

Victor Vu's Filmmaking Approach: From Literary Script to Film Set in Contemporary Vietnamese Cinema

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.913COM0026>

Received: 29 May 2025; Accepted: 03 June 2025; Published: 13 July 2025

ABSTRACT

This article examines the filmmaking approach of Victor Vu, a leading figure in contemporary Vietnamese cinema, focusing on his process from constructing literary scripts to directing film productions. Through direct collaboration with the director and analysis of 19 of his feature films and television works, the study elucidates how Victor Vu crafts narrative scripts that integrate literary depth with cinematic structure, creating a unique multimodal communication framework. The research applies theories of narratology, stylistics, and film poetics to analyze his storytelling style, dialogue, visual composition, and adaptation strategies. The article highlights Victor Vu's dual role as both director and screenwriter, and underscores the practical significance of his approach for aspiring filmmakers seeking to adapt traditional stories into globally resonant media products.

Keywords: Victor Vu, screenwriting, Vietnamese cinema, literary script, film adaptation, multimodal communication, narratology

INTRODUCTION

Victor Vu is one of the most influential filmmakers in contemporary Vietnamese cinema. His unique filmmaking approach, which bridges literary excellence and cinematic innovation, presents a compelling case study in the context of an evolving global media landscape. This article explores Victor Vu's filmmaking methodology—developed through direct collaboration with the director in a series of specialized events and detailed analysis of his works—to provide insight into the integration of literary depth and cinematic structure in Vietnamese film.

Vietnamese cinema is entering a phase of artistic diversification, as filmmakers strive to balance indigenous traditions with global forms. Among them, Victor Vu stands out as a pioneering director, whose style combines rigorous narrative structure, distinct visual aesthetics, and cultural hybridity.

During the specialized seminars held on May 16 and 17, 2025, focusing on Victor Vu and his newly released film ("Victor Vu – From Script to Film Set: Detective Kien – The Headless Case"), we recorded remarkable engagement: within just eight days, there were 214 registrations for the seminar, demonstrating the director's strong appeal among young audiences and the filmmaking community.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is based on direct engagement with Victor Vu through the organization of seminars on his films and filmmaking methods, direct surveys of seminar participants, as well as in-depth textual and visual analysis of 19 feature films and television works he has directed. By combining experiential observation, comparative field surveys, and theoretical analysis, the research provides a comprehensive perspective on Victor Vu's creative process.

The filmography included in this study comprises 18 out of 20 of his works (excluding the short film "Firecracker" and the television series "Red Flower Camp"):

- Buổi sáng đầu năm (2003)

- Oan hồn (2004)
- Chuyện tình xa xứ (2009)
- Giao lộ định mệnh (2010)
- Cô dâu đại chiến (2011)
- Thiên mệnh anh hùng (2012)
- Scandal: Bí mật thảm đỏ (2012)
- Mệnh lệnh liên hoàn (2013)
- Cô dâu đại chiến 2 (2014)
- Quả tim máu (2014)
- Scandal: Hào quang trở lại (2014)
- Tôi thấy hoa vàng trên cỏ xanh (2015)
- Lôi Báo (2017)
- Người bắt tử (2018)
- Mất biếc (2019)
- Thiên thần hộ mệnh (2021)
- Người vợ cuối cùng (2023)
- Thám tử Kiên: Kỳ án không đầu (2025)

Notably, the research employs practice-based and direct observation methods within the framework of the community project “Appreciating Artistic Works in Schools” organized by SECC, with the inaugural seminar “Victor Vu – From Script to Film Set: Detective Kien” involving 137 students from the Ho Chi Minh City University of Theatre and Cinema and the University of Management and Technology, Ho Chi Minh City.

The main data sources include:

- Direct interaction with the director during the seminar
- Q&A sessions between students and the director
- Excerpts from the "Detective Kien" script and behind-the-scenes materials
- Interviews, mock casting, and students' stage performances

The theoretical framework is grounded in narratology (Genette, Trần Đình Sử), stylistics, film poetics, and adaptation studies (Corrigan, Millard)^[1].

