Escaping from Dreamscapes: On the Politics of Space in Films by Young Independent Vietnamese Directors[❖]

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ABSTRACT

In the Vietnamese cinema industry today, state-sponsored (formerly known as revolutionary cinema) and commercial cinema (held by private entertainment groups) are the two cinema mainstreams that dominate the film market. The third, but lesser known, mode is a diverse range of new independent films. With an aesthetics of socialist realism, governmental cinema often shows less "dream" in the ordinary, personal, and secular sense. However, it often turns to grand visions and symbols that impress upon the whole community concepts like "a brighter tomorrow." Meanwhile, commercial cinema follows the capitalist model of cultural reproduction, presenting pragmatic dreams about a prosperous, successful, and beautiful life to stimulate viewers to work, consume goods and services for tourism and entertainment, and accumulate wealth. Meanwhile, young independent directors of the 1990s generation in Vietnam today are deploying the cinematic language of black comedy and magical realism to resist the pragmatic consumerist and "land of tomorrow" ideologies of the two mainstream tendencies. In the movies of the independents, dreamlike and fanciful elements occupy equally important, essential, organic places. Dreaming becomes a way of escaping the politics of the space or the ideologies embedded in dreams of the future that influence people consciously and subconsciously. This paper also explores the possibility that Vietnamese independent films can create new narrative potentials and interpretations of people's inner lives in the postsocialist era through a unique and anti-traditional cinematic aesthetic.

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I. Introduction: The History of Dreams in Vietnamese Films—A Paradox

Vietnam's national cinema is divided into three parallel lines due to the peculiarities of the country's development: state-sponsored films, commercial films, and independent films, with state cinema (whose predecessor is revolutionary cinema) and commercial cinema (held by private entertainment corporations) accounting for the two lines that predominate the film market. In today's Vietnam, the history of Vietnamese cinema is generally considered to have begun in 1959 with the first revolutionary feature film: *Chung một dòng sông* (*On the Same River*). Set in Vietnam after the 1954 Geneva Accords, when the Bến Hải River became a temporary demarcation line separating the two banks of the South and North of Vietnam, *Chung một dòng sông* tells the troubled love story of two people from regions separated by the seventeenth parallel. Despite many hardships, they still keep their dream of being together again as soon as the country is unified. It signifies the beginning of the Vietnamese version of a socialist realist aesthetic, imbued with epic scope, a sense of community, and a belief in an assured victory. Personal sentiments become intertwined with patriotism, and individual aspirations mesh with the grand ambitions of the entire nation. It is significant that the characters in *Chung một dòng sông* exhibit few introspective and imaginative moments, instead embodying the essence of action and resilience, devoid of psychological or ideological contemplation.

Indeed, in the films of the Vietnamese revolutionary or state-sponsored cinema from 1959 to 1985 (before the Doi Moi reform era[1]) we can observe an absence of personal dreams in favor of social or collective aspiration. These films seldom depict dreams or personal aspirations in the conventional sense; instead, they prioritize communal solidarity, and the intricacies of social existence as guided by dialectical materialism. Private, subconscious, unconscious, and spiritual realms receive scant attention, deemed by filmmakers as superstitious and idealistic. Dreams, if they do appear, become a symbol and a cultural code used to indicate revolutionary heroism and a faith

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[1] Doi Moi ("Reform" or "Innovation") is the name given to the economic reforms initiated in Vietnam in 1986 to create a "socialist-oriented market economy" (Hansen 171-72). Doi Moi is a general term widely used in the Vietnamese, meaning "innovate" or "renovate." However, the Doi Moi Policy refers specifically to these reforms that sought to transition Vietnam from a command economy to a socialist-oriented market economy.

in victory that permeates the subconscious and unconscious layers of people's minds.

