualism and racialised ideologies that underlie such campaigns and websites could marginalise women of colour in the collective advocacy for reproductive justice (Baird & Millar 2019).

Films, television and abortion

The last media form that has received significant attention from scholars is film and television, particularly the studies of American films and television from 1916 to 2016 by Sisson, Kimport, and Rowland (2017). As was found in news media, negative representations abound about the procedures. The character of the women seeking abortions, their health complications and mortality, are central and overrepresented. Sisson and Kimport (2014) indicate that 37.5% of women from eighty abortion plotlines in American television from 2005 to 2016 were shown to have experienced harmful medical consequences, meanwhile, evidence informs us that only 2.1% of women having abortions experienced any complications or adverse effects (Upadhyay et al. 2015; cited in Conti & Cahill 2017). The same negative conclusions about women

experiencing death when seeking or having abortions in the US television is again overly dramatized, the authors critically contrasting this data with real-life facts to provide an impressive comparison, 'the onscreen depiction of death following abortion [...] is about 7000 times the actual mortality rate seen in US abortion statistics' (Conti & Cahill 2017, p. 428). Thus, it is believed this negative depiction of abortion not only reflects the general social discourse of abortion but also reinforces the discourse of abortion as a dangerous practice in the US (Sisson & Kimport 2014).

In a later study, Sisson and Kimport (2016) also emphasise the misrepresentation of women's decisions about abortion, as nearly half of the characters in need, or of wanting an abortion end up not going ahead with the procedure. They have also looked at the lack of diverse female characters. Predominantly, in these depictions, the women are white, young, wealthy, and not currently parenting; this can reinforce the misperception of audiences who tend to believe that media is then capturing "reality" about abortion (Conti & Cahill 2017, p. 428). Sharing this common concern, O'Neil (2013, pp. 811-7), who examined four Turkish television series between 2005 and 2011, found that the way abortion-seeking characters are shaped are with negative attributes like 'selfish, vengeful, and often full of spite'. She believes that those representations are informed by and perpetuate the Turkish discourse about womanhood in which motherhood is the national desire.

Fortunately, the film industry does have "positive" representations of abortion to sell. Baird and Millar (2019, p. 1112) briefly list several contemporary films and series such as *Obvious Child*, *Grandma*, and *Jane the Virgin* which provide audiences with more sympathetic characters who make informed choices, or are 'rom-com' narratives about abortion. In 2019, we continued witnessing many encomiums from pro-choice and abortion rights advocates made for two Netflix original series - *13 Reasons Why* and *Sex Education* due to the contribution of portraying abortion more positively.

McNamara; (2019) names her article on Teen Vogue as '*Netflix series Sex Education Portrays Abortion Accurately*' with a small subtitle '*And that's important*'. Similarly, Buzz Feed reporter, Yandoli (2019), cites her star interviewer asking that the title stress the

importance of positive representation, *'13 Reasons Why Star Anne Winters Said Abortion Storylines on TV Are More Important than Ever'*.

Indeed, abortion should be represented more positively across all media forms to normalise the conversations (Baird & Millar 2019). However, the collective thinking about abortion on media within the binary of good/ positive and bad/ negative representations rests solidly in public-health-driven researchers' and pro-choice activists' demand for better portrayals of abortion to 'combat abortion stigma and improve women's access to and experiences of abortion' (Baird & Millar 2019). Cockrill (2014, p. 663), in her commentary imagining the abortion-stigma-free world, expresses a vision that '[o]n the whole, the media pieces about abortion would be educational and relationship-oriented [...]'. Yet, while endorsing the urge for 'positive and normalising representations of abortion' as above, Baird and Millar (2019, p. 1111) remind us that 'in relation to abortion what counts as positive representation is an open question'. Indeed, it is crucial to visit the thesis of Millar (2017, pp. 4 - 5) on representations of abortion in which regardless of whatever form they take, they do not solely mirror every woman's experience of abortion, 'but are empowered by norms surrounding gender, as they are refracted through other nodes of inequality such as race and social class; and because gender is inherently unstable and in need of constant reiteration and reinvention, representations of abortion are one means by which norms pertaining to gender are naturalised and made to appear outside of culture'.

2.2. Thinking through films

Films are thematically vital in media studies. Indeed, the first part of this literature review partially demonstrates the critical concern researchers have about the way films portray abortion, mainly landing on negative representations and narratives. Rather than following this dualist way of thinking about representations of abortion, I will trace and present literature that considers films featuring abortion discursively, putting emphasis on reading meanings of representations and narratives and in particular, cultural and socio-political contexts. This section will illustrate that there is literature within film studies that discusses the representation of abortion in films in relation to film direction,

genres, audio-visual effects, and the politics of feminism about abortion. The majority of the literature in this part will pay attention to three particular films which are not foreign to the conversations about abortion; namely, *Story of Women* directed by Claude Chabrol (1988), *Vera Drake* by Mike Leigh (2004), and *4 luni, 3 saptamâni si 2 zile (4 months, 3 weeks, and 2 days)* by Cristian Mungiu (2007). There will also be an important but brief discussion about the way that survival-horror and sci-fi films that feature abortion metaphors, can contribute to social and academic conversations.

Firstly, it is believed that different directors of films will distinguish the way abortion representation is taken into consideration. Lucca (2020) uses specific language in her discussions and film critiques, utilising the language of a 'male take' or 'female take' encompassing directors, genres in general, authors/script writers and such. She also, in her collective study of films featuring abortion, approaches them from a position that transcends the good and bad critique found in many other media representations. She distinguishes the films with 'female takes' (such as films from Gillian Armstrong; Agnès Varda, Céline Sciamma & Gillian Robespierre) from films made by male directors, 'male takes' (such as Claude Chabrol & Cristian Mungiu). Indeed, she puts *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, a newly released film from Sciamma into the first group, in which abortion is effectively portrayed with a complex narrative full of emotions, support, choice without guilt, and relief. Lucca (2020) argues the film has done well in representing abortion within a women-centric creation. A complex set of emotions from the character that has an abortion becomes tangible through film techniques as well as the use of symbolic images of children. A message about the aftermath of abortion and the possibility for future pregnancy is well conveyed, although the abortion procedure is cinematographically placed in a pre-modern period, which means it is not as safe as ours in contemporary times.

In contrast, male-authored (or directed) films, while bringing up different feelings in the abortion narrative, are fuelled with woefulness and mystery. Lucca (2020) takes Chabrol's *Story of Women* (1988) as an example to see that 'male takes' have few moments of relief for abortion as well as highlighting the film's aesthetics. To give an example, the film represents an abortion performed through the gaze of a young boy

looking through a keyhole. Lucca (2020) compliments Chabrol's filmic choice as it does well to partly hide the complete procedure. This work signifies the re-mystification of this medical procedure which a male gaze can never achieve, in the same way that Lucca believes many male directors have not done justice to abortion in films. Yet, beyond the gendered-authored- direction of films, Lucena (2016, p. 64) contends that Chabrol has done much with *Story of Women* and abortion to reveal the 'moral hypocrisy and double standards that hover over the issue of abortion'. In the movie, both the legal system and the Church are represented as such examples of hypocrisy. The author firmly echoes the work of Chabrol as a performative discourse that counters the institutional power and oppression over women's bodies. According to her, *Story of Women* emphasises abortion's health consequences. This is seen as the result of this reproductive service performed in secrecy in a totalitarian political regime that was not concerned with maternal mortality. She reiterates that it also did not concern itself with, '... the moral aspects of the problem, which in this case are closely linked to the populationist policies of the fascist governments of the time' (Lucena 2016, p. 64).

Vera Drake from Mike Leigh (in 2004), another example of an "abortion" film, is also discussed alongside the *Story of Women* in Lucena's paper (2016). As the author notes, 'while Leigh's desire is to illustrate 'a moral dilemma for public' 'from my [Lucena's] point of view, [...] in the case of this film it is vital to bear in mind the contrasts, the paradoxes, the lights and the shadows (both in the figurative and in the literal sense) presented to us by Leigh,' (Lucena 2016, pp. 64 – 65). Lucena (2016, p. 65) also shows us that film has often used lighting as a contrast to represent structural divisions of class and gender, to distinguish how 'poverty vs. wealth match the representation(s) of hygiene failure and disease vs. hygiene and neatness'. In this sense, women in the lowest social classes suffer the worst consequences of unwanted pregnancies as well as bearing the aftermath. A gender contrast is also seen in *Vera Drake* as women's decisions about abortion are seen as irrational and if in a woman's control, 'are [sic] not presented without a hint of moral condemnation' in the film. Lucena's (2016, p. 65) critique is that 'it is perceived as a women's problem' being 'solved by men' so while Leigh does not attempt to solve the issue of abortion, he does present who is the more desirable to 'deal' with abortion Lucena (2016, p. 66).

This idea is extended to link with the medicalisation of abortion that discourages women's authority about their decision; 'Women themselves are the source of danger, and medicalisation establishes control over such danger' Lucena (2016, p. 67). In the end, Leigh's film has a clear message - lay providers like women should never conduct abortions. Therefore, while *Vera Drake* can be read to represent the consequences of illegal and unsafe abortions happening to women as a way to back up legalisation of this reproductive healthcare, according to Lucena (2016, p. 68) this discourse is weak, especially when comparing it to *Story of Women*. She contends that Leigh gives few opportunities for Vera to defend herself, to disclose the failures. The only scene that sparks a little spotlight on abortion rights features the moment that the daughter's boyfriend speaks for Vera. This small detail is noticed by the author to point out that even other film analysts believe that *Vera Drake* 'does not speak in favour of abortion at all' (Incart et al. 2004, cited in Lucena 2016, p. 68).

However, considering which films speak for or against abortion is sometimes ambiguous. Take *4 Months, 3 Weeks, 2 Days* of Mungiu, thereafter called *432*. Godeanu-Kenworthy and Popescu-Sandu (2014) have critically examined the film's reviews in both Romania and the US. The authors point to the national debates over abortion through *432*. Nevertheless, the positions that pro-life and pro-choice take remain unclear; both sides' articulate specific interpretations to their allies. While the pro-life position tends to focus on the representation of the loss of a foetus as the loss of a potential life, the pro-choice camp pays more attention to the consequences for women when abortion rights are taken away; as happened in Romania during the Ceauşescu communist regime. Indeed, *432* is an exceptional example among films representing abortion that gets much attention from the academic field because of the intertwining discourses of gender, class and sexuality. There are also prime cinematographic techniques performed that represent complexity in socio-political and cultural narratives (Batori 2016; Godeanu-Kenworthy & Popescu-Sandu 2014; Palmer-Mehta & Haliliuc 2011).

Wilson (2008, p. 18) refuses to call *432* an "abortion" film because she believes that it is not Mungiu's films primary concern but rather that it is more about friendship and

intimacy 'under an intolerable strain'. The only thing that could make *432* a pro-choice film are the struggles as well as the bond that the two young women share in the movie. The author expresses that 'that intermittent, fragile bond is, rather than the abortion procedure, the main subject of Mungiu's superb film and the source of its compelling, stringent ethical seriousness' (Wilson 2008, p. 22). Reflecting Lucca's awareness of male-authored abortion films (which are usually woeful), Wilson's point of view (2008, p. 18) is an example of difference in that she contends it 'not only fails to spare us its characters' distress but also includes a harrowing and un-avoidable image of a tiny aborted foetus' – commonplace in pro-life campaign materials which unequivocally aim to horrify. In further contribution to this view, Maierhofer (2017, p. 160) agrees that 'instead of promoting a happy life with a baby, Mungiu's film uses graphic images and major moral dilemmas to deter the audience from accepting abortion'. Furthermore, Maierhofer (2017) believes that Mungiu's use of silence is, instead, a punishment or a show of suffering that both women characters in *432* experience even though their illegal act is not caught.