VICTOR VU'S FILMMAKING APPROACH

Literary Script and Narrative Construction

Victor Vu's screenplays are distinguished by their literary depth. He often rewrites or co-authors the scripts himself, ensuring that the textual foundation of the film is both robust and emotionally rich. His narrative

construction is influenced by contemporary screenwriting models such as the three-act structure and the hero's journey, which he adapts to incorporate Vietnamese cultural motifs and emotional nuances.

There are two notable definitions of the literary script:

- “The literary script is the first stage of film creation. It is written in prose, with a narrative structure comprising a system of characters, space, time, and a complete plot, designed to artistically express the film's content and emotions, and serves as the basis for the shooting script.” (Đào Lê Na)
- “A literary script is not an ordinary literary work, but an artistic blueprint. It shows what the film will be like in terms of content and emotion, before technical elements are implemented.” (Nguyễn Quang Lập)

From a creative perspective, the literary script is considered the product of the screenwriter, while the film itself is the work of the director. However, for Victor Vu, the most important aspect is finding a subject and inspiration for his work; he does not place excessive emphasis on the concept of the literary script. Once the process enters the screenplay stage, it already transitions into a new domain, even if the work originates from a literary story.

From Script to Screen: Integration of Visuals and Sound

To develop a screenplay, it is essential to emphasize the role of personal emotion and empathy with the story. Victor Vu shares that when reading a literary work that touches his heart, or when he sees himself reflected in it, he feels motivated to begin a film project. For example, “Yellow Flowers on the Green Grass” and “Dreamy Eyes” both provided him with emotional experiences similar to those of the characters, enabling him to tell the story in a profound and authentic way.

Victor Vu does not confine himself to a specific genre, though he has a particular fondness for spiritual and detective films. In addition to literary adaptations, he also works on films based on ideas from other screenwriters or his own creations, as long as the subject matter inspires him. He affirms: “Sometimes the way I choose a subject is neither clear nor constrained; it just needs to bring value and inspiration to me.”

In terms of visuals, Victor Vu's films stand out for their outstanding image quality, meticulous composition, and full utilization of Vietnam's natural landscapes and cultural spaces. Wide shots, natural lighting, and subtle color palettes create a strong visual impression. Professional cinematographers such as Dominic Pereira and a modern technical crew ensure consistently impressive cinematic quality.

Special effects and visual techniques are also flexibly applied by Victor Vu, from image effects to editing techniques, making action, fantasy, or historical scenes vivid and captivating for audiences. Music composed by international musicians such as Christopher Wong and Phan Mạnh Quỳnh, harmoniously combined with on-set sound, effects, and dialogue, enhances the emotional depth and resonance of the films. Original soundtracks like “The Boy Who Wrote on the Tree” (Dreamy Eyes), “The Day Before the Storm” (The Immortal), and “The Promise” (Detective Kien) have become V-pop phenomena, closely tied to the emotions of the films.

Settings, costumes, and art direction are meticulously researched, especially in historical films such as “The Last Wife” and “Detective Kien.” The recreation of spaces, architecture, customs, and traditional Vietnamese costumes is carried out elaborately, elevating the cultural value of the works. The filmmaking process always involves close coordination among departments: cinematography, sound, music, art direction, costumes, etc., ensuring that all technical elements best serve the story and the film's emotional impact.

Victor Vu emphasizes: “When I make a film, I completely turn off the sound to focus on the visuals; but sound and music are two indispensable elements for an engaging film, and I have an excellent sound director and composer whom I trust absolutely—true geniuses who elevate the film.” He is particularly grateful to collaborators such as Christopher Wong and Phan Mạnh Quỳnh, who have contributed to the musical identity of his films.

Adaptation Strategy and Cultural Hybridity

Victor Vu's adaptation strategy reflects a successful blend of Western film education and Vietnamese cultural

sensibility. He often draws from indigenous literary elements, adapting traditional stories for contemporary audiences while retaining their emotional resonance. This approach not only enriches his films but also positions them as global media products capable of connecting with both domestic and international audiences.

Victor Vu has shared that, although he was born and raised in the United States, he was thoroughly educated in Vietnamese culture by his mother—a Northerner who migrated to the South in 1954. In a Western environment, he became even more aware of the need to give voice to the Vietnamese perspective, to help others understand and empathize with Vietnamese people. The strong Vietnamese roots embodied in his name (Vu Quoc Viet) have become an intrinsic strength, motivating him to consistently create films about Vietnam, its land, culture, and people, using knowledge acquired from the West.