For example, in *Bài ca ra trận* (*Song to the Battlefield*, 1973), an injured soldier's dream at a medical station is that he will recover and be able to return to the battlefield to continue fighting. At the end of the film *Em bé Hà Nội* (*The Little Girl from Hanoi*, 1974), after her family was scattered because of American bombs, the dream of the little girl from Hanoi is to see her sister again and to enter a beautiful and spacious school in the era of national socialist construction. In *Mẹ vắng nhà* (*Mother is Absent*, 1979), the family dreams of holding hands and walking peacefully when the mother comes home. In those films, besides the dream of victory, there is always a dream of peace and of constructing a "dignified, grander and better" socialist realm (Hồ 131) which is bright and glorious, and bears national significance in both literal and symbolic senses. Moreover, the desire and motivation of all the characters in those films that makes them willing to sacrifice both their lives and personal happiness is driven by their belief in a Tomorrowland where there are "immense roads" (*Đất nước* [*The Nation*], Nguyễn Đình Thi), where they "will take the Country to the future / To the days of dreams" (*Đất nước* [*The Nation*], Nguyễn Khoa Điềm), where they find "first of all: a Soviet planet" (*Đẻ một hành tinh* [*A Planet is Born*], Xuân Diệu), etc.[2]

Following Vietnam's economic integration into the global arena in 1996, urbanization has rapidly accelerated. By 2020, the urbanization rate had reached 40%, with the "Resolution of the 13th Party Congress" targeting a rate of 45% by 2025 and approximately 50% by 2030 (Ministry of Construction). In recent years, Vietnam has been influenced by the trend of urban romance films from China and Korea, creating a captivating shared urban dream for rural youth who aspire to leave their hometowns and settle in cities. The portrayal of young individuals who move from the countryside to the city streets to embark on

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[2] However, since the war's end, especially since the Doi Moi period in the 1980s, war films telling small stories of forgotten or marginalized people, lives, thoughts, and personal dreams in the context of epic battles have emerged in Vietnam. In these "little narratives" (which still belong to the state film type but have innovations in storytelling thinking and cinematic language), the relationship between human and the dream world in wartime is reviewed, reevaluated, and questioned, and is portrayed as more profound, more painful, and more challenging (such as *Bao giờ cho đến tháng Mười* [*When the Tenth Month Comes*, 1984], *Không có đường chân trời* [*There Is no Horizon*, 1986], *Người sót lại của Rừng Cười* [*The Survivor of the Laughing Forest*, 1991], *Người đàn bà mộng du* [*Sleepwalking Woman*, 2003], *Đừng đốt* [*Don't Burn*, 2009], *Truyền thuyết về Quán Tiên* [*The Legend of Quan Tien*, 2019]). However, while the personal dreams of these films are still closely tied to the theme of war, it is surprising this is not yet articulated with the dramatic socio-economic changes of the past half-century.

entrepreneurial journeys and achieve remarkable success has become a prevalent theme in television series such as *Chuyện nhà Mộc* (*The Story of the Mộc's House*), *Phía trước là bầu trời* (*The Sky is Ahead*), *Những cô gái trong thành phố* (*The Girls in the City*), *Chỉ có thể là yêu* (*It can only be Love*), and *Tình yêu và tham vọng* (*Love and Ambition*). Popular media-art products, particularly in major cities like Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Da Nang, and Hue, also offer an idealized depiction of the urban landscape serving as a dreamland that ignites desire among rural individuals, reinforcing the discourse of longing for the city and its attractions. The urban ideal coincides with grand fantasies of the market economy and Western capitalist society. Despite the uncertainties and challenges urban migrants face, commercial films offer viewers romance, weaving a visual fantasy that provides respite from the harsh realities of daily life.