Nevertheless, in the particular ways of representation that the foetus and the 'performing silence' engenders, Palmer-Mehta and Haliliuc (2011) argue that there is disorientation in *432*'s scene, where the director pans out away from the foetus, to allow the audience to keep following the characters' conversation. It changes the way that we typically see abortion imagery which visibly enjoins 'woman and foetus', proscribing her as just a reproductive vessel. The foetus is thus seen as vulnerable; and women's lives are 'invisible and irrelevant', therefore we feel less sympathy (Phelan 1993; cited in Palmer-Mehta & Haliliuc 2011, pp. 124 - 125). Indeed, silence does not only contribute to the scene mentioned earlier. Palmer-Mehta and Haliliuc (2011, p. 112) argue that in fact soundlessness can be used with effect to challenge the liberal feminist idea of women's empowerment without discarding the idea that silence may allow people to see women as 'passive, empty or obedient'. The authors argue instead that silence itself can be empowering and it can offer a nuance of resistance or power rather than being seen as a negative connotation of repression and invisibility. Leading our gaze to follow Otilia entering different spaces, we can see how silence works in regard to the rape scene, the boyfriend's family dinner party and the disposal of foetus. The

performances of silence in Mungiu's film draws the spectators' attention allowing them to distinguish between the resistance of women and the complexities of patriarchal oppression in the Communist government in a Romania of the past, which always attempted to control women's bodies (Palmer-Mehta & Haliliuc 2011). Furthermore, the performance of silence illuminates different discussions about women's experiences of abortion, showing spectators the women's agency and extending the tactic of resistance to that forceful socio-political manipulation (Palmer-Mehta & Haliliuc 2011).

In further examinations of the socio-political manipulation in *432*, Godeanu-Kenworthy and Popescu-Sandu (2014, p. 233) point to the intertwining power of patriarchy and class, and note, '[i]n *432*, the oppressive patriarchal system that parallels the state oppression of the main characters is gradually revealed via the interactions of the individuals. The main figures of authority with whom Otilia and Găbiță have to negotiate their predicament are males such as Adi - Otilia's boyfriend (who provides money but requires her presence as a dutiful girlfriend at a family function), and the abortionist (who provides the abortion and requires money, sex and silence)'. Furthermore, as the film progresses, the authors argue that class may have had greater weight over the patriarchy and state oppression that limited women's reproductive rights. 'A sign of affluence which allowed the women either access to contraceptives or, more frequently, to safe abortions', (Godeanu-Kenworthy & Popescu-Sandu 2014, p. 234).

Moreover, Batori (2016) uses particular filming techniques to articulate and unravel these power relations in *432*. Batori (2016, p. 131) argues that audiences are invited to a metaphoric representation of 'power prevails over' Otilia, and exposes 'her as endangered and vulnerable' in every space she finds herself in. Throughout the experiences and circumstances Otilia is in, it emphasises that she 'becomes increasingly imperilled and defenceless in the face of power'. While recognising the resistance that the young woman in *432* has shown, Batori (2016) invites people to look closely at its complexity of resisting and negotiating struggles. Specifically, Otilia goes against the pronatalist policy to help Găbiță have an abortion, making a dreadful deal with the male abortionist, Mr Bebe, who forces her to have sex as part of this 'deal'. The body which has been breaking the law now gets invaded. This character holds two

positions; one that goes against the will of the authorities, while another demands and runs 'the risk of unwanted pregnancy' (Batori 2016, p. 132). When the procedure is done, the way that Otilia carries the foetus and tries to find a place to dispose of it is again figuratively seen as a pregnant woman trying to get away from the monitoring by authorities. When she can finally get rid of it, the author notes that her body 'acts independently again; she moves around the hotel and is now able to step out into public space', but the visual positioning shows how elusive that freedom is (Batori 2016, p. 134). Indeed, although abortions in the *Story of Women*, *Vera Drake*, and *4 months, 3 weeks, 2 days* are inevitably bloody with sweat and tears; all of these films carry opportunities to further discuss power relations of gender and class. By not simplifying the cinematography to a medical, socio-political discourse of abortion, the different film studies scholars mentioned above have deconstructed films beyond the negative representations of abortion.

Lastly, it is fascinating to see that without being explicitly scripted and illustrated, abortion discourses are figuratively and metaphorically interpreted in a few sci-fi horror movies. Notably, Jones, S (2015) argues that the survival-horror film genre can significantly present reflections on women's reproduction, and specifically abortion, while academia and activism usually overlook its worth amid the proliferation of popular culture. Taking *Inside* as one among a few examples in the study to articulate this, Jones (2015) points out that the film has shown the protagonists experiences of both the difficulties of maintaining pregnancy and having an abortion. In this life-death circumstance, the protagonist in *Inside* demonstrates how her actions can be read as a way of protecting her pregnancy (like covering her navel protrusion), but also how she is 'holding the foetus hostage' and threatening to stab it with a big needle when facing her attacker, who fantasises about the baby. Jones (2015, p. 440) decodes the needle 'as an abortive instrument' which could end the protagonist's life as well as the pregnancy. But in a later scene, it becomes her life-saving tool when she has to use 'the same needle to perform an auto-tracheotomy'. With *Inside*, the choice is nothing but a 'hopeless dualistic position' for the protagonist; whatever decisions are made about the foetus, the outcome for her is misery. For Jones (2015, p. 441), *Inside* not only surpasses the dualist political agenda of pro-choice and pro-life but also depicts the

turmoil that those agendas inculcate. Therefore, the horror-survival genre, as Jones (2015) contends, is not necessarily politically motivated, but leaves space for engaging with emotions, politics of choice, and personal struggles about abortion.

A common theme is exhibited in *Alien* by Ridley Scott (1979); like *Inside* it has no definitive abortion scene but instead there is a collective of brutal actions towards female characters. Cobbs (1990, p. 198) argues that rather than conveying 'gratuitous sexism', the 'sexual symbolism' that *Alien* illustrates 'may actually be its *leitmotif*,' which is reproduction. The author goes further to point out how *Alien* depicts the horrific struggle of a reproductive term with both astronauts and the spaceship being symbolised as "mothers" bearing monsters that could destroy their lives. Cobbs (1990, p. 201) then notes that the film's leitmotif is abortion, '[the] little girl threatened by a manifestly female alien monster incubating a whole ghastly nursery of developing eggs. He notes that *Aliens* concludes with Ripley [the survival character] wiping out the lot of them with a flame thrower in a massive job-lot abortion just before they hatch'. Thus, signifying connotations about the termination of pregnancies, both *Inside* and *Alien* are examples in which the representation of abortion in films goes beyond good/ bad binary.

CHAPTER 3: ABORTION POLITICS AND DISCOURSES IN VIETNAM

3.1 Politicising abortion in Vietnam

In line with my activism about abortion and my advocacy for women and abortions, I feel it is important to keep emphasizing that abortion is legal in Vietnam. However, in my experience, these seemingly liberal laws on abortion in Vietnam appear to grant the country a 'pass' on discussions about reproductive rights and justice in many of the recent regional and international agendas. As a young advocate in the field, I have been questioned several times about my motivations and the legitimacy of chasing the dream of Vietnamese abortion justice in both regional and international forums on reproductive health and rights. My interests concur with several scholars who have made it evident that legalisation is not the only attention-worthy issue in abortion politics (Luker 1984; Norris et al. 2011; Millar 2017). Having legal grounds to provide women with an abortion should not mean an end to justice or the need for abortion advocacy. Indeed, the situation in Vietnam is beyond the legalisation of abortion. For as long as I have been aware of the politics around abortion, I have also become aware that the discussions around this topic are insufficient.

In this chapter, I am therefore going to illustrate the discourse of abortion through crucial political milestones and the various political agendas in Vietnam. To better understand the analysis of *Flapping in the middle of nowhere*, it is crucial to also acknowledge contemporary politics, thus my discussions will centre on the legal status of this as a healthcare issue, abortion rates in Vietnam, the emergent discourse of an aging population, women's experiences, and the perceptions of the constitution of a 'fetus'.

The early days of abortion legalisation in Vietnam have been recorded differently by local and international papers, from 1945 to 1954 (Johansson et al 1996; 1998, p. 401; Bélanger and Khuat 1999; Tran 2018, p. 5). A few scholars consider that abortion was legalised in the 1960s as the result of the Prime Minister's decision on the Guidance on Birth Control Activities in 1963 (Goodkind 1994, p. 343; Hoang, Phan & Huynh 2008, p. 145). The many different reasons that are acknowledged to justify the early legalisation of abortion include the decolonised political agenda which 'rid the country of the penal code instituted' by the French, a need to control population growth and overcoming

poverty by reforming households during *Đổi mới* (the Renovation³), and the socialist affirmation of women's rights (Goodkind 1994, pp. 342 – 343). From my point of view, while the discourse of women's rights affirmation is currently used whenever abortion is brought to the discussion, the attempts of the government of the time regarding abortion should never be separated from the political views for population control and to deal with poverty. Prior to 1989, abortions could only be obtained by married women with consent from their husbands (Sjösten 2014, p. 21). Since then, only particular sets of texts have affirmed the rights to abortion for Vietnamese women, found solely in the 1989 law on People's health protection, issued by the National Assembly.

During *Đổi mới*, abortion was promoted as an alternative family planning program nationwide. Goodkind (1994, p. 343) notes that alongside other contraceptive methods, abortion was provided free of charge. In some particular areas, the government even implemented financial incentives and disincentives to engage families, especially women, in birth control programs following the enactment of the *one or two-child* policy of 1988 (Goodkind 1994, p. 343). Papers record that women who worked in the governmental sector during that time, received small grants from the state after having an abortion (Tran 2018, p. 69; Ministry of Finance & Ministry of Health 1976). Following this, dramatically increasing numbers of abortions reached a peak of 1.3 million, which meant one out of three pregnancies resulted in abortions in 1995. This led to international health professionals as well as Vietnamese policy-makers becoming increasingly concerned. Sjösten (2014, pp. 22 - 5) suggests that international pressure may have been a concern the Vietnamese government had about this abortion rate and abortion generally. Indeed, the Vietnamese government received criticism from international bodies during and after the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, while other scholars cite the United Nations Population Fund's remarks about abortion rates during that time as 'alarmingly high' (UNFPA 2002, p. 45; cited in Nguyen, HKH et al. 2010). Thus, these are the influences acknowledged as contributing to the shift in reproductive health strategies by the Vietnamese government (Sjösten 2014, p. 22). The first assessment of abortion policies and

³ - known as the economic reform of Vietnam in 1986

programs in Vietnam carried out by the World Health Organisation and health professionals' network in 1999 raised the need for reducing the recourse to abortion alongside improving the quality of this service. In the report, it is noted that when the many abortions in this period caught the attention of Vietnamese policy-makers, solutions were discussed and proposed including 'eliminating provider remuneration for abortion services that may act as an incentive for providers to perform unnecessary procedures, increasing the cost of abortion services, and making greater efforts to warn women of the dangers of abortion' (WHO 1999, p. 2). WHO, in fact, shared these concerns, yet, expressed the warning about policies that go against reproductive health or cause hurdles in access to services for women. Thus, until the present, while it is acknowledged that abortion numbers are significantly lower across the country (the ratio reduced to 0.16 in 2016) (Ministry of Health 2011, 2016), abortion has been placed in an untenable position in the medicalisation framework of the Vietnamese government. Abortion numbers in Vietnam are still considered too high and while there is a desire to reduce these nationwide, safety and accessibility must still be provided.

Indeed, over the past 25 years, abortion has been placed solely in the medical realm for technical discussion and improvement. Many research papers from the 1990s to 2008 were undertaken in order to explore new techniques, introducing medical abortions as well as adapting the updated guidelines of the WHO in order to expand the different uses of the current methods (Blum et al. 2012; Ngoc et al. 2014; Raghavan et al. 2012). In 2009, the first national guideline on reproductive health was issued where abortions had systematic guidelines in a separate chapter by the Ministry of Health. The new updated version, which discourages the implementation of the *nạo thai/ nong và gắp* (dilation and curettage) procedure (Ministry of Health 2016, p. 399), was issued in 2018. However, after three years, some reproductive health advocates felt considerations about the legal changes for abortion and a re-affirmation of abortion's legal status were needed.