DISCUSSION

This study is distinctive in that it was conducted concurrently with the theatrical release of Victor Vu's film "Detective Kien: The Headless Case," enabling the application of contemporary field research and survey methods. The seminar series "Victor Vu – From Script to Film Set: Detective Kien" attracted a large number of students, researchers, and film enthusiasts, creating favorable conditions for collecting practical data and direct feedback from young audiences.

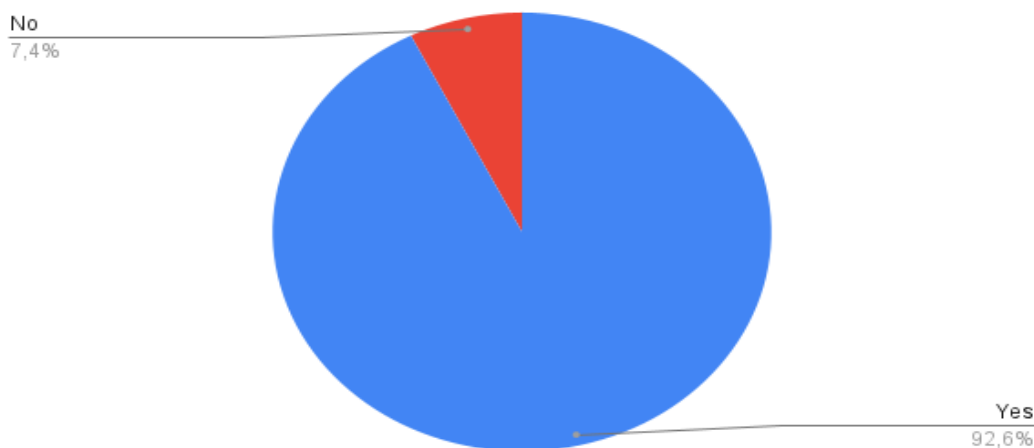
Survey results from 136 out of 214 registered students revealed:

- 47.4% considered Victor Vu the most outstanding director in Vietnam; 34.3% ranked him among the top directors; only 0.7% disagreed.
- 92.6% rated Victor Vu as successfully balancing art and commerce.
- 60.6% awarded the highest score to the film "Detective Kien: The Headless Case."

Regarding script preferences, 47.8% of students preferred films adapted from literature with creative additions, 31.6% favored scripts co-created by the director and the team, and only 20.6% preferred purely literary adaptations.

The most popular film was "Detective Kien: The Headless Case" (42.6%), followed by "Dreamy Eyes" (17.6%) and "The Immortal" (10.3%). This demonstrates the strong appeal of new projects and affirms Victor Vu's influence on young audiences.

Do you agree that Victor Vu is the best Vietnamese director with best balances high artistic expertise with box office