In state and commercial films, in whatever form, dreams are often of a collective nature. Whether it be revolutionary or personal romanticism, these dreams coalesce into a shared societal aspiration for a grand utopia. This utopia can manifest as the idea of a communal space or a collective living apartment during the socialist development era, or as a high-tech company and a thriving city in the age of the market economy. Through propaganda during times of war or the mass media in the era of globalization, individuals portrayed in these films appear to be indoctrinated into dreaming and living according to such ideals. As Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant have observed:

> The dreamer searches for all the tangles of his dreams in the vast collections of collective images his civilization has provided for him, and this keeps the door open between the two halves of said man's life, enabling the constant exchanges between dreams and myths, between personal fictions and social coercion, causing culture to infiltrate into the human psyche and human psyche to permeate the culture. (178)

As described above, a socialist realist aesthetic in state-sponsored cinema typically depicts dreams less often in mundane terms, but gloriously, where dreamed socialism morphs into a grand revolutionary future, as is indicated in the slogan of the Revolutionary Republic of Vietnam: "Independence— Freedom—Happiness." On the other hand, the commercial film mimics the

capitalist paradigm of cultural reproduction by portraying utilitarian fantasies about a future version of a happy, prosperous, and beautiful existence that entices viewers to enjoy a plastic consumer prosperity. We can see that "dreaming" or "dreams" have progressed beyond the ontological/individual meaning and developed into communal symbols in an epistemological sense in both state-sponsored and commercial cinema lines. The plots become parables of Tomorrowland and dreamscapes that all the protagonists seek. A dreamscape could be defined as an imagined landscape; taking the suffix "-scape" as a theoretical category has a track record in the social sciences. In *Public Worlds: Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Arjun Appadurai argues that "the suffix '-scape' allows us to point to the fluid, irregular shapes of these landscapes" (33). The mediascape is Appadurai's privileged example, but almost any term with the common suffix "-scape" implies descriptions or disclosures that are

> not understood as objectively given relations that look the same from every angle of vision but, rather, . . . deeply perspectival constructs . . . inflected by the historical, linguistic, and political situatedness of different sorts of actors: nation-states, multinationals, diasporic communities, as well as subnational groupings and movements (whether religious, political, or economic), and even intimate face-to-face groups, such as villages, neighborhoods, and families. (33)

Meanwhile, the young independent Vietnamese directors of the 1980s and 1990s generations, such as Phạm Ngọc Lân, Đặng Hải Quang, Dương Diệu Linh, Vũ Minh Nghĩa, Phạm Hoàng Minh Thy, and Việt Vũ, employ black comedy, absurdity, and magical realism to challenge the prevailing stereotypes surrounding the idealized promised lands depicted in the mainstream cinematic trends. Short films by these younger directors include: *Thành phố khác* (*Another City*, 2016) and *Giòng sông không nhìn thấy* (*The Unseen River*, 2020) by Phạm Ngọc Lân; *Tỉnh thức* (*Awaken*, 2017) and *Tàn thể: Tiền truyện* (*Broken Being: Prequel*, 2019) by Đặng Hải Quang; *Mẹ, con gái, và những giấc mơ* (*Mother, Daughter, Dream*, 2018) by Dương Diệu Linh; *Mây nhưng không mưa* (*Live in Cloud-Cuckoo Land*, 2020) by Vũ Minh Nghĩa and Phạm Hoàng Minh Thy; and *Mùa xuân vĩnh cửu* (*The Eternal Springtime*, 2021) by Việt Vũ.

In those films, dreams and magic hold equally significant positions. It is within these narratives that we come to understand that the issues surrounding dreams and dreamers extend beyond the individual level; they exist at a deeper, communal level—that of an "imagined community" (6), as described by Benedict Anderson. Building beyond Anderson's concepts, Appadurai described several kinds of land-scape (including dreamscapes) in the context of globalization as "imagined worlds" and he states that, "the imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labor and culturally organized practice)" (33). In general, dreamscapes, according to the approach of this anthropologist, are no longer only forms of "fantasy," "elite pastime," or "contemplation," but become a politics of imagination: "a form of negotiation between sites of agencies (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility" (31-33). Dreaming then also becomes an escape from the politics of space that profoundly affects people, consciously and unconsciously, making it necessary to investigate how the unique and counter-traditional cinematic aesthetics of Vietnamese independent films might produce new narratives and interpretations of people's inner lives in a postsocialist period.