In 2015 the General Office of Population and Family Planning (GOPFP) from the Ministry of Health attempted to revisit the legal ground for population control and proposed new laws on the population. Even though the proposal was finally dropped

from the national plan by the National Assembly in 2018 (Le & Phan 2018, p. 22; National Assembly of Vietnam 2018, p. 3), there was a controversial debate among health and law professionals emerged during its development. Among many discussions, one area of concern appeared when policy-makers decided to make a significant change to the legal status of abortion. The GOPFP put forward restrictions against abortions over 12 weeks of gestation in the first draft (Le & Phan 2018, p. 22) (see *appendix 1*). After consultation with various reproductive health professionals in public and non-governmental sectors, GOPFP made a slight change in the proposal that brought about an oddly legal circumstance for abortion-seeking women. Instead of loosening the restriction, the draft that I received one day before the youth conference under my coordination, indicated that while abortions were only possible for those below 12 weeks of gestation, this restrictive regulation would not apply to unmarried women. However, during the conference, the GOPFP kept stressing a concern that young women would use abortion as their 'pass ticket' to irresponsible sexual intercourse, as abortion is thought to be an easy choice. This also appears to be the interpretation of policy makers. These ideas were firmly netted by Sjösten (2014, p. 17) when she interviewed a government official in the population and family planning department. So while no particular studies in the country discuss these complicated issues, completely counter to the above statements, in a broader sense, and among the population of women, Johansson et al. (1996) indicate that women never perceive abortion as a family planning method or an easy choice.

After the collection of professional and community opinions at the regional and central level, the discussions about abortion went quiet until the final decision by the GOFPP which was to keep the remaining parts of the 1989 Law of people's health protection. This proposed several additional points which included circumstances where abortions were not allowed, how involved the husband and family could be, specific conditions for adolescents and people with special needs, and an obligation to sign a consent paper before having an abortion (Online Law Draft n.d.). These conditions are exceptional measures which reinforce the stigmatisation of abortion, continue reinforcing the inferior position of women regarding their own bodies and places abortion into a distinctive 'medical model' (Millar 2017, pp. 14 - 6). Despite being voted out of the National

Assembly's law-making agenda in the middle of 2018 the proposal of the Population law has been available on the government's website which could well be understood as a potential future attempt to put forward this proposal again. In fact, during the time of writing this section in May 2020, a new version for this draft of the Population law (see *Appendix 1*) was published on the National Assembly website (Online Law Draft n.d.). The reasons for the attempted redraft of this law remain unclear as there have not been any available discussions since 2018 when tracking public news.

In 2020, the most recent decision by the Prime Minister that passed the national Program of adjustment about replacement fertility levels (Decision 588) by regions and populations to 2030 is encouraging young women in some urban cities to give birth to one-or-two children. This policy indicates that by adjusting replacement-level fertility, women in urban areas are being encouraged to give birth aiming to build a young potential labour force (Prime Minister of Vietnam 2020). Even though there are no regulations regarding abortion in this policy; it suggests a possibly blurred change to abortion policies in the country. So far, indicated by numerous (neo)liberal and populist policies, the Vietnamese government discourse about abortion remains consistent with 'reduction in numbers' and 'high quality service' (Government of Vietnam 2017; Ministry of Health 2016, pp. 7-13). However, while considering abortion as an easy and unhealthy personal choice and practice, in the ironic manner, health promotion policies and educational programs have always stressed the danger and health risks of abortion. Thus, the circumstances that keep a silence around abortions after the rise of this service before the early 2000s as well as the current discourses cause young advocates like me to remain bewildered by the government's vision or plan. These have been causal to my own vision to act on the improvement of the discourse and the practicalities surrounding abortion in the country as otherwise there will be no significant reasons for abortion to be brought to the political agenda.

3.2 Women's experiences of abortion

Women's subjectivity has not been adopted by studies on this thematic issue in Vietnam, so their abortion experiences have mainly been collected through public health and medical researches. Despite being seen as individual concerns dependent on the

self-determination of women by the government, access to abortion is never uncomplicated for women anywhere for many reasons, from legal to cultural barriers. Vietnamese women, despite having good legal grounds for this healthcare, have more struggles with cultural and moral acceptance. While there are few studies that focus on women's experiences of abortion, existing research covers young women's experiences regarding unwanted pregnancy and abortion, the reasons why women delay abortions, the dilemmas of selective reproductive choices that require abortions, and their levels of 'satisfaction' about the services received (Bélanger & Khuat 1999; Gallo & Nguyen 2007; Gammeltoft 2014; Nguyen, THM & Do 2014; Tran 2018). In terms of decision making, one of the most important factors of reproductive agency, Tran (2018, pp. 74 - 75) argues that women in the Vietnamese context are less likely to make the decision alone or by themselves; specifically '[h]usbands play an important role in women's decision-making in general, including in abortion decisions'. Other studies explore medical worker's attitudes towards this reproductive service (Klingberg-Allvin et al. 2006; Klingberg-Allvina et al. 2007). Abortion stigma, excepting in one chapter of Tran's (2018) book, has not been comprehensively conceptualised in the Vietnamese context.

Research exploring the positive experiences and satisfaction of Vietnamese women about abortions is rare. In these few cases, positivity is assigned to medical diagnoses such as 'non-reactive expression' to 'mild post-abortion effects'. One particular contributing account discusses the perception among women of feeling "as normal" after having an abortion in rural areas of Thai Binh province. According to this paper, a number of women (20%) describe 'normal' as 'somewhat dizzy', or a feeling of dizziness alongside a backache or headache (Johansson et al. 1996, p. 105). Another report by two medical doctors in the National Hospital of Obstetrics and Gynaecology found a significant positive response (96.7%) from women having had medical abortions when discussing *tác dụng phụ* (side effects), but as indicated in the report, this does not appear to be common among women having medical abortions (Nguyen & Do 2014).

Major qualitative research has explored the ethical and moral concerns from women and partners that may fit with the notion of stigma surrounding abortion. Women's negative experiences around abortion including the emotional challenges faced pre and

post abortion are predominantly captured and reported in these papers. Sin (*tội lỗi*), committed a sin (*làm điều có tội*) and sinful (*mang tội*) are words that frequently occur in the different publications about abortion experiences in Vietnam and specifically can be found in publications between the late 1990s and 2008 (Johansson et al. 1996; 1998; Gammeltoft 2001; 2003; Tran 2018). These papers articulate that the complexities of *tam giáo* (three teachings or triple religions including Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism) ideologies in respect to the life of the foetus, self-responsibility and *có hiếu* (filial piety) have profound impacts on how people perceive the termination of pregnancies as unacceptable and immoral (Gammeltoft 2001; 2003; Johansson et al. 1996). On one hand, this sense of morality alongside the feelings of shame and regret lead to hesitation in disclosing experiences but also reinforce the continuum of silence around abortion not limited to women (Kumar et al. 2009, p. 627). Indeed, Tran's (2018, pp. 192 - 194) findings, are evidence of the 'social stigma attached to the event' that keep women silenced. In addition, both Tran (2018) and Johansson et al (1998)'s studies illustrate how family members are also embroiled in the cycle of silence in which their feelings are of 'ambivalence, guilt, sadness, and powerlessness' (Norris et al. 2011, p. 551). 'We knew about her abortion; we did not talk about it. It is not a happy story', said the mother-in-law of a woman in Tran's (2018) book. On the other hand, Gammeltoft (2010; 2014) explores the moral experience of abortion with another account in which decisions around abortion are responsible decisions 'for the child's own sake', for example if the ultrasound result came out with a diagnosis of a foetal anomaly. Thus, the author (2014) argues that these choices are tangled in forces including kinship, love and obligation as well as the discourse around medical judgment regarding the status of foetal impairment or abnormalities.

I suggest there is a common pattern - whereby individuals in the medical field firstly disapprove of 'irresponsible and unprotected sex' among unmarried and young women, and perceive that abortion is morally wrong and therefore hold strong attitudes against abortion. Klingberg-Allvin et al. (2006) observed that while no young women actually felt disrespected, privacy was identified as a big gap in the provision of service. Medical practitioners often perceive that pre-marital sex is unhealthy and leads to negative consequences such as dropping-out of school (which is normally associated with crime

or social/ evil behaviours). This is despite also justifying that unwanted pregnancies among unmarried women are unavoidable due to the trends of a modern lifestyle. It appears then, that their job when pre-abortion counselling is to stress the dangers of abortion on the body and the woman's future, especially her fertility. While the 2006 paper does not touch on the morality of abortion, the later 2007 paper describes the perceptions of midwifery students towards pre-marital sex and stresses the belief participants have about abortion as a morally wrong practice. But this paper also notes that abortion is less stigmatised among unmarried women (Klingberg-Allvin et al. 2007). Interestingly, the latter paper shows the moral conflict young midwifery students have regarding abortion, which the authors name as the struggle between the ethics of care and the ethnics of justice.

3.3 Abortion and the perception of fetus

Luke (1985) emphasises that among the debates over abortion and the status of the foetus, the concepts of when a foetus is a human being is ambiguous throughout history and culture. This idea is explored by Gammeltoft (2001, p. 319) in their study of Vietnam, hence, the author concludes that '[a]s long as the foetus is defined as belonging to the domain of "nature" rather than "culture" [...], abortion is morally acceptable'. Contributing to understanding what women's experiences are like in Vietnam, studies by this anthropologist also unravel the perception of abortion in light of the good or bad judgement. These are thought to be justified by the different reasons surrounding the spiritual and scientific paradigm of the foetus. Vietnamese philosophers note that traditionally, until the birthday rites when infants reached a full living year, they are not considered 'a human being with a true human soul' (Chanh Cong Phan 1993; Dao Hung 1989; cited in Gammeltoft 2001, p. 319). Gammeltoft (2001) also reports several responses from participants that align with the above notion. 'Asking the [sic] question of whether they think a foetus has a soul, Cuong says, "Of course not, a child does not have a soul until it is born, until then it is part of its mother's body" and Cuc adds that "such an idea is superstitious. At this stage, it is merely a blood clot."' (Gammeltoft 2001, p. 322)

A common belief is thus shared, but from different perspectives. We can see that the accounts by two Vietnamese philosophers when discussing 'human beings' are from a traditional standpoint, Gammeltoft (2001)'s and Johansson et al (1998, p. 407) papers justify this notion of 'not being a human' based on what is called a "scientific" perspective. This considers early abortions or abortions at the time that a foetus is not properly developed (young foetus) showing on an ultrasound as a desired practice. However when "scientific" techniques display the later stages of foetus development, which she calls 'evidence of humanness'; abortion is then seen as unethical (Gammeltoft 2001, p. 323).

On the socio-spiritual account of abortion and the aspects of a fetus in Vietnam, when it is believed to have a soul, abortion is seen as immoral (Gammeltoft 2003). People, including abortion providers, women and family members, practice rituals to commemorate the loss as well as to gain a sense of relief from what they have done. Incidents are described in various papers where women and family members are asked and ask to bring the post-abortion substance (the remaining parts of the fetus or the deceased fetus) to worship at home or in pagodas as a lost member of the family (Gammeltoft 2001; 2003). This practice is also associated with the superstitious belief that it helps to avoid the *báo oán* (revenge) of the aborted foetus's spirits/ souls or ghosts, (Gammeltoft 2014, p. 210).

In addition, the relatively new pro-life groups in Vietnam, who could possibly be identified as religious groups, adopt these various types of practices as part of their resistance and objections against abortion. I have found little evidence of research about these groups in the academic field. They are mainly young male medical or health science students in big cities like Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. The common news media represents these groups as saviours who firstly collect the deceased fetuses from hospitals and clinics and then offer them to *noi an nghi* (cemeteries) with ritual ceremonies like small funerals. In these online stories, every fetus is thought to be piteous and precious; therefore every abortion is unacceptable according to the perceptions of these pro-lifers (Helino 2019; Minh Nhan 2017; Thuy Nga 2018). It is believed that the many pro-life youths have actively collected 2000 to 3000 fetuses in just a few years. Minh Nhan (2017) notes that after witnessing the video of an

anonymous young medical student collecting fetuses from a black plastic bag in the dumping area near a reproductive health clinic, representatives of Hanoi Department of Health reported penalizing such clinics who breached medical regulations by dumping fetuses. However, from my point of view, this disclosure not only raises concerns about such breaches but also illustrates an ambiguity and curiosity about such pro-life practices.