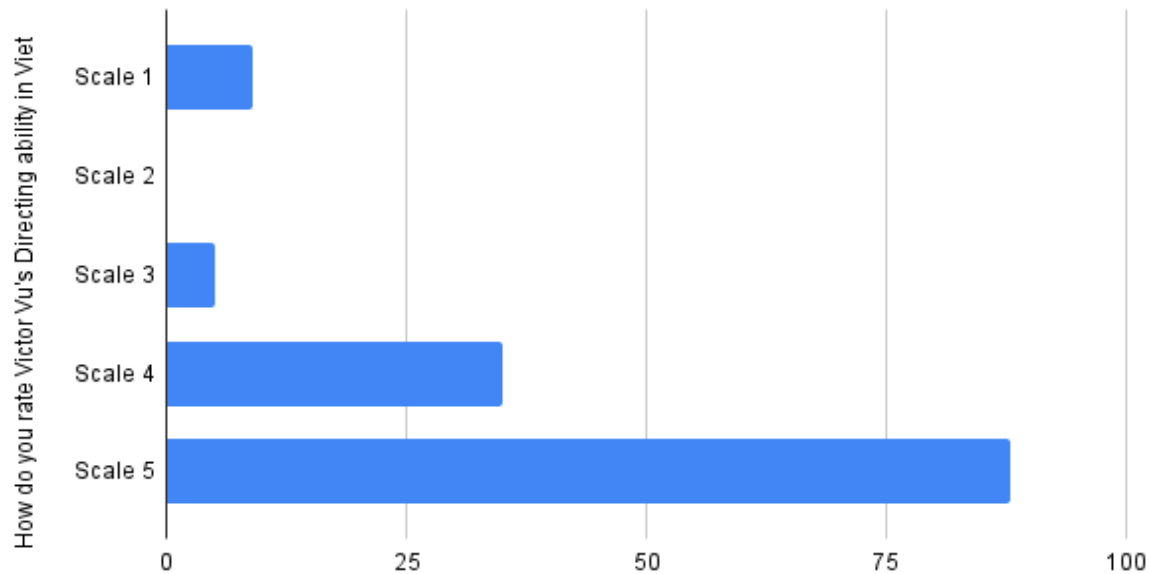


Do you agree that Victor Vu is the best Vietnamese director with best balances high artistic expertise with box office success?

Yes 92,6% (Equivalent 126/136)

No 7,4% (Equivalent 10/136)

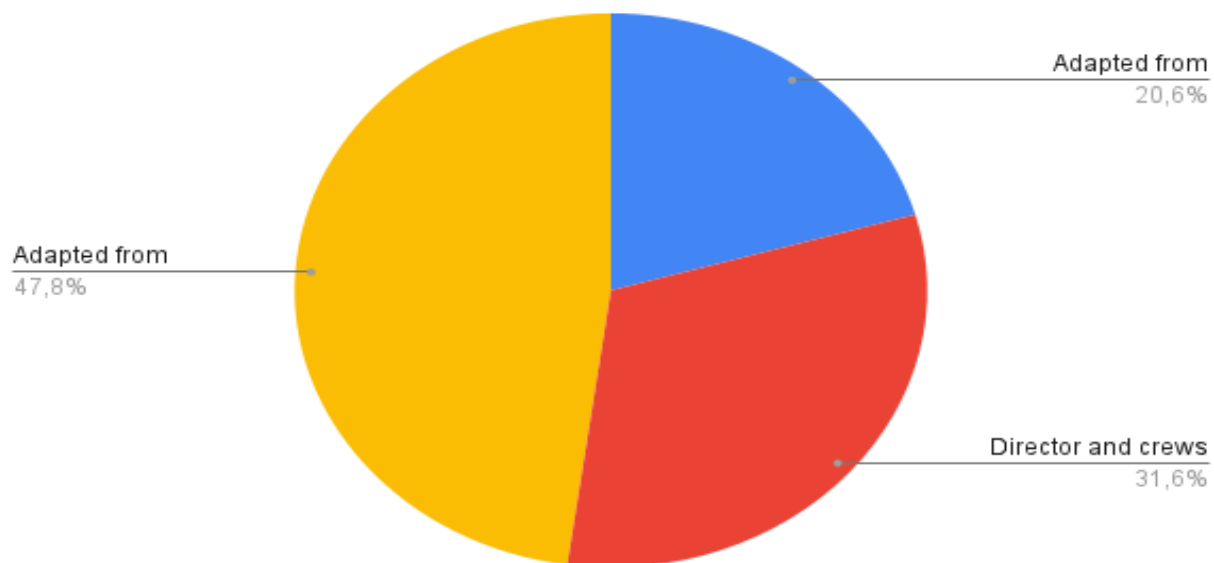
How do you rate Victor Vu's Directing ability in Viet Nam?



How do you rate Victor Vu's Directing ability in Viet Nam?

Scale 1: 9/136 Applicator (Equivalent 6,6%); Scale 2: 0/136 Applicator (Equivalent 0%); Scale 3: 5/136 Applicator (Equivalent 3,6%); Scale 4: 35/136 Applicator (Equivalent 25,5%); Scale 5: 88/136 Applicator (Equivalent 64,2%)

