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MOVIE REVIEW | 'BUFFALO BOY'

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## On a Journey to Adulthood, Accompanied by Buffaloes

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Published: March 11, 2005

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**S**et in the haunting watery wilds of Vietnam shortly before north and south were violently parted, when the country was still part of the French imperialist dream and known to the larger world as Indochina, "[Buffalo Boy](#)" tells a deceptively simple tale in a deceptively simple fashion. Ostensibly a coming-of-age story, this languorous, beautifully shot feature debut from Minh Nguyen-Vo, a writer and director, centers on a teenager whose journey from innocence to knowledge is also a twinned meditation on both the natural and very unnatural state of things.

As it turns out, the life of a mid-20th-century buffalo boy was no Thoreauvian idyll, but a rollicking - albeit in a totally Zen kind of way - ride, complete with gangland hijackings, down-and-dirty epithets, boozy brawls and, as the subtitles colloquially put



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Global Film Initiative  
Le The Lu as the title character in "Buffalo Boy," which was written and directed by Minh Nguyen-Vo.

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it, weed. Not long after the film opens, 15-year-old Kim (Le The Lu, who looks about a decade older) is sent away by his ailing father, Dinh (Nguyen Huu Thanh), with the family's two water buffaloes. It's the rainy season, and with water, water everywhere and not a grass blade to spare, the buffaloes are starving, and if they die, the family will follow suit. Which is why, despite protests from his scold of a mother, Kim departs with the animals, thereupon commencing this rather unusual variation on the bildungsroman.

A patchwork of scenes richer in pictorial beauty than quotidian detail, "Buffalo Boy" essentially follows the slow maturation of its central character; it takes Kim a while to grow up, and this generally involving film develops just as deliberately. The most unpredictable scenes concern the teenager's tenure with a gang of herders led by the charismatic Lap (Vo Hoang Nhan), for a kind of Southeast Asian ["Red River"](#) interlude. With a knife at the ready and a vocabulary that would do Hubert Selby proud, Lap is surly proof that buffalo herders are "vagabonds and crooks," as one customs official says with a manner as starched as his uniform. Lap responds with rage, forecasting the storms to come, that he and his brethren are the same crooks who "feed your French masters."

Raised in Vietnam and educated in the West, Mr. Nguyen-Vo has clearly absorbed his share of European art-house cinema. The film's rhythms at times seem borrowed from some cinematic favorite rather than from the life of a peasant, and on occasion the filmmaking feels overly processed, more studied than freshly imagined. Still, Mr. Nguyen-Vo throws a frame around the world nicely, giving the landscape's rough beauty a sense of classic proportion, even if the lush greens bring to mind the distinctly nonclassical Henri Rousseau. And the filmmaker certainly knows the power of his chosen medium: one of the most striking shots is of a boat prow going nowhere and surrounded by swirling water, a graphically strong image that also suggests the resiliency of the Vietnamese people.

"Buffalo Boy" has none of the hothouse exoticism you sometimes find in stories set in that part of the world or in tales of the natural world and those most closely connected to it. Perhaps because of its geography and palette, the film made me think of the opening of [Terrence Malick's](#) World War II movie, ["The Thin Red Line."](#) when a young American soldier - only somewhat older than Kim - rhapsodizes about life and death, and wonders why the children from the South Pacific island on which he squats never seem to fight. One of the strengths of Mr. Nguyen-Vo's film is that despite the overwhelming physical beauty of the landscape and the simplicity of his characters, he doesn't succumb to such aerated thinking. The world in

"Buffalo Boy" is filled with wonder, but it is a world also filled with real desire, real death, not abstractions.

## 'Buffalo Boy'

Opens today in Manhattan.

Directed by Minh Nguyen-Vo; written (in Vietnamese, with English subtitles) by Mr. Nguyen-Vo, inspired by the short-story collection "Scent of the Ca Mau Forest" by Son Nam; director of photography, Yves Cape; edited by Rudi Maerten; music by Ton That Tiet; art director, Nsut Pham Hong Phong; produced by Olivier Dubois, Vincent Canart, Jean Brehart, Muriel Merlin, Rachid Bouchareb and Le Duc Tien; released by the Global Film Initiative. Shown as part of the "Global Lens 2005" series at the Museum of Modern Art's Titus Theater, 11 West 53rd Street. Running time: 98 minutes. This film is not rated.

WITH: Le The Lu (Kim), Nguyen Thi Kieu Trinh (Ban), Nguyen Huu Thanh (Dinh), Kra Zan Sram (Det), Truong Van Be (Haitich), Nguyen Anh Hoa (Hai), Thi Tham (Nguyen) and Vo Hoang Nhan (Lap).

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