In Vietnam, postsocialist culture is the cultural context or current status and cultural heritage created from the process of building socialism in Vietnam. In parallel with globalization, postsocialist culture in Vietnam today has a cross-border trend, with a substantial shift in value systems and lifestyles between countries in the socialist bloc. The postsocialist period is assumed to involve "a quick transition for these societies to neoliberal forms" and "the market economy" (Martin 1). More importantly, "postsocialist transformations in actuality happen within ongoing conflicts, both collective and individual" (3).[3] With specific evidence mentioned in independent films, such as high-rise apartment buildings, hydroelectric dams, old factories, etc., there is a flow of socialist globalization of objects alongside the flow of the economy. These material objects that were symbols of the one-time cooperation of countries in the socialist bloc are still reappearing, changing their appearance in current life,

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[3] In *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics*, Xudong Zhang stated that Chinese socialism today "survives as post-socialism, which is articulated through the discourses of postmodernism and nationalism and the co-existence of multiple modes of production and socio-cultural norms" and "post-socialism is a system more open to the construction of a social world which transcends the dogmas of capitalism or socialism to get in touch with the productive forces of a world of life with all its social and cultural specificities and complexities" (16).

but within the current process of Western globalization. Accordingly, independent films tend to question collective dreams, community dreams, and moral dreams from the perspective of building a socialist society, as is still shown in state-sponsored movies. Independent film also challenges the urban-globalized dream of consumerism, and the utopian vision of commercial films. The prefix "post," more than representing what is assumed to happen *after* socialism, can also explain a somewhat erratic suspension of movement between the past and the future. In conventional studies, postsocialism only applies to former socialist countries or to socialist countries with a hybrid economy (for example, Vietnam's "socialist-oriented market economy"). Discussions of postsocialist manifestations of state governance are mainly in an administrative aspect within a management apparatus, and do not appear in everyday economic and social life.

II. I Know What I Will Not Dream Of

In the independent short films, we recognize a continuous process of resisting the urban dreams presented in Vietnam's urban romantic and love films. *Live in Cloud-Cuckoo Land* (2020) is the work of directors Vũ Minh Nghĩa and Phạm Hoàng Minh Thy. The film is about a girl working at a wedding dress shop who falls in love with a boy who sings and sells goods on the street. On the day of the football final, she wants to meet him and sing her favorite song for him. Unexpectedly, she has to deliver wedding dresses, and his speaker is stolen, with the consequence that they cannot see each other and therefore resolving, or perhaps not resolving, the tension that had been building from the outset. For example, already during the opening sequence of *Live in Cloud-Cuckoo Land*, the dream of the male protagonist (the street busker) has the color of an urban romantic movie scene. In that dream, the female main character appears as a helper at a wedding dress shop and stands motionless between two mannequins in the store; they look like three dolls placed in a large transparent glass case. The back and top lighting focus on the girl and mannequins to create a scene resembling a theatrical stage performance. A song praising a female lover/darling resounds: "There is a wonderful light, brighter than the sun; that is the smile of the one I love" (00:00:17-33), and a boy appears in the foreground, singing the song. According to the standard rom-com formula, the following sequences should then progress into a tender, beautiful,

and warm love story where the city sparkles with lights and romantic sounds, and the bridal shop becomes a reassuring symbol of elegiac fantasy. However, the young independent filmmaker abandons all genre expectations.