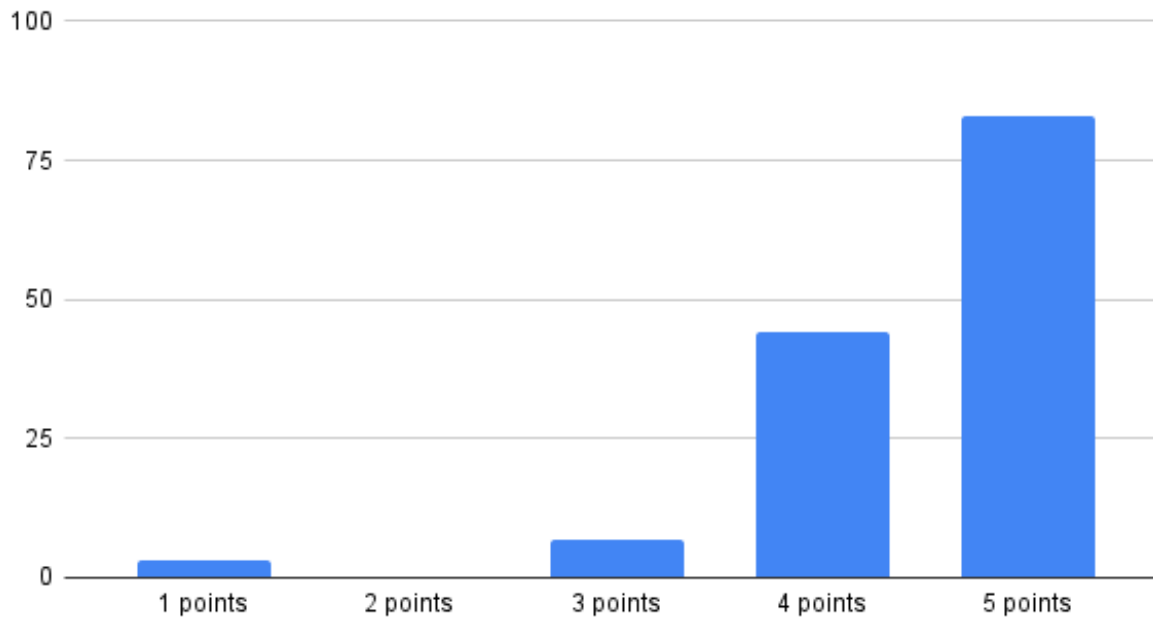
What type of Victor Vu's movie script do you like best?



What type of Victor Vu movie script do you like best?

Adapted from Literature: 28/136 Applicator (Equivalent 20,6%); Director and crews create script together: 43/136 Applicator (Equivalent 31,6%); Adapted from Literature and Added more: 65/136 Applicator (Equivalent 47,8%)

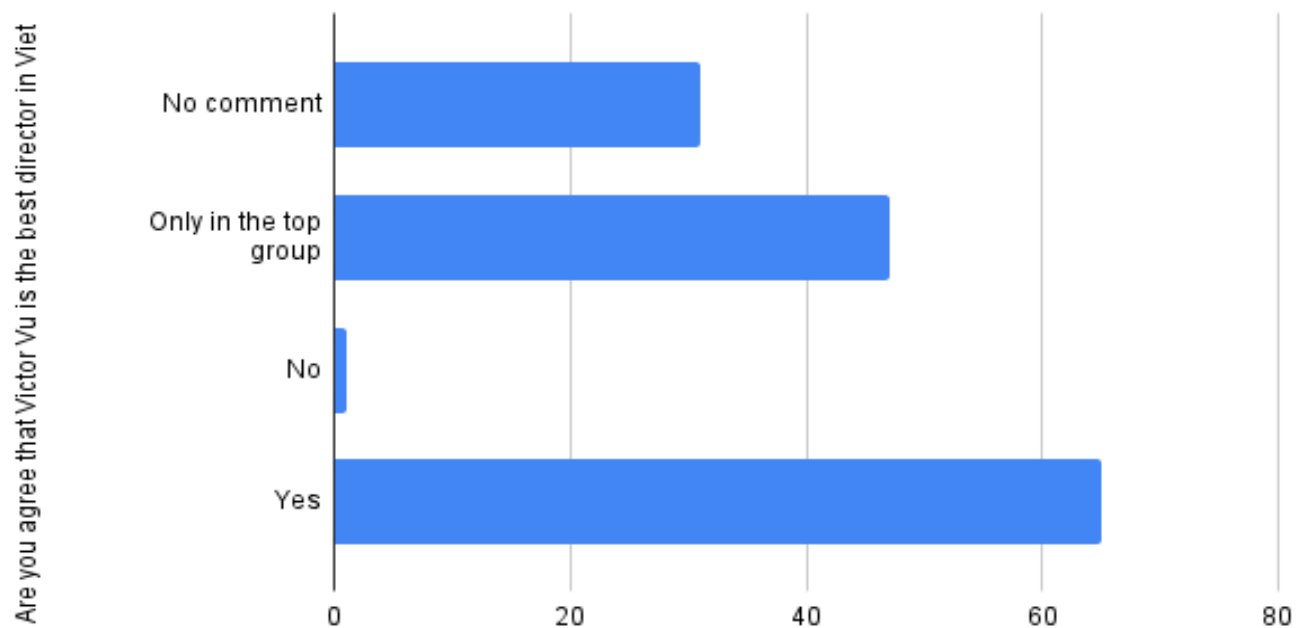
How many points do you rate the movie Tham Tu Kien?