In conclusion, this chapter demonstrates the way that the Vietnamese government has been politicising abortion to serve the populationist agenda from the beginning of its legalisation in the 1980s. While there have been few changes in the current policies regarding this reproductive healthcare service, abortion continues to be seen both as individual responsibility and a national shame by the government because of the high annual numbers. Concern regarding morality and stigma within Vietnamese culture and society is socially widespread but there is no attempt at intervention. Diverse stories of women who have experienced abortions are scant and little attention is paid to countering the negative and piteous moral discourses in the country. Lastly, while Vietnamese religious groups (pro-lifers) have no concrete voice in national policies, they are possibly advancing their causes through the media in order to spread sympathy for aborted foetuses and convey messages against abortion. The politics of this will be discussed in the next chapter when it comes to the analysis of the film.

CHAPTER 4: THE ANALYSIS OF *FLAPPING IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE*

Flapping in the middle of nowhere (Flapping) follows *Huyền*, a young woman living in Hanoi for college with her intimate partner – *Tùng* who is interested in rooster fighting, and her close friend - *Linh* who can be identified as a transgender person⁴ working as a sex worker. The film traces *Huyền's* unintended pregnancy and how she navigates her situation. *Huyền* has worries, but decides to have an abortion. She goes to one public

⁴ No script in the film confirms *Linh's* gender identity but I am identifying *Linh* as a transgender person because her character is a common occurrence in Vietnam where a male identifies as a woman through wearing feminine clothes, a wig, and make-up.

hospital where she is refused an abortion because the male doctor believes it is a sin to perform an abortion in the second trimester. After this incident, *Huyền* is presented with the possibility of attending a private hospital that might provide the service for her, though unfortunately, at a higher cost. *Huyền*'s lack of finances means she cannot immediately afford that service. During this time, *Tùng* runs away with all of their money after losing his rooster fighting match. To deal with financial hardship, *Huyền* follows *Linh*'s advice; to pursue sex work so she can earn some income. In an unusual arrangement, *Huyền* is introduced to *Hoàng* – a wealthy, good-looking man who is interested in pregnant women and fetishizes fetuses. As time passes, *Huyền* becomes closer to *Hoàng* and starts disclosing her feelings for him. However, after their first-time making love, *Hoàng* leaves, disappearing into the woods. The film concludes with *Huyền*'s life going on, *Tùng*'s return and *Linh*'s leaving. *Flapping*'s ending may suggest a separation of these friends and closes with ambiguity about *Huyền*'s pregnancy.

While *Điệp* does not dramatize abortion in the film, it is crucial to recognize that what happens around *Huyền* revolves around the decision about abortion which is the centre of *Flapping*'s storyline. Viewers are invited to pay attention to the idea of abortion in the very early minutes of the film and to wonder what will happen next in her life and her decision about abortion. Indeed, while concerns about abortion usually fall into centralising a liberal framework of choice, autonomy and agency (Millar 2017; Smith 2005; Tran 2018), I argue that this film does not. Particularly, in a liberal understanding, autonomy is usually understood as 'individual independence', 'self-determination' and the self-reliant individualist view of the right to choose; and while agency 'refers to people's ability to make and act on their own life choices, even in the face of others' opposition', the choice is considered as the independent practice of individuals (Gupta 1996; Kabeer 2005, p. 15). I argue this film does not fall into this conventional concept but suggests an alternative way of thinking about choice by visualizing an intersectional feminist lens about women's agency and bodily autonomy, and by doing so focus on the question of abortion.

Tran (2018, p. 57) notes that Lock and Nguyen (2010) argue that the individual 'choices' and 'rights' assumed by Western liberal thought carry little favor in Asian cultural

contexts, which are dominated by hierarchical, relational and consensual social identities. The relevance of Western concepts such as autonomy and choice need to be tested in a Vietnamese context. To give an example, the author illustrates this idea in her discussion of sex-selective abortion in Vietnam in order to demonstrate that a woman's decision for sex-selective abortion is predominantly influenced by the socio-political shifts in Vietnam, the persistent patriarchal norms, and the development of modern reproductive technologies (Tran 2018, pp. 57 - 89). However, while mindful of Tran's argument that we cannot simply transfer assumptions of Western liberal thought to Vietnamese contexts, I do suggest that the liberal approach does have a strong influence on the politics of abortion in Vietnamese society, especially in the way that the government is politicizing it. I have explored this point in more detail in chapter three, where I discussed the assumption that abortion is easy, accessible and a women's own decision. Thus, by upholding this liberal approach and treatment to abortion, there are a lot of concerns unaddressed or neglected by the government. In this sense, *Flapping* is an example of a cultural counterhegemonic discourse in the context of presenting a relational concept of autonomy which provides an appropriate alternative approach to healthcare. Particularly, Sherwin (1998), in her work on women's autonomy in health care, proposes a relational approach. In response to neoliberal appropriations of autonomy, a relational approach to autonomy reminds us as scholars, advocates and providers, of the material restrictions in many women's lives including 'economic resources and on-going fear of assault' (Sherwin 1998, p. 37). In particular, restrictions include poverty, anti-abortion harassment and the persistent norms that stigmatize abortion from providers which limit available options. A relational approach to autonomy appreciates that while women's autonomy and choice are crucial factors in access to abortion, we must also understand that choice is limited by a multitude of factors.

Kabeer (2005, p. 14), for example, insists the idea of agency and 'real choice' must include the alternatives that enable 'the ability to have chosen differently', and 'they must be seen to exist'. To articulate the idea, she argues '[p]overty and disempowerment generally go hand in hand, because an inability to meet one's basic needs – and the resulting dependence on powerful others to do so – rules out the capacity for meaningful choice'. Moreover, in the context of thinking about the

representation of abortion decisions, Baird and Millar (2019, p. 1) provide us with a critical analysis of ‘unapologetic’ representations of abortion decisions in the media, centering the ‘multi-dimensional experiences’ of people seeking abortion. With this in mind, I argue that *Flapping* makes a unique and important contribution to a cultural and contextual representation for relational theories of autonomy and agency in terms of seeking abortions in Vietnam.

Furthermore, by tracing the film’s narrative, I contend that while abortion is less likely to be seen as an accomplishment in the film, it is crucial not to utterly categorise *Flapping* as representing a “bad” abortion film. Instead, I argue that *Diệp*’s aesthetic product excellently produces a counter-discourse to liberal abortion politics in Vietnam by visualizing the relational approach to autonomy and agency because it places attention on the concern of “real choice” in Vietnam regarding this. Significantly, the film situates *Huyền*, a young migrant Vietnamese woman, and her reproductive struggles, among a complex and intertwining set of challenges; poverty, the refusal of doctors to provide the abortion, and finally the existence of a social force that can be rendered as “pro-fetus”. Thus, I will discuss these three themes in this chapter to expand our understanding of the relational theory of autonomy and agency in Vietnam.

If we follow *Huyền*’s story in the narrative of *Flapping*, it is vital to view this character as socially situated in a particular politics of location which result in the experience of herself in poverty, the impotent support she receives from her boyfriend – *Tùng* and best friend - *Linh*, as well as the intimately flimsy and evanescent nurture from *Hoàng* – a pro-fetus⁵ metaphor that I will discuss in the later section. From my point of view, the struggles that *Huyền* experiences do not represent the independent and individual struggles of the (neo)liberal feminism framework, but highlight the struggle within the structural oppression of location and institutional and socio-cultural dilemmas of women in the Two-third-World⁶ (Rich 1984). Thus, by showing the complexity of a young

⁵ – I use this term pro-fetus deliberately here to describe a situation that does not fit within pro-life or anti-abortion dualisms. While it illustrates ambiguity and complexity, it fits with the representation that the film constructs.

⁶ - Introduced by Mohanty (2003) in her article Under Western Eyes Revisited: Feminist Solidarity Through the Anti-capitalism struggles. The term is coined in order to break through the limitation of location and borderline (of

Vietnamese woman's subjectivity, the film illustrates *Huyền's* journey to an ambiguous destination, with the limited and arduous 'so-called' choices to make in the context of unintended pregnancy and abortion in Vietnam.

4.1. “I don't know. I don't have money either”: The beginning of the intertwining struggle

The ways in which the film tells its narrative surround the protagonist and exquisitely uses cinematographic techniques to add to our understanding of the complexity of *Huyền's* position. Given the central role of economics and poverty in women's decision making about abortion in terms of choice to delay or not anywhere in the world but particularly in Vietnam, poverty must not be merely situated as a personal struggle (Chi et al. 2010; Gallo & Nguyen 2007; Hajri et al. 2015; Hoang, Phan & Huynh 2008; Levin et al. 2009; Sherwin 1998; Smith 2005; Solazzo 2019; Tran 2018). In *Flapping*, the entire social structure that is represented through the aesthetic imagery and narratives of differing identities, the social and cultural environments and the relationships between characters, links closely to the experience of poverty underlying the uncertain state of limited choice regarding *Huyền's* abortion. Thus, by bringing poverty to the journey of a reproductive decision by a young woman, I argue that the film demonstrates why we need a relational approach to autonomy when providing abortion care in Vietnam, where the choice for abortion is assumed to be made easily. In this section, I highlight how the film techniques illustrate *Huyền's* social location and help analyze the structural poverty that intertwines with patriarchal power.

Poverty and politics of location

Firstly, through the construction of space and sound, a cultural imagination of poverty and the politics of location in Vietnam are illustrated. As Lodge (2014), in his review on *Verity*, notes '[r]emarkably resourceful location work is employed to underline the urban decay gnawing at the film's chosen slice of Hanoi society from the outside in, but this is no stripped-down exercise in social realism'. Indeed, *Huyền's* lack of financial resources is evident not only through a singular individual statement, but through representations

Global North/South, developing/ (less-)developed country and First/Third World) while still stressing the weight of inequality that two-thirds of the population experience across the globe.

of landscape, cultural symbols and her social relationships with *Tùng* and *Linh*. Through public to private spaces we start noticing *Huyền*'s impecunious living situation. The film begins in the urban landscape of a modest residential area where we first see the appearance of working-class livelihood - a young man replacing a street light on a murky afternoon. *Flapping* expresses realism by using the combination of diegetic sounds and low-key lighting to ingeniously match and fit our imaginations about daily life in every scene (Turner 2006). The sound of water dripping in the archaic apartment, the echo of the train's horn, and the sound of a train rolling heavily across the rails, together with other urban noises in the neighborhood, arouse a common cultural imagination among audiences about the poverty in the 'marginal living spaces' where *Huyền* resides (Karis 2013). With the work of dim lighting throughout most scenes, spaces in *Flapping* become emotionally expressive without being fictional. Indeed, *Flapping* provides an ideal representation of the urban poor for those who derive pleasure from experiencing realism.

As spectators, we watch as *Huyền* leaves the city on a short trip to explore her origins. We can continue to draw on our imaginations about this young girl and her identity through the representations of landscape; images such as the mountainous terrain shown along the country roads. In addition, the distinctive dialect, calling her mother as *mạ* (also *mẹ*, as mother, in the dominant Vietnamese dialect), constructs *Huyền*'s identity through a sense of ruralness and migration. While Lodge (2014) sarcastically notes that '*Huyền* has at least flown some distance, having left her rural village to pursue a college education in the Vietnamese capital of Hanoi', I contend the poverty in this binary of location between rural and urban is not left behind for *Huyền*. In other words, urban life does not utterly benefit her, but could make it more challenging. Thus, the representation of poverty in *Flapping* has great consistency due to *Điệp*'s deployment of locations.