In the next scene, the focus shifts to the cabinet loudspeaker (the source of the music that overwhelms the boy's voice), and the image of the dreamer (the street busker) who lies asleep next to a long wall while the sounds of a radio broadcasting a cultural program echo. Such public communication agendas in Vietnam today (such as local loudspeakers, radios, news programs on national television, and reality shows) are always full of propaganda, aiming to create ideal models that encourage people to dream of a utopian socialist society. However, the above scene shows that everything preceding it was an unfinished and strange dream, showing the struggles and insecurities within the dreamer's character. The director constantly disconnects and submerges the storyline, the fantasies, and dreams driven by the audience's romantic model, as well as the pleasures that typically arise after those fantasies; the director pushes the audience into a precarious, improvised, and unpredictable situation as they process the work. At that moment, the wedding dress shop, the cabinet loudspeaker, and the public loudspeaker (attractive symbols of city life) become external forces that shred reality and the dreams of marginalized people like the maid or the street performer. Between them, there always lies a spatial and temporal barrier, transparent and seemingly beautiful, yet cruel and subtle. It is like the dress shop window preventing physical contact between the girl and the boy. It is like the distant sound of a loudspeaker, resonating while the boy sleeps, abruptly awakening him from his nocturnal escape from reality. The power of the city's landscape and soundscape has permeated deeply, overwhelming individuals in their entirety and shaping their emotions, particularly those drawn to its magnetic urban center. In this movie world, it is no longer a simple matter of people wanting to "follow their dreams," to live in pursuit of their aspirations and desires for a prosperous future, and to find joy and fulfillment in their chosen paths. Rather, they not only cease to dream, but actively try to choose not to dream in the way they were taught or guided.

In these independent films, a river often figures as a symbolic representation in the dreamscape, serving as a spatial and temporal separation between real life and fantasy. At the same time, it is also a way out for unfortunate young people rejected by the city. After having his speaker stolen by the city's scoundrels and being cornered, the street busker in *Live in Cloud-*

Cuckoo Land sleeps next to an abandoned dragon-painted wall on the city's edge and begins to sink into a long dream. In the dream, he wanders to the riverbank, next to people exercising leisurely alongside two dragon statues with their heads held high against the towering buildings of the city in the distant background, implying the "transformation of the dragon" or the desire for the ultimate development of Vietnamese nationalism. After waking up in the first dream, because he wanted to disconnect from the loudspeaker's sound, the character enters the second dream. In this dream, he leaves and sinks into the river, turning his back on two giant dragon statues. This is an apparent discourse of colored nationalism where the socialist identity is imprinted in all public media in Vietnam (such as public architecture, art, media, and social networks). At the same time, when leaving reality to enter the dream world, the character also rejects and leaves behind the enormous buildings—the symbols of capitalism that are taking up the living space of Vietnamese people. When the street performer floats to the water's surface at the end of the dream, he enters a primeval realm of dreamy fog, green woods, and lush grass. At that moment, he is transformed into a horse. The horse returns to its place with Hương, his poor lover, at the wedding dress shop; then Hương mounts the horse and escapes with him.

In *Another City* (2016), the rejection and interrogation of both literal and metaphorical urban aspirations extend beyond the individual sphere, encompassing the communal consciousness and spirit of an entire generation.[4] In the city's heart, young individuals find themselves entrapped within substandard living spaces, resembling mice confined within a cave. They grapple with existential and subsistence issues while contending with their own emotions. Despite their circumstances, they remain surrounded by the echoes and expressions of a dream for a brighter, more romantic future that lies somewhere on the distant horizon.

Within the confines of their dwellings, two items of kitsch art serve as conduits for this dream: a sentimental love song depicting a noble queen and a castle of love and a canvas displaying a picturesque waterfall, representing untamed, expansive natural landscapes. Despite their working-class backgrounds and the lack of light and greenery in their basement-like

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[4] *Another City* (2016) focuses on three main characters living in the same stuffy city: a single middle-aged woman, a young girl preparing to get married but becoming pregnant by her lover, and a group of boys. Young people live together, including the young girl's husband and lover. Finally, the film's characters escape that urban space to immerse themselves under the beautiful waterfall.

surroundings, these young individuals employ these items to envision a fantastical realm where they are accepted. They engage in perilous tasks, such as window washing while suspended on a bosun's chair, and they remain separated from the city dwelling woman who futilely attempts to reach them through a glass pane where the symbolic flow of white soap and water seemingly cleanses and purifies.