How many points do you rate the movie Tham Tu Kien?

1 point: 3/136 Applicator (Equivalent 2,2%); 2 point: 0/136 Applicator (Equivalent 0,0%); 3 point: 7/136 Applicator (Equivalent 5,1%); 4 point: 44/136 Applicator (Equivalent 32,1%); 5 point: 83/136 Applicator (Equivalent 60,6%)

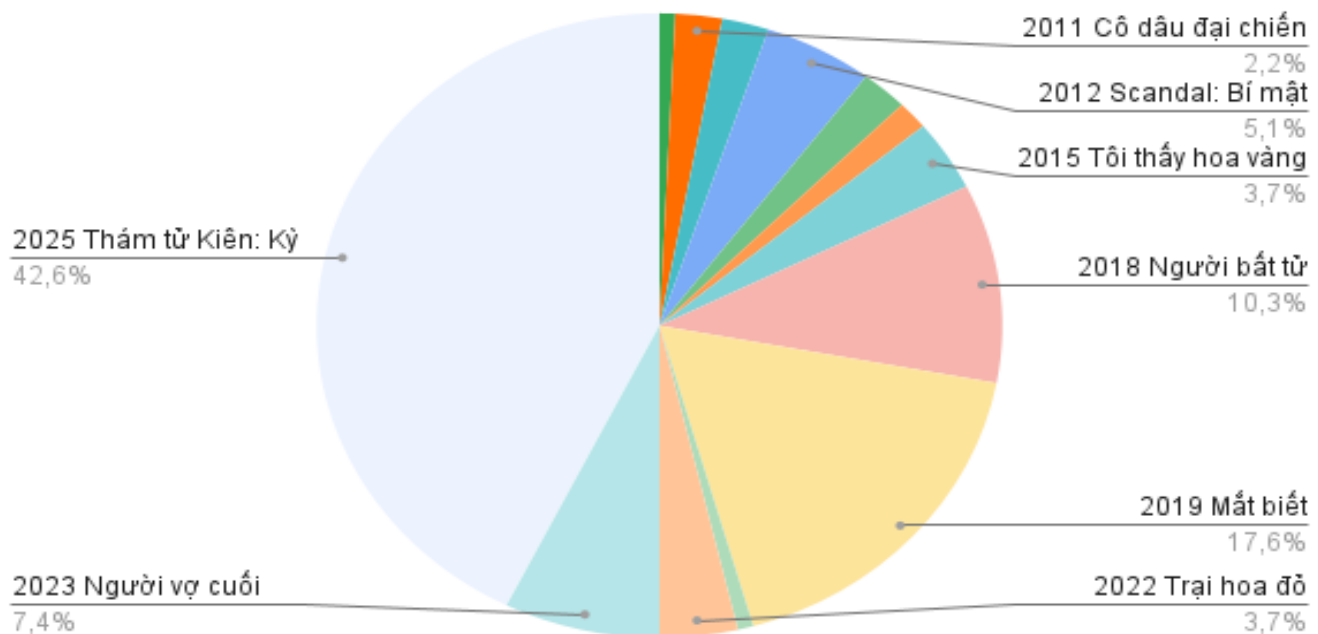
Are you agree that Victor Vu is the best director in Viet Nam?



Are you agree that Victor Vu is the best director in Viet Nam?