Flapping also consistently uses the cultural signifier of soup bowl (porridge) without shallots as *Huyền*'s choice of food in daily life. I suggest this allows audiences to reference poverty. Soup bowls are significant symbols that usually appear in the context of destitution or illness in Vietnamese society as people usually refer to this as the most

modest of foods that will 'keep you alive'. Notably, the soup bowl in *Nam Cao's* novel – *Chí Phèo* which tells a story of the rural poor in the *Nguyễn* dynasty of traditional Vietnam, has given this iconic imagery a cultural implication of intimacy and poverty in local media and literature. By using soup bowl in *Flapping*, audiences are invited to socially navigate and relate to *Huyền* and make the link between poverty and the vulnerable state of pregnancy.

Along with the social and cultural constructions, the film takes us inside to the private sphere where intimacy can be closely viewed. The narratives bind *Huyền* to the network of people who share a common circumstance like *Tùng* and *Linh*. These characters are no better off financially than *Huyền* and their presence contributes to the understanding of the narrative in which the politics of location and socially situated poverty are clearly illustrated.

Firstly, *Tùng* is a young man who pursues informal labour that involves lighting replacement and trading. *Tùng's* poverty is marked through the imagery of constant debt, leading to his affiliation with the rooster-fight gang and the sex worker. In both relationships, he has no money to pay which leads to severe consequences; the gang beats him up while the sex worker searches his house in order to find money as he has not paid her. Despite all the hardships, we can observe that he does work to find ways to partially contribute to *Huyền's* abortion. However, in the end, he decides to run away not only with the money he gave *Huyền* but also her scholarship money. *Tùng*, alongside the other male characters in *Flapping* represent patriarchal hegemony. These characters include the male lecturer who holds the power to grant her one-off money in the form of scholarship, the male doctor who decides not to grant her an abortion and *Hoàng* who nurtures her in order to satisfy his fetish. It is important to note that rather than being a passive actor in these power relations, *Huyền's* agency and resistance is illustrated in various scenes and in some patriarchal spaces, for example approaching her lecturer for a scholarship, deciding on an abortion without considering *Tùng's* opinion and the decision to begin a business transaction with *Hoàng*. However, various influences, decisions and control over *Huyền* are undeniably demonstrated as those male characters practice power over that agency, her body and the fetus she carries.

Secondly, *Linh*, the third member of this triangular relationship works as a sex worker who seems to have a consistent, intimate partner providing her with money. Spectators have few opportunities to consider *Linh's* background, but we can certainly observe the companionship and intimacy between her and *Huyền*. From their conversations about their bodies to money, the companionship and support between these two is undeniable.

Linh's gender expression is transgender and her primary labour is sex work. This combination of identities is usually linked to poverty in the development sector particularly in Vietnam (Oosterhoff & Hoang 2018). It is equally important to notice that 'sex trade has served a vital role in the course of economic survival' within the existing social system of discrimination against transgender (Jones, A, DeFilippis & Yarbrough 2018). The film suggests that for *Linh* there is an assumed connection between having a biological female body and material privilege in the context of sex work; this idea will be looked closely within the body's politics in the later section. Bui (2018), in a study about online platforms and transgender representation, argues that Vietnamese electrical news media usually pay attention to famous transgender celebrities to convey the idea of progress within the heteronormative boundary. However, by seeing *Linh* in the film, this representation broadly serves to counter-hegemonic discourse to illustrate another life-course struggle for transgender sex workers in Vietnam. I argue that despite the in-depth narrative regarding a transgender woman the representation of *Linh* potentially suggests a significant binding of heteronormativity, patriarchy and neoliberal ideology in Vietnamese society.

Thus, viewing *Flapping* through the lens of the politics of location, which considers the intersectional perspectives of age, class, and gender identities, *Huyền*, who appears as a migrant, lower working-class, young woman in a common situation in a Vietnamese capital city, is wholly positioned in structural poverty that she cannot simply overcome with individual effort. It is clear to see *Huyền's* decision about abortion will not be easy. We can witness this struggle in *Huyền's* statement where she hesitantly indicates the wish for an abortion in front of *Linh*, "*chắc là tao bỏ thôi*" (*I might have an abortion*). The tenuousness of this statement reiterates her crucial concerns about finances; "*Tao*

không biết. Đẳng nào thì tao cũng chẳng có tiền” (I don’t know. I don’t have money, anyway).

Poverty and the politics of body

As discussed above, *Huyền’s* struggles in poverty are not just expressed through a single thread; they intertwine with identities which are situated in particular landscapes, social networks and bodies. *Flapping* visually articulates two remarks by Brown and Gershon (2017) about bodies. Firstly, how Marxist ideology considered ‘the body was marked with a person’s economic class’, and secondly, how Foucault (1977) suggests the body is the place where the shape of power can be analyzed (not limited to economic position and class) (Brown and Gershon 2017, p. 1). The authors argue ‘[a]nalyzing the body as a site where power is contested and negotiated provides scholars with the ability to examine the fluidity of privilege and marginalisation’ This idea of body politics is well represented in this film through the relation between *Huyền’s* pregnant body, *Linh’s* transgender body, and *Tùng’s* cis-male body (Brown and Gershon 2017, p. 1).

Therefore, the following section will pay attention to body politics and what this signifies in order to explore *Huyền’s* struggle in relation to gendered bodies, poverty and agency. Equally importantly, ‘the body’ in this analysis is not drawn away from the context of *Huyền’s* social location; surrounded by her friend, *Linh*, her intimate partner *Tùng* and the sex worker who has an affair with *Tùng*. We will see in the following discussion, that the struggle of ‘the body’ ties closely to the struggle of poverty to influence one’s agency and autonomy regarding decisions about abortion.

After giving money to *Huyền* so she can afford proper meals, *Linh* expresses ‘*Nếu tao mà là con gái thật, thì chẳng bao giờ tao lo chết đói; (If I were a real girl, I would never starve to death)*. *Huyền* contends ‘*Nếu mà mà là con gái ý, mà sẽ lại có bầu, mà có bầu thì lúc nào mà cũng đói’ (If you were a woman, you would be pregnant; thus you would always be hungry)*. By using such lively language, the tangled experiences of poverty and body politics are revealed. This conversation carries two implications through the use of language in which the idea of starvation and hunger signifies poverty while being a “real girl/woman” possibly indicates an essentialist ideology of “owning” a

biologically female body. Considering the circumstances of *Linh's* sex-work, her assumption also signifies an experience of poverty and the struggle of gender identity *Linh* faces as a transgender woman in the dominantly heteronormative society of Vietnam. Her point of view indicates the materialistic liberal thought regarding the biological body of a “real girl” (inhabiting a female body) which could potentially play a role in dealing with poverty; at least, if she had ‘that’ body, she thinks she would not have been hungry. This idea is once again re-emphasised by a “real woman” in *Flapping* when *Huyền* meets the sex worker with whom *Tùng* has a sexual affair. This woman tells *Huyền* that “đàn bà, dễ ấy mà” (*woman, that's easy*) in order to address her question “em phải làm gì bây giờ?” (*What should I do now?*) after *Tùng* runs away. In Vietnam, it is called “bán thân” (*selling your body*) and is assumed to be an economical way to exchange a body for benefits. Thus, the female body is subjected to being exploited in any (neo) liberal political or social space. There is an assumption that women can easily earn money by providing sex work, particularly in the context of this film.

Linh's assumption about the privilege of being a “real woman”, in particular, having a female body as a way out of poverty is challenged by *Huyền* as a pitfall that prolongs the poverty fueled by patriarchy, (neo)liberalism and capitalism. *Huyền* quickly fell into a dilemma shown through *Flapping's* narrative that gave her no real choice in her current circumstances. This dilemma can be understood in this context where neoliberal and capitalist ideas of bodies as economic solutions are expressed through *Linh's* desire for a female body; quickly shutdown by the unique body subjectivity *Huyền* experiences. This is backed up by another sex worker. Consequently, *Huyền's* body subjectivity is collapsed under the influences of these forces with a rift between her agency and autonomy, and the power over her own body.

The representation of bodies is seen through another gender lens following small talk between *Tùng* and his male friend. From the point of view of the two men, abortion is an effortless business; *Tùng's* friend says “Đơn giản ấy mà. Cắm cái ống hút vào... là xong!” (“*It's simple. Just a tube in... [He takes the straw out of his drink, and sucks in the air as a demonstration for an abortion procedure] and that's it!*”). Their conversation

while waiting for *Huyền*'s abortion contributes to the point that a male perspective about abortion is greatly disconnected from a woman's experience of her body. Furthermore, this failure to recognize the burden or weight of female embodiment continues when spectators see *Tùng* running away with all the money. While this scene could be generally read as the ideal portrayal of an irresponsible intimate partner in patriarchal Vietnamese society, I further argue that there is a symbolic disconnection from masculine bodies and experiences in this context. It requires us to look into *Tùng*'s situation of being dehumanized and emasculated after losing the rooster fight and I would argue the loss of masculinity and self-esteem when beaten up by the gang. At the same time, his rooster – a traditional and cultural symbol of masculinity in some Asian cultures – is executed by having its throat cut. This brutal scene is illustrated without showing the severe physical injuries that *Tùng* receives, but through the spiritual and ideological damage to his (bodily) manhood when the gang members hold the dying rooster, with its blood splattering, over *Tùng*'s face. Hence, the representation of *Tùng* running away is not only that of a thoughtless young man who wants to deny the responsibility of *Huyền*'s pregnancy, the film enables us to read this representation in more complex ways and can be read as the breakdown of a conventional stereotype of masculinity in a heteronormative society. As a result, we see complexity in cis-male subjects like *Tùng* and how he finds a way to deal with the breakdown and distance from *Huyền*. There is a lack of bodily connections and empathy occurring in the intimacy between *Tùng* and *Huyền*. Regardless, the film then re-locates the narrative back to an analysis of poverty and body politics, as *Tùng*'s departure emphasizes the severity of *Huyền*'s suffering of poverty in the particular circumstance fuelled by patriarchal power.

In the end, looking at the portrayal of *Huyền* under the relational theory of autonomy and agency requires feminist analysts to look into choices through the lens of intersectionality. It requires rejecting the liberal framework of self-reliance in terms of the decisions around abortion. *Flapping* does not present any easy choices, but the complexity of struggle caused by structural poverty powered by patriarchy and capitalism towards *Huyền*'s decision for an abortion are clearly shown. Specifically, the intersectional identities of gender, location, body and labour are constituted along with

the splendid filmic techniques, so structural poverty is represented in the narrative of this film as the primary concern that constrains the protagonist's agency and autonomy.

4.2. “I want to earn money”: Back to the beginning due to the conscientious objection to abortion

While poverty is evident in the film as the barrier for the decision of the protagonist (as shown in the above discussion), this section explores the second theme regarding conscientious objection to abortion, which results in another dilemma for *Huyền* in her journey to overcome an unintended pregnancy. The main argument in this section underscores the complexity and ambiguity of moral standards concerning the understanding of fetus that underlies the doctor's refusal to perform *Huyền*'s abortion. As a result, another perspective of the relational theory of autonomy and agency is not only seen but is expanded. We can then see the entanglement between a conscientious objection and when *Huyền* finally has money (partially given by *Tùng*) to afford an abortion. She comes to the public hospital where she had already had an ultrasound before receiving the service. It is crucial to note that this is not an unplanned visit because she had already expressed the wish to have an abortion to a doctor in this hospital when she had an examination in the first quarter of the film. These particular scenes work for the development of the film narrative regarding the on-going struggles that *Huyền* experiences. *Flapping* shows us a cycle of struggle starting from a state of poverty to the conscientious objection to abortion which leads to the Doctor's refusal to perform an abortion in this public hospital. At this point, *Huyền* faces a not-new challenge but an intensive extension of poverty that drives her into deciding to do sex work while still pregnant. This section will not concern the representation of abortion procedures and will exclude the medical techniques and processes. Instead I will endeavor to provide an in-depth interpretation of the cultural and moral perspectives occurring in the abortion narrative within the medical setting in Vietnam through the film.