Nevertheless, it perpetuates divisions between servants and the served, those who clean and those who inhabit the house, observers and the observed, dirtiness and cleanliness, and darkness and brightness. Notably, notions of cleanliness and brightness become discriminatory, biased, and obsessive in the eyes of the city people who imagine and visualize the immigrant workers. Moreover, at the end of the film, in a dream, they all reach the waterfall they longed for and desired. Significantly, the first time they go deep into a dream is the first time they see the outside. However, as soon as they see the waterfall, all their bodies are soaked and submerged in cold water, and a naive, awkward viewing ceremony replaced a bustling wedding ceremony.

It is the irony, absurdity, and banality of dreams and dream models "written" by an invisible power—by famous architecture, cityscape, and music. These things are continuously reproduced so that the rural young generations continue to launch themselves and rush into the urban dreams like moths to a flame. In a more drastic negative dimension, in *The Unseen River* (2020), the city stands as a misty silhouette across the river, left behind by two individuals who traverse the waters searching for a Buddhist monk.[5] The city they inhabit robs them of sleep, thus depriving them of dreams. For "the worst thing about not being able to sleep is not being able to dream. When you cannot dream, you cannot return to the past, nor can you find any future" (00:13:16-23), as articulated by the monk. The boy's insomnia actually conceals a more severe disease of modern people: the sickness of blindly pursuing reason and utilitarian values; they are too afraid of having no future to dare to live fully in the present. The fact that they can neither sleep nor dream and do not dare to dream makes them only able to live on the surface of the stream of consciousness while failing to immerse themselves in its depth.

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[5] *The Unseen River* (2020) is about a woman named Nguyện (played by Minh Chau) who goes up the Mekong river and reunites with her lover 30 years ago. Meanwhile, young lovers Thục and his girlfriend (Wean, Naomi) go down the river to a temple to find a cure for insomnia.

In general, independent filmmakers often "awaken" characters, causing them to wake up and eliminate all imaginative thinking and daydreaming embedded in their minds by popular culture, powerful urban landscapes, and clichéd representations. Not only alluding to the failure of the "city dream," the films mentioned above often include parody sequences and dismiss the desirable and appealing symbols of the West, the globalized world, post-humanity, and future technological capitalism currently present in Vietnam. For example, the instructions for delivery that a wedding dress shop owner gives to his employee Hương in *Live in Cloud-Cuckoo Land* map out the complications of globalization exemplified in an international-standard villa complex: "Cross the French area, proceed to the American area, and do not get lost in the Arab area" (00:04:54). The way Hương becomes lost in the dim darkness of that foreign villa complex (as if being watched from a camera) somewhat evokes the feeling and atmosphere of a dream. To be more exact, it evokes a feeling of being overwhelmed and unable to adapt to one's surroundings. This portrays the character's struggle within globalization's dream that hints at the notion of neo-colonialism—when the presence of big capitalist countries and political forces manifest themselves in architectural institutions. The guide for Hương is a Vietnamese janitor tasked with cleaning this luxurious villa complex.

The film *Broken Being: Prequel* (2019) vividly offers mockery and degradation of dreams associated with a capitalist paradise and the future of globalization, the ultimate phase of capitalism. This is a post-apocalyptic story world where humans, clones, and machines fight for the survival of their species. The film opens with a beautiful love story of a couple living in one of the many existing Tranquil Havens. The Tranquil Haven is seen by the ones occupying it as a peaceful village, a safe zone under the protection of the gods above (Sky Palace). However, the love story quickly falls into a bottomless pit of pain and despair when the wife mysteriously dies. The loyal husband goes on a dangerous journey from his peaceful Tranquil Haven to find Sky Palace, hoping to reunite with the love of his life. It is the moment he is about to discover the horrifying truths underneath it all, waking up from lies and deceptions, realizing things are not what they seem, and having the perception of reality shattered into pieces. This is exemplified through the model of the Sky Palace. To reach this destination, the character residing in the Pure Land must traverse a vast river riddled with turbulent waves and enveloped in

darkness. Once again, the river assumes the dual role of symbolizing both a turbulent dream and a transient death of rational consciousness.

