

Franziska von Stenglin's first feature-length film starts with the same principle that guides most ethnographic cinema: to register realities in risk of disappearing. However, that which *The Dust of Modern Life* accompanies is already a reenactment.

Liêm, the protagonist, is a member of the Sedang ethnic minority, one of more than five dozen in Vietnam. Every year, he leaves his village in the Central Highlands to go into the jungle for a few days with other young villagers attempting to reconnect with their ancestors' form of living and the landscape that used to be their home. Notions of legacy and intergenerational continuity are key in the film.

The group lives off what they can hunt, immersed in the flora and fauna whose existence is also endangered: Vietnam's biodiversity is threatened by population increases and the demand for resources from national and international markets. The disappearance of human forms of living is only an echo of the ecocide taking place. Von Stenglin transmits some of the secrets of the jungle's enchanted terrain to us. Yet these territories remain for the most part untranslated, like the words spoken by an old villager during the village feast.

In fact, *The Dust of Modern Life* is structured around different types of deferral and fictionalisation. Von Stenglin lets the viewer know more about the Sedang men's expedition through Liêm's conversations with his own family, in the same way that news from life in the country's metropolis – or from further away, in the US – reaches the village through other people's voices, whether villagers or government officials.

This filtered apprehension of reality is at the core of the film, as the recurring low-angle shots of the village loudspeaker on top of a utility pole remind us. That apparatus is part of the old radio system installed during the mid-20th century and still working to this day. It continues to be used by the government, led by the Communist Party of Vietnam, to disseminate propaganda and bureaucratic information to the most remote regions, playing both a practical and a symbolic role.

The disembodied voice coming from the loudspeaker, permeates the villagers' hard days. It signals the coexistence of different realities and temporalities in present-day Vietnam: wartime and the present, the rapidly changing cities and the mysterious enclosed jungle, the urban buying habits and the poverty of rural areas. The villagers' day-to-day lives are punctuated by spectres of other dimensions, while the camera tries to focus on their daily rhythms, working rituals, family dynamics – their existence in connection with the setting.

In one of *The Dust of Modern Life*'s most resonant scenes, Liêm's family has dinner in front of a small TV set showing a war propaganda film, teaching guerrilla techniques and encouraging the peasants how to resist the US invasion by resorting to local materials – a connection that reverberates in the Sedang men's departure to the jungle, filled with warlike echoes. Von Stenglin is interested in learning through observation, in following the possible associations between humans and nature at a communal and convivial level, an association continuously disturbed in Vietnam by colonialism, war, the centralised state and so-called progress.