Every scene where *Flapping* represents medical doctors, I argue, represents the discourse of the conscientious objection to abortion by Vietnamese doctors. This discourse is rarely discussed, but it suggests the internalisation of the *tám giáo* (three teachings), particularly Buddhism, among the medical forces to morally oppose abortion

in contemporary Vietnam (Gammeltoft 2001, 2003, 2010, 2014). While *Flapping*, in my interpretation, does not entirely convey a moral discourse which aims to direct people into an absolute moral stance, the politics of morality surrounding abortion in this context require discussion. Therefore, I argue that *Flapping* does not solely represent a concrete standard for morality towards abortion; it demonstrates the ambiguity and instability of these ideas within the medical field in Vietnam.

Gammeltoft (2001, p. 324) notes in her study that in Vietnam '[h]ealth staff at the obstetrical hospital [...] had no moral qualms about performing abortions, as long as they took place within the first trimester'. Specifically, one doctor insisted that when the fetuses "grew" to a particular stage that could be observed as human, indeed, the second trimester, doctors feel uneasy about performing abortions (Gammeltoft 2001, p. 324). In the film, this idea is represented mainly through the hospital scenes. Firstly, the female Doctor who performs the ultrasound on *Huyền* after expressing her wish to have an abortion, shows her conscientious objection to abortion through the way that character expresses her hesitation and disappointment about *Huyền's* will to have an abortion; she expresses "*Tôi cứ tưởng có giữ để đẻ*" ("*I thought you were keeping it*"). The language in this scene illustrates the essentialist assumption about motherhood in which pregnancy and giving birth is seen as the expected practice among women. Thus, the doctor, in this scene does not anticipate the request for an abortion. She asks *Huyền* to "*suy nghĩ cho kỹ*" ("*carefully consider*") if she has no "*lý do gì đặc biệt*" ("*any particular reasons*") whereas "*thai nhi đang tốt*" ("*fetus is well developing*"), and that *Huyền* has to "*quyết định thật nhanh*" ("*quickly decide*") because "*làm sớm sẽ đỡ đau*" ("*doing it early will reduce the pain*"). The doctor makes this conscientious objection within the (neo) liberal framework of agency and autonomy, which is highly problematic in the context of abortion. Firstly, it is assumed that people have choices; as in this case, it is the choice of stopping the pregnancy versus entering the state of motherhood. This assumption is contested because choices are not possible and equally made by every woman seeking abortion care. Secondly, abortion, among many other healthcare services typically involves a morality which disregards the person who needs the service and focuses on the 'potential' one who is living inside that person's womb. Thus, no matter how long it takes to make any decisions, the gestation continues

which impacts the provision of abortion. Indeed, this idea is well articulated in *Flapping* when the female doctor reminds *Huyền* that “*nếu để lâu, thai to, thất đức lắm đấy*” (if you take too long to decide, the fetus will get bigger, and it is immoral⁷), after giving her time to consider her “choices”.

The narrative of *Flapping* further shows the failure of this conventional approach to autonomy and agency for abortion seekers like *Huyền* when indeed she continues to struggle with persistent poverty. In this context, we see that *Huyền* fails to “quickly decide” according to the doctor. The doctor, later, reasons that that is why *Huyền*’s wish for an abortion was rejected on her second visit, when she had developed confidence with her decision and had the resources. At the same time, without considering *Huyền*’s circumstances, a male doctor makes a harsh and snap judgment “*to quá rồi*” (it is too far along), “*Cứ để nó ễnh ra rồi mới đến bệnh viện để chúng tôi dọn bãi à*” (If you let it develop then we have to clean up the mess). He, then, expresses the more apparent opinion underlying the conscientious objection to performing the procedure; “*Tôi không nhận làm được đâu, làm như thế thì phải tội chết*” (I won’t take this case, it is committing a sin). While the practice of rejection is illustrated firmly in this scene and implies this is a “bad abortion” to reinforce the stigma of this service, it is worth paying attention to the justification underlying this refusal. Thus, from my point of view, the justification based on morality, in this case, is ambiguous following the contested idea about the fetus as a human-being. Initially, *Huyền*’s time of gestation is not revealed clearly except for a few fragmented moments when *Huyền* uncertainly indicates that she is in the 15th week of pregnancy. Thus, spectators are invited to think about the fetus solely through the abstract, vaguely described by the doctor who says “*to quá rồi*” (“it’s too big”). The idea of “too big” means the possibility of being interpreted as being in the second trimester, but there is no specific definition in Vietnam in the medical field. Moreover, in public discourse “too big” plays a role as descriptive and figurative evidence for the existence of a fetus as human inside the womb.

⁷ The original English subtitle in the film uses *inhuman*, however, in my opinion, the Vietnamese translation as *immoral* is closer to its meaning as well as critically relevant to the analysis.

(Luker 1985) indicates that there is no definitive conception of human. Thus the answer for whether the fetus is a human is culturally, locally, and socially context-based. Also, it is argued that with reproductive technologies, particularly, ultrasonography, the idea of the fetus as a person or a proper human is fostered (Franklin 1991; Gammeltoft 2014; Hopkins, Zeedyk & Raitt 2005; Kroløkke 2010; Nash 2005; Palmer 2009). In Vietnam, Gammeltoft (2001) concludes that the perspicuous line between superstition and science is dissipated in terms of seeing and thinking about the fetus in the ultrasound era. To give an example, once the 'blood clot'⁸ approaches the later trimesters and is shown on screen, it develops personhood attribution (Gammeltoft 1999, 2001). Thus, the idea of science which is conveyed through the use of ultrasonography becomes evidence to reinforce the idea of superstition and authenticates the close ties between abortion and sin (Gammeltoft 2001). However, Gammeltoft's (2001, p. 324) article additionally indicates that professional medical staff may have a chance to reject superstition in order to provide second-trimester abortions, as it is said 'we have to do it [...]'. After all, the health care system does not adhere to the Buddhist faith'. Not avoiding that part of reality, a bitter version is showed through the film in which conscientious objection by medical officials towards abortion is illustrated.

Furthermore, this representation of conscientious objection in *Flapping* is gendered, and although both male and female doctors make their objections, the way they do so is different. When *Huyền* has a quick moment to observe the procedure by the female doctor before her turn, she is rejected by a male doctor whose reasons for his objection to abortion are based on an ambiguous way of thinking about fetus-related morality. Furthermore, an implication regarding patriarchal power can also be observed in this particular scene in the gendered representation of doctors. Drawing from my observation, it is usual to see a large number of women working as gynecologists in the country, yet the male gynecologists usually hold the leadership roles. In this case, I suggest *Flapping* might demonstrate such gender issues by employing the particular

⁸ A participant in Gammeltoft's (1999) study indicates an imagery representation of a young fetus as a blood clot to articulate why abortion in the first trimester is not a big deal.

representations of the gender of doctors in this narrative. We can therefore see the potential links between gendered hierarchal power and conscientious objection.

Another instance in *Flapping* where we can examine the fragility regarding morality and conscientious objection is when the female doctor suggests an alternative choice for *Huyền*. After being rejected by the male doctor, *Huyền* gets up from the table in order to ask questions. The female doctor, without saying anything, gestures for her to lie back down and begins to suggest other options to *Huyền*.

Female doctor: Hay là thế này nhé... Cô sẽ giới thiệu cháu đến một bệnh viện rất là tốt, bệnh viên tư. Cháu có làm không? (How about this... I will refer you to a very good hospital⁹, a private one. What do you think?)

Huyền: Có vấn đề gì không ạ? Cháu sợ (Will there any problems? I am scared)

Female doctor: Đây là bạn thân của cô. Trang thiết bị của họ còn tốt hơn ở viện này nhiều. Chỉ phải chi phí hơi cao một chút. (My close friend works there. They have high-quality equipment which is even better than these here. The thing is..., the cost will be a bit higher).

This alternative option for *Huyền* to have an abortion by a private provider, in my reading, does not signify a sense of support and understanding. Instead, it construes two ways of thinking about abortion. Firstly, it produces the idea that is typically seen in the public discourse regarding abortion in Vietnam, where the private service is more accessible, so preferred to the public system. This practice by the female doctor may represent that version of reality. Secondly, an analysis I favor, it demonstrates a particular power that should not be perceived as support, (even though for *Huyền* this could be the last recourse) but instead a contestation to the moral standards underlying the conscientious objection to abortion. The fragility of morality in this context must be read concerning the private provision of abortion in Vietnam where socially, the private provision of abortion in the country is usually attached to the idea of illegal and unsafe

⁹ The original English subtitle in the film uses *clinic*, however, I consider using *hospital* is the closet translation of the Vietnamese text as well as there is a different performative power between hospital and clinic in the medical and cultural context of Vietnam.

abortions. In this analysis, my intention is not to defend or devalue the private provision of abortion but to examine how the conventional way of thinking about morality is disrupted in this context where *Huyền*'s abortion is morally judged in the public hospital but accepted in the private service after a referral by the public hospital doctor. In this sense, I argue that *Flapping* brings up profound concerns about morality, abortions and conscientious objection as it raises the question of whether it is moral to reject the provision of abortion for people in need, then put their life at risk in a place where the quality of care and legal status are not fully validated. At this point, the conscientious objection to abortion pushes *Huyền* back to the beginning of her struggle with her own agency. Moreover, when I say the beginning, it is literally where she started struggling with the decision for abortion within the struggle of poverty when *her* intimate partner made the wild decision to leave and took all the money with him.

In this sense, a woman's agency and autonomy regarding abortion are not only affected by poverty per se, but also the interaction between poverty and the conscientious objection from medical profession. Consequently, a cycle of the struggle for agency is reproduced in which poverty causes challenges for a person to get an abortion. Turning away abortion seekers on the grounds of conscientious objection intensifies poverty and makes it a persistent condition that continues restraining abortion seeker's agency. In *Flapping*, this cycle is represented in a specific conversation between *Linh* and *Huyền*.

Linh: Nó mà to lên, ăn càng tốn hơn, mà đi phá thì lại đau, lại đắt (If it [fetus] becomes bigger you will need to eat more, the abortion will be also be more painful, and costly)

Huyền: Này, hay là thôi (Or... just forget it)

Linh: Thôi là thế nào? Mà muốn giữ à? Mà muốn giữ hay mà muốn bỏ thì phải nói cho rõ ràng dứt khoát ra đi (what do you mean by forgetting it? do you want to keep it?)

Huyền: Tao muốn kiếm tiền (I want to make money).

In the end, according to Kabeer (2005), *Flapping* shows us that unfulfilled agency and the idea of real choices become limited so that *Huyền* feels increasingly uneasy and disoriented about her decision making around abortion. Indeed these choices are ultimately manipulated. . Poverty is represented as a concern that restricts choices as

well as driving *Huyền* towards a self-reliant economic solution, as she expresses “*Tao muốn kiếm tiền*” (*I want to make money*). *Huyền* therefore ends up exploring the possibility of doing sex work as discussed in the section on body politics. Hence, rather than being interpreted as a singular and liberal practice of choice, instead the narrative should be construed as a dilemma. This dilemma is created by the multi-layered disempowerment of structural, institutional and cultural power as they play out in *Flapping* through the struggles of poverty, conscientious objection and the politics of the body in regards to decisions about abortion for women.

4.3. “Or do you want to keep it?”: An impotent solution in the middle of the struggle.

By exploring her chances to earn money from sex work, *Huyền* follows *Linh* to meet a senior woman who is in charge of making such arrangements. After checking on *Huyền* and noticing her pregnancy, a “special” arrangement is made between *Huyền* and a client named *Hoàng* who is a wealthy, good-looking man and interested in pregnant women. This character with the name “*Hoàng*” is instigated into the narrative through *Huyền* which is possibly the result of what he asks her to do, “*em nghĩ luôn cho anh đi*” (*You can name me*).

In the way that I read the construction of *Hoàng*, his presence in *Flapping* is ambiguous, far more than just having a uniquely romantic and sexual interest which, indeed, is not usual in daily life. However, this ambiguity gives spectators the cues to identify him with his gender identity as male with classy attributes. I might suggest there are ideologies of generic patriarchy and middle-class privilege, which are potentially embodied in this figure. As long as his presence intervenes into the narrative of abortion, it is crucial to consider the power within the relationship between *Huyền* and *Hoàng* to see the effect of this influence on her agency and autonomy, which are the core subjects in this analysis of *Flapping*.