Through the arrangement and staging of unique and exciting spatial architecture (such as the Pure Land and Sky Palace in *Broken Being*, and the River and Sky in *Tỉnh thức* [*Awaken*]),[6] Đặng Hải Quang's films present to the audience dreamed objects and possibilities (both literal and figurative) of the future as if everyone could easily acknowledge, agree, and select them freely.

For instance, in *Broken Being*, the character "I" is depicted lying on a boat in the Pure Land, gazing up at the sky. Even after escaping the village and aimlessly drifting on the river, he catches glimpses of the Sky Palace: "When did the Sky Palace come into existence? No one knows. Yet, it is said that by being there, one can live happily ever after. . ." (00:00:53-01:53). Therefore, the Sky Palace has always been an invitation, an obsession, a reminder, and a form of collective consciousness. The old dormitory, a legacy from the years of previous socialist construction, hangs over the land of Heaven, lying faintly next to new apartment buildings built by capitalist corporations. It encompasses not only the villagers who believe in divine blessings and a heavenly tomorrow but also includes "I," the lost and rebellious child of the Pure Land community who constantly insists, "I don't believe it. . . . I don't need it either because I already have my other half" (00:01:06-:20). The Sky Palace symbolizes the future aspirations of the Pure Land inhabitants, an undeniable truth they strive for. However, it remains a distant concept, characterized by an epic distance reflected in its hierarchical structure and size, ranging from the humble Pure Land to the lofty Sky Palace and from the small to the grand. From an egocentric perspective, this structure hints at the idea of a fairytale realm, a Tomorrowland, an elusive dreamland. However, others believe it can be attained through genuine worship and the intervention of a medium.

Across generations, the Sky Palace has been regarded as a heavenly abode where individuals lead fulfilling lives and practice a beautiful religion, obediently assimilating into society. However, when a tragedy befalls the protagonist, and his heart breaks upon losing his beloved, he is left with no alternative but to seek solace in the Palace, clinging to it as a beacon of hope.

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[6] *Awaken* (Đặng Hải Quang, 2017) is a short animated film that DeeDee Animation Studio independently produced. Inspired by the writings of Zhuangzi, an ancient Chinese philosopher, the film is about a fishing trip involving an older man, a dog, and a strange creature in a half-awaken, trance-like reality.

Only then do other future options unfold, causing all beliefs to vanish and dissipate. Symbolizing dreams and death, the stormy black river becomes the threshold he must cross, leading him to the Palace, a mysterious and sacred place.[7] As soon as he enters the dreamland and experiences life within, the man enjoys a moment of awakening, revealing that all the dreams his entire Pure Land community conjured up (hopelessly) were nothing but falsehoods and mere simulations.

The main space where "I" collides with the Sky Palace is a modern laboratory and workshop where capitalist corporations perform human cloning. It can be said that that is the place where the power of technology and science owned by wealthy forces is most clearly at work. Scientists have classified at least four types of humans projected to coexist in the future: (1) normal humans, (2) cyborgs (individuals whose bodies comprise a blend of natural and artificial components), (3) cloned humans (artificial beings regenerated from stem cells), and (4) mixed humans (Yên 3). Within this setting, the character "I" realizes that he and the inhabitants of the Pure Land, a supposedly serene and genuine realm, are artificial creations and clones manufactured by a laboratory and a robust technology corporation. Moreover, they are fated to degenerate and perish prematurely, succumbing to their demise by the fourth generation without any discernible cause, just like "I's" lost lover. Even in a world where humans, post-humans, and non-humans coexist, order and justice still favor the privileged, the technologically advanced, and the powerful—namely, the capitalists. In a moment of despair, as the guardians of the Sky Palace violate his human dignity, "I" confronts them and subsequently identifies his beloved among numerous identical clones, recognizing her through the engagement ring as a symbol of their shared human identity.[8]