Yes: 65/136 Applicator (Equivalent 47,4%); 3/136 Applicator (Equivalent 2,2%); No: 1/136 Applicator (Equivalent 0,7%); Only in the top group: 47/136 Applicator (Equivalent 34,3%); No comment: 31/136 Applicator (Equivalent 22,6%)

Which Victor Vu's Movie do you like the most?



Which Victor Vu's Movie do you like the most?

2003 Buổi sáng đầu năm/2004 Oan hồn/2009 Chuyện tình xa xứ/2013 Mệnh lệnh liên hoàn/2014 Cô dâu đại chiến 2/2017 Lôi báo: 0/136 Applicator (Equivalent 0%);

2010 Giao lộ định mệnh: 1/136 Applicator (Equivalent 0,7%);

2011 Cô dâu đại chiến: 3/136 Applicator (Equivalent 2,2%);

2012 Thiên mệnh anh hùng: 3/136 Applicator (Equivalent 2,2%);

2012 Scandal: Bí mật thảm đỏ: 7/136 Applicator (Equivalent 5,1%);

2014 Quà tim máu: 3/136 Applicator (Equivalent 2,2%);

2014 Scandal: Hào quang trở lại: 2/136 Applicator (Equivalent 1,5%);

2015 Tôi thấy hoa vàng trên cỏ xanh: 5/136 Applicator (Equivalent 3,7%);

2018 Người bắt tử: 14/136 Applicator (Equivalent 10,3%);

2019 Mắt biết: 24/136 Applicator (Equivalent 17,6%);

2021 Thiên thần hộ mệnh: 1/136 Applicator (Equivalent 0,7%);

2022 Trại hoa đỏ (Phim truyền hình): 5/136 Applicator (Equivalent 3,7%);

2023 Người vợ cuối cùng: 10/136 Applicator (Equivalent 7,4%);

2025 Thám tử Kiên: Kỳ án không đầu: 58/136 Applicator (Equivalent 42,6%)

The seminar series also documented creative practice activities such as live auditions, casting simulations, script analysis, and stage performances. Through these activities, students gained a deeper understanding of the adaptation process from text to screen, as well as the roles of emotion, space, and sound in constructing cinematic

narrative. The director emphasized: “Subtle emotion and spatial perception are more important than formal acting.”

Internationally, “Detective Kien: The Headless Case” was released in over 12 countries, with more than 7,000 screenings in Vietnam during the first week, making it one of the Vietnamese films with the largest international release to date. This success demonstrates that the creative model integrating literary theory, cinematic practice, and arts education can indeed transcend Vietnam’s borders.

Victor Vu’s approach reflects a broader viewpoint: filmmaking is an act of cultural translation and ethical engagement. For young filmmakers, “Detective Kien” is not merely a film but a model of disciplined, profound, and socially responsible creative labor. Cinema thus becomes a tool for critical thinking and arts education, helping students to deeply understand aesthetics, culture, and emotion.

CONCLUSION

At the time of this article’s completion, “Detective Kien” was screening in over 200 theaters worldwide, not including those in Vietnam. Victor Vu’s filmmaking approach is a model that integrates literary theory and cinematic practice in contemporary Vietnam. His works demonstrate that creative production in Vietnam can reflect and contribute to the development of global media and cultural hybridity. By combining Western screenwriting models with Vietnamese cultural elements, Victor Vu creates films that are both familiar to domestic audiences and appealing internationally, thereby enriching the discourse on multimodal storytelling.

The introduction of creative workshops into educational institutions not only imparts professional skills but also inspires the younger generation to view storytelling as a living act—profound, humane, and collaborative. This sets a new standard for film education in Vietnam and Southeast Asia.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Sincere thanks to actor Cong Ninh for introducing Victor Vu to the author. Thanks to Victor Vu for his cooperation in this research, and to the data collection team led by Dai Phuc, with members Minh Tuan and Gia Han. Thanks also to Hoang Lan, Bao Quan, Tan Tai, Co Tien for organizing the workshop, and many other collaborators.

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Some pictures for the seminar series “Victor Vu – From Script to Film Set: Detective Kien” which the writer (Dinh Thi Vu Trinh) was the host.





MA Dinh Thi Vu Trinh