Indeed, the narrative shows us that *Hoàng*’s presence has influences on *Huyền*’s agency, especially when she perceives the way *Hoàng* treats her beyond the scope of sex-work. During the film, spectators see a growth in intimacy rather than the more conventional ideas of sex work involving sexual intercourse. It is not difficult to fall into a

perception of *Hoàng* being a support rather than an intervention in *Huyền*'s journey. Internalizing the nurture from *Hoàng* by the way he treats her, *Huyền* develops affection for him; this affection is challenged by *Linh* when she asks whether *Huyền* is falling in love with *Hoàng*. *Linh*'s confrontation of *Huyền* and her situation is essential in the narrative because it re-directs spectators back to *Huyền*'s struggles, initially the unintended pregnancy and the decision about abortion; “*Hay là mày muốn giữ?/ Mày bắt đầu yêu rồi phải không?*” (Or do you want to keep it? / are you falling in love with him?). While *Huyền* denies the feelings that go beyond the business arrangement, the narrative suggests *Huyền* has affection for *Hoàng*. In one example, we see *Huyền*'s concerns about whether *Hoàng* has other women so that he does not demand anything from her. The idea of “not demanding anything” from *Huyền*, in my opinion, may serve to unpack what he is genuinely interested in within this relationship. I argue that rather than seeing *Hoàng* as a person who has a fetish for pregnant women, the narrative shows that *Hoàng*'s representation in *Flapping* illustrates a metaphor that is pro-fetus within a patriarchal society. However, while this pro-fetus metaphor is presented in the narrative, it does not secure a woman's power over the fetus due to the visual attachment which limits the representation of the fetus itself to the pro-fetus man. Thus, due to this reason, *Flapping* does not read as a pro-life or anti-abortion film.

The representation of foetus and the disruption of anti-abortion discourse

Indeed, the initial visualisation of the fetus begins during the utilisation of the photo of the ultrasound that *Huyền* prepares before coming to see *Hoàng*. The camera follows *Hoàng* raising the photo in order to see it from on high. Through the camera shot directing the gaze, spectators can fully observe *Hoàng*'s reaction to the photo. The photo is then centralized in a short *mise-en-scène* creating intense focus only on the image of the fetus. The combination of the up-shot camera angle and *Hoàng*'s point-of-view shot suggest the intensity the ultrasound image has on this man. As Nash (2005, p. 45)'s critique articulates that '[u]ltrasound ensures the value of a child: essentially the only product valued by the patriarchy', I contend that in *Flapping*, the ultrasonography, which leads to a manipulation of fetal imagery does not secure the value that a child could have within the patriarchal force. Drawing from the critique by Phelan (1993) which indicates 'fetal imagery itself becomes vulnerable to all the

potential manipulations of any signifying system', it is crucial to see the possibility that the position of the power of the fetus in this film is reduced in relation to *Hoàng*. There are two scenes where the interpretation of *Hoàng*'s power over the fetus can be understood. Firstly, in the first meeting between *Hoàng* and *Huyền*, he holds the fetal image upside down and says "*nhìn như thế này, trông nó vui vui*" (*it's funnier looking at it this way*). Secondly, when *Hoàng* takes *Huyền* to a secret place in the middle of the sea to eat 'special soup', introduced as poison soup. The reason behind the name "poison" is explained by *Hoàng* as the vendors use *ấu tẩu* tubers as a unique ingredient to make the bowl. *Hoàng* continues his explanation, saying that this tuber is deadly to consume when people do not know how to prepare it. However, if it is well prepared, the *ấu tẩu* soup is safe and "*đặc biệt rất là tốt cho thai nhi*" (*it is especially nourishing for the fetus*). According to literature about traditional medicine from *Hải Thượng Lãn Ông*, *ấu tẩu* tuber (also *phụ tử* or *ô đầu*, as aconite tuber or monkhood tuber) is recognized as a poisonous root (purple poison) that can be used to treat some particular illnesses in correct doses. It is not recommended for use by pregnant women as this can cause miscarriage (Lê 2005). In practice, there is a myth spreading among some communities in Vietnam that agrees with what *Hoàng* has told *Huyền*. While this scene could be read as a reflection of an ambiguous socio-cultural phenomenon regarding the use of traditional medicine and reproduction, I would contend that the use of *ấu tẩu* soup in this narrative might suggest the idea of a contradictory discourse which aims to channel patriarchal power. Notably, in this case, *Hoàng* retains his position of power over *Huyền* and the fetus. Indeed, spectators can see the superior epistemic and empirical authority that *Hoàng* practices regarding what is acceptable to feed the fetus.

Therefore, rather than seeing this visualisation as a conventional message to speak for the pro-fetus cohort with an anti-abortion message, *Flapping* possibly problematizes that anti-abortion discourse with the consistent use of fetal imagery and language. While feminist scholars usually argue the utilisation and visualisation of fetal imagery emphasizes the viability and the idea of potential life to the fetus, this motif in *Flapping* suggests particular liberation from reductionism when imagining a fetus's personhood (Franklin 1991; Gammeltoft 2001; Hopkins, Zeedyk & Raitt 2005; Nash 2005; Palmer 2009; Tran 2018). In other words, *Diệp*'s cinematographic choice for *Flapping* actually

gives the spectator little to imagine the fetus is an active actor; instead, it is objectified in the film. As Palme-Mehta and Haliliuc (2011, p. 116) take from Phelan (1993) and Thom (1989), the authors note that 'visibility "summons surveillance and the law; it provokes voyeurism, fetishism, the colonialist/imperial appetite for possession'. Therefore in this film, the representation of the fetus is reduced to a vulnerable object that serves one person's fetish as well as broadly painting a patriarchal fetishisation of a fetus.

Furthermore, the visualisation of the fetus in *Flapping* through the use of fetal ultrasound imagery surrounding *Hoàng* creates the separation of *Huyền* from the fetus, which then enables the narratives about her throughout the entire film. At the same time, being 'cropped out of' the relationship to *Huyền*, the representation of fetus in this film, is less likely to cloud the issue of *Huyền's* body and subjectivity (Phelan 1993; Thom 1989). The only moment we may see the tight connection between the protagonist and the fetus is when the audience watches *Huyền's* nightmare. In the dream, we see *Huyền* experiences pain from her stomach followed by a dreadful miscarriage. What comes out of her womb in this scene is genuinely cinematographically terrifying; there is blood and a school of tiny black creatures that Lodge (2014) reads as slugs. However, in my opinion, those tiny creatures can be read as leeches which serve a particular cultural imagination of draining from the inside. Given such a scary *mise-en-scène* made as *Huyền's* dream, it is not just a conventional horror scene but a suggestion of the subconscious conflict in the triangular relational existence of *Huyền*, *Hoàng* and the fetus in which *Huyền's* fears are reduced. Thus, the nightmare represents the consciousness of *Huyền* where she fears losing the fetus. Overall, except for the fear and confusion, it is hard to see the emotional appeal of this representation of the fetus in this triangular relationship. In the end, *Flapping* also breaks through the conventional moral discourse which aims to take advantage of the 'feeling rules' and 'emotion work' which aim at leading audiences to a predetermined emotional destination (Hopkins, Zeedyk & Raitt 2005; Lee, JA & Ungar 1989). In this sense, the use of fetal imagery does not enable sympathy and sadness regarding abortion. *Điệp's* film differentiates its narrative from the conventional discourse of both liberal feminism and anti-abortion forces in the West by utilizing unconventional fetal imagery in the form of the ultrasound images which are the key features of

contemporary anti-abortion campaigns (Hopkins, Zeedyk & Raitt 2005). Indeed, while Hopkins, Zeedyk and Raitt (2005, p. 396) note that this way of representing fetal imagery support one anti-abortion campaigner to claim fetus as an “unseen citizen”, the use of fetal imagery in *Flapping* challenges that idea and may restrict our imagination to think about fetus as an independent subject.

Therefore, there is a power relation between *Hoàng*, *Huyền* and the fetus within the narrative as it illustrates *Hoàng*'s position of power. Class and the patriarchy are the forces that critically influence *Huyền*'s agency and her bodily autonomy regarding abortion. In the end, critical disorientation within this power relation is seen through the disappearance of *Hoàng*. Thus, nothing is left but the fragile and ambiguous state of *Huyền*'s agency and autonomy, especially, the decision for an abortion. The film winds up with the sense that *Huyền* stands carelessly in her apartment while making a pot of soup. The ambiguous ending does not explicitly provide a tangible conclusion for *Huyền*'s abortion and her future. Considering the context of the film and the symbolic presence of the soup pot that situates *Huyền* in relation to her pregnancy and poverty, I suggest she might not achieve her desires for an abortion until the continuing struggle caused by structural poverty is resolved. However, different interpretations might be construed through this ambiguous ending which makes *Flapping* significantly crucial for feminist discussions regarding the relational theories of autonomy and women's agency. Furthermore, beyond the binary of pro-life versus pro-choice discourse, *Flapping* excellently exploits the metaphor of “pro-fetus” and the representation of fetus to confirm its position as a non-moral narrative. Therefore, the emphasis remains around the dilemma of *Huyền*'s social position within poverty and the conscientious objection to abortion.

CONCLUSION: VIETNAMESE ACTIVISM FOR ABORTION JUSTICE BEYOND AN ABORTION FILM

In the early days when selecting *Flapping in the middle of nowhere (Flapping)* as the analytical sample to examine for this thesis, some people suggested it was a fascinating idea and considered this film was the Vietnamese version of the iconic Romanian abortion-story film - *4 luni, 3 saptamâni si 2 zile (4 months, 3 weeks, and 2 days/ 432)*. This both surprised and fascinated me as my first impression of both films was so distinctive with their roots in the consequences of the two narratives. Following the discussion in chapter two I examined the two research patterns of media representations of abortion. My conclusion does not attempt to suggest which pattern is better in terms of giving researchers and advocates the ultimate answers in their respective fields. It is also not an attempt to provide a definite methodological framework. However, it is clear that there is an epistemic difference in the research patterns about abortion and representation in which one tries to categorise media products including films into “bad” or “good” based on how medically accurate the abortion or preparation for the procedures and the outcomes are depicted. Consequently, it usually overlooks the complexity of some artistic media products including films. For example, if I followed the paradigm of good/bad, it would be possible to claim *Flapping* is a “bad” representation of abortion or an anti-abortion / anti-choice media product if the interpretation strategy paid attention to the unaccomplished abortion. Thus, it is easy to dismiss the nuances of the narratives and discourses in the film which carry crucial themes regarding abortion in the particular social and cultural context of Vietnam.

While this paper has no primary research in the form of audience surveys to learn what perceptions of the film might be, it follows a different paradigm which is rooted in cultural studies to present the application of analysis of two areas; narratives and discourses with a feminist lens for *Flapping in the middle of nowhere*. Hence, it is argued that rather than thinking of the film per se in the bad/ good or pro-life/ pro-choice binaries, the film illustrates various counter-hegemonic arguments to separate itself from this dichotomous logic. First, I demonstrated how liberal frameworks of agency and

autonomy fail to adequately or appropriately describe *Huyền's subject position* whose identity intersects gender and class within her socio-political location that also marks her social relationships, body and sexuality in terms of decision making. Thus, it requires the analysis to thoroughly consider an alternative lens, which I have argued is best served through the relational approach to autonomy by Sherwin (1998) and a combination of the concepts of agency and real choices by Kabeer (2005). Particularly, we saw *Huyền's* agency was severely curtailed as her choices are neither easy nor autonomous as they are influenced by the structural barriers including poverty, conscientious objection from the doctors and the involvement of a pro-fetus feature. Second, I argued that *Flapping* is not an anti-abortion film despite of the consistent use of the fetal ultrasound photo. Exploiting crucial ideas from feminist abortion-allies and scholars regarding the performance and representation of fetal imagery, I demonstrated that the use of fetal ultrasound imagery is situational in *Flapping*. Not only is it appropriated in the patriarchal relationship to *Hoàng* to serve as a fetishized object rather than a subject that could convey the emotional and moral messages that we usually observe in the conventional anti-abortion campaigns, it also remains independent from *Huyền's* body and subjectivity.

Back to my point about how and why some observe a commonality between *Flapping* and *432* in their comparison of these films, I would like to expand the discussion beyond the films themselves, therefore I have critically located *Flapping* in the social, cultural and political context of Vietnam to unravel the in-depth connection of the film and the politics of abortion in my country. Godeanu-Kenworthy and Popescu-Sandu (2014) in their analysis of *432* remind us of the socio-political context of Romania in Ceaușescu's regime that treated abortion in a distinct way compared to other communist states in the world where abortions were usually legalized with a liberal stand. I believe my country strongly positions itself as a socialist state ruled by a Communist party, and approached abortion in the conventional liberal way with the early regulations that allowed abortions in the 1960s. At the same time in the history of the two countries, the Ceaușescu government decided to make abortion a crime. While those decisions were completely different, the concerns of both states rested similarly in the national strategies for economic and political growth. Particularly, the Romanian government in the 1960s

considered the high birth rate as pivotal to the nation's success (Godeanu-Kenworthy & Popescu-Sandu 2014, p. 228). In contrast, the Vietnamese government's tactic underscored population reduction and household reform as the means to combat poverty and hunger, thus aiming for their national development. Thus, in Romania both contraception and abortion were strictly prohibited while those methods, including the utilisation of abortion to assist women's reproduction as national reproduction, were quickly introduced in Vietnam, as discussed in the third chapter. "*Nếu mà y mà là con gái ý, mà y sẽ lại có bầu, mà có bầu thì lúc nào mà y cũng đói*" (If you were a woman, you would be pregnant; thus you would always be hungry). Indeed, it appears to me that both *432* and *Flapping* convey a contextual imagination for national nostalgia of poverty and pregnancy, particularly, the control of women's bodies. Thus, positioning *Flapping* in comparison with *432* might suggest a commonality in the bio politics of the two countries, but it is fascinating instead to witness the different dynamics of bio power used to oppress both women's bodies and subjectivity (Foucault 1977). From my point of view, this is the point where interested audiences of arthouse cinema connect *432* and *Flapping*.

In contemporary Vietnam, while abortion is assumed within in the government and public discourse as an easy choice or even a solution for "bad" girls and women to deal with the "consequences" of having unprotected sex as a matter of personal decision, *Flapping* appears as a counter-discourse that contributes to reorienting the discussion as well as putting emphasis on the existing concerns of young abortion seekers in the country. Furthermore, within the emergence of the discourse about the aging population, the neoliberal populationist approach becomes perhaps glorified in a socialist country like Vietnam. It shifts the national concern into a contemporary goal of both quality and quantity of population and as a result, young women in Vietnam are currently encouraged to get married and give birth before 35 to accomplish the nation's goals. Back when abortion was legalized shortly before and during *Đổi mới* era, our grandmothers, mothers, aunts and women across the country were encouraged to have abortions when our households reached a standardized limit of children to serve the same purpose. Those political tactics continue to be exploited for the national benefit by the government, and strongly imply the intention of controlling women's bodies. This

keeps failing generations of women in Vietnam regardless of the regions they are living in. Indeed, besides evidence that brought these concerns to light like studies by Gammeltoft and Trần Hằng, *Flapping in the middle of nowhere* as an aesthetic filmic product plays a key role for revisiting the issues that are usually covered in silence and intervenes in the hegemonic discourse of abortion in daily conversation. Particularly, it represents a version of social reality where young women, not limited to *Huyền*, are struggling with pregnancy, poverty, and the failure of abortion provision in relation to conscientious objection, which is deeply rooted in the entanglement of local culture, spirituality and religion. Thus, understanding about *Flapping* does not only serve the academic purpose of my degree but this paper also connects to the activism for abortion justice in my country which I am going to continue.

For me, *Flapping in the middle of nowhere* is not just a movie but also a version of life that, until now, has not been told in such a nuanced way. Decisions about abortion are a struggle but not 'unapologetic' (Baird & Millar 2019). Evidently, the ambiguity, the failure of abortion, the struggles that *Huyền* is facing in *Flapping* appears as emphasizing abortion injustice without stressing morality in Vietnam, where the legal status and the high quality of medical techniques do not fully secure the accessibility of this health care for women. *Flapping* works well for feminists as a bridge between theories and activism, just as Sara Ahmed's (2017) book titled "Living a feminist life" does. Thus, the story of mine below will assist the connection between films, feminist theories and reproductive justice activism.

Just before the world was shaken by the COVID-19 pandemic, my colleagues and I encountered numerous unexpected obstacles in our efforts to support a young woman seeking an abortion in Vietnam. This young woman traveled hundreds of miles from her home country where abortion access is restricted, and was devastated when looking for safe and legal abortion care in my country. Accompanying her for nearly the whole month of January, it became clear to me that choices do not work the way we as the Vietnamese abortion advocate collective imagine and try to foster. For her, it was weighing up whether the costs were worth it; going to a foreign land like Vietnam to have an abortion, even an illegal one or going back and being sentenced to death. For

us, taking the legality and quality of this service for granted due to our understanding and experiences of helping foreign women in previous cases, we faced an extraordinary burden securing her legally protected care at that time. It is said everywhere that Vietnam is recognized for its progressive stand on sexual and reproductive health and rights, including a largely unrestricted abortion policy environment, detailed guidelines, and high-quality services. However, conscientious objection is common among health care providers, especially for abortions that do not fall into their “standard” which is likely to be in the first trimester. She was that one.

In early December, a young woman from a South East Asian country (hereafter is referred to a pseudonym Sarah) contacted our abortion support page to get advice for having an abortion in Vietnam. Sarah was in the 17th week of gestation and urgently sought a safe abortion. After she travelled to Vietnam, we identified the two biggest public hospitals in the capital city of Vietnam as top options, given their policies both written in papers and published online that stipulate abortion services for 13 - 22 weeks gestation be available and affordable. At the first hospital, she received an ultrasound to confirm the pregnancy’s gestation and then met with the doctors. *“That kind of abortion is terrible and she is bad”*; the doctors refused to perform the service to the dismay of our volunteers. Neglecting professionalism, the doctor raised their voice, shouting that if abortion is illegal in her home country, it was illegal for her here as well. With the tense and judgmental environment, Sarah burst into tears, and the volunteers had to escort her out of the hospital.

Early discussions with the second hospital through our senior advisor were more promising; with a doctor initially indicating they could provide the abortion there. By this time we began pursuing other options in Ho Chi Minh City and found a public hospital, which explicitly, in writing and online, published their abortion policy that included cases of 13-22 weeks gestation. Failing the second option in Hanoi, we rushed to get Sarah to the third option, but the doctor began by saying they could not provide an abortion and suggested Sarah check into the hospital, wait a month and then deliver prematurely; *“after a month, if she has a premature birth and the baby is dead, the hospital will process it as a medical procedure. But if the baby is alive, she’ll have to take it back*

home with her'. This shocked us and they were forced to make the risky decision to engage with private sector hospitals, which legally could not provide abortions exceeding 12 weeks gestation. After rejecting a few options due to exorbitant costs, a Director of a public ob-gyn hospital in the city finally agreed to help. However, the healthcare team again tried to avoid doing the abortion and then created barriers in the form of many documents to be completed in English and Vietnamese. The procedure was finally completed and the entire procedure cost nearly \$US1000 and immeasurable stress and trauma.

In the end, she had an abortion, a safe one, before heading back home. This story remains a silent one and cases like hers are inevitably under-represented. Her case was settled but it has left the structural and systemic concern about abortion in my country unresolved. Every time we assist a woman to have an abortion which she should have been able to organize herself without judgment and a loss of dignity, we give her a card to wish her a speedy and safe recovery. There is helplessness in the way we are dealing with abortion struggles in Vietnam where the problem, rather than being situated in individual power is within in-depth structural, institutional and cultural powers which are usually dismissed by the government. Thus, that is why I believe *Flapping* has a crucial position in this context due to the potential discursive power that it carries. Moreover, the film continues speaking to the crucial recognition of an unsettling feminist movement in the country that we are not aware of. The movement in which Vietnamese abortion-justice activists continue struggling between the *post-abortion-right* discourse from the government and the stigmatizing discourse of abortion in society. Unfortunately, *Flapping* has not been available for the public since 2016 and popular culture continues feeding Vietnamese audiences with more commercial products which sometimes take abortion in their story plots. We have seen the representation of abortion creep through a few television and cinema products like *Quỳnh búp bê (Quỳnh doll)* in 2018 as well as *Chị chị Em em (Sister-sister)* – a blockbuster movie in 2019.

Hence, feminist theories are crucial for activism and activism is crucial to reflect the application of theories in every day, and through films like *Flapping in the middle of*

nowhere, a highly potential connection has been made which is demonstrated in my thesis. This is truly how Ahmed (2017) reminds us to bring Feminist theories home. Following bell hooks (2009) who argues we should not settle for powerlessness or be passive receivers, we must reclaim the power to utilise such films to apply feminist and intersectional lenses to examine, to learn and to counter. By doing so, I believe that we can create a dynamic discourse so people have opportunity to use the space in order to challenge the norms as well as being challenged with counter-hegemonic points of view in terms of abortion justice and gender justice in Vietnam.

Appendix 1

Abortion-specific proposals in the Vietnam Population Law bill

<p>First presentation from GOPFP (15th April, 2015)</p> <p>Article 22. Conditions for abortion</p> <p><i>Proposing two options:</i></p> <p>Option 1: Pregnancy under 12 weeks and abortion that does not cause severe consequence for abortion receivers. In cases of pregnancy that causes harm to women’s life and health, fetus; pregnancy as a consequence of incest, rape; pregnancies that have evidence indicating the potential abnormal development and disability of the child are allowed to have</p>	<p>Second draft (12th October, 2017)</p> <p>Article 23. Rights and Obligations of person who is allowed an abortion</p> <p>Abortion is not a family planning method. Women have rights to abortions excluding sex-selective abortion, or abortions that cause severe consequences to their health. It is encouraged that the wife and husband have discussions before abortions. Women consulted with in the case that abortion is necessary; are provided with information about abortion including complications, potential risks, post-abortion self-care, and contraceptive methods use after abortion; are allowed to choose abortion methods which are relevant to age of gestation; mental health and confidentiality about abortion. If abortion receivers are youths, people who have loss of or impaired capacity to carry out their civil practices, people who have cognitive difficulties and cannot control their behaviour, assent from parents or legal guardians is required. Husbands and family members have responsibility to request the wife or other</p>	<p>Third draft (27th April, 2020)</p> <p>Article 36. Rights and Obligations of persons who are allowed an abortion</p> <p>Women have rights to abortions upon their aspiration excluding sex-selective abortion, or abortions that cause severe consequences to the health of abortion receivers. Women are consulted, allowed to choose, provided with information about relevant abortion methods; are provided safe abortions and confidentiality about their health and their personal information indicated in their health record. It is encouraged that the wife and husband have a discussion before abortion. Wives have right to request supports from husbands and family members in order to undergo safe abortion,</p>
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<p>abortions after 12 weeks of gestation. Option 2: Abortion that does not cause severe consequences for women's health.</p> <p>Outcome: not adopted</p>	<p>members of the family have safe abortions, to take care of their health, and provide mental encouragement when the woman gets an abortion. Abortion receivers have responsibility to sign a paper to indicate their volition; and to present personal identity papers at the abortion services. If abortion receivers are youth, people who have loss of or impaired capacity to carry out their civil practices, people who have cognitive difficulties and cannot control their behaviour, parents and legal guard are obligated to sign volition paper, to present the personal identity papers on behalf of the abortion receivers.</p> <p>Outcome: not adopted</p>	<p>healthcare, have mental encouragement after abortion. If abortion receivers are youth, people who have loss of civil capacity, people who have cognitive and behavioural difficulties, people who are limited of civil capacity, provision of an assent from legal representative, who is established by the abortion receiver, is required. Abortion receiver are responsible for following the accurate guidance on medical technique, health facilities' regulation that provide abortion.</p> <p>Outcome: pending</p>
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