Cultural structure functions typically as a network of devices that create meaning, allowing individuals to anchor and establish subjectivity. At the climax of the process of subjectivization, we witness a form of de-culturalization within the realm of community space or collective spiritual space. This occurs because, ultimately, all entities (such as the Pure Land and

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[7] First, what appeared before him was a model of old collective living quarters resembling suspended blocks in the air, a reflection of the extensive efforts invested in developing a socialist utopia. In the film's various shapes, we do not see people but only closed doors that cannot be touched.

[8] And in the end, despite succumbing to the people of the Sky Palace and being shot to death, "I" still grips his wife's ringed hand and repeats the saying: "I am a simple person. I want to live with you forever, whether in Heaven or Hell!"

Sky Palace) are simulation models lacking true essence and tangible existence. They are products of imagination and do not possess the qualities of being omnipresent, all-knowing, and responsive to everything. Both Pure Land and the Sky Palace are hierarchical, value-driven models of social organization involving grand narratives about an eternally happy place, which stipulate that people must obey and be loyal, docile and silently accept their status without questioning it, and believe in what is universally held. All of this has fallen apart.

The Pure Land evokes a reconstructed version of indigenous lands, rediscovered through Western colonial discourse and safeguarded by Western influences. However, the fourth generation in the Pure Land experiences degeneration, and its inhabitants struggle to preserve their lineage. On the other hand, the Sky Palace embodies a vision, a grand fantasy and narrative of a Western paradise rooted in capital, science, evolution, purity, originality, and authority (a rumor about a man disliked by the Pure Land people is ad hominem; while rumors told by the people about the Sky Palace are very general and vague, full of admiration and epic distance).

It becomes evident that indigenous beliefs, socialist ideologies, and capitalist philosophies all present distinct utopian visions that individuals can choose from. However, in the post-apocalyptic era, the protagonist "I" questions and rejects these options in various ways. The gods worshipped by the inhabitants of the Pure Land fail to help him revive his wife, the floating blocks of collective apartments offer no space for him, and the laboratory leads to his degeneration and demise. All future fantasies designed for "I" himself to integrate into those communities as a cog in the machinery are bankrupt. After all, future alternatives collide and always aim to take away the most private, profound, instinctive part of "I."

By observing the process of dream deconstruction within the character in response to his socio-political fantasies and illusions, breaking the boundaries of predetermined dreamlands, we wish to delve more into the mechanism, the process by which the character has identified the structure of those futures. Through the legacy of the past, the filmmaker reconstructs the existential being of the "I" and turns it over through ceaseless interrogation and adjustment. Towards the future vision, the filmmaker pushes the character and viewers into the realm of knowing by taking them out of their horizon of expectation and the usual reception of animations. This interpretation catalyzes the character's

journey towards awakening as he gradually sheds his obsession with the deceptive discourses of capitalism, globalization, and post-humanism.

It is evident that, as mentioned above, young independent films vehemently reject the common dreams associated with uprightness. These ideals are predetermined and rigidly define their identities, giving them a sense of belonging to a nation and a community. However, these individuals have been driven by their own volition, feeling isolated and unable to live for themselves or challenge the cultural norms imposed on their subconscious. They are filled with apprehension towards intangible moral norms, public perception, and judgments rooted in ethics and aesthetics. Dreams seem to be the realm of freedom, but a society controlled by a system of images and symbols establishes and regulates the cultural conceptions of reality and the unconscious. The films being discussed serve as a form of awakening, rejecting all illusions, fantasies, and utopias and demystifying them; they mock the surface authority and the emptiness within. Denying dreams also means rejecting pre-written future alternatives.

From there, the characters seek to create intersubjective, multi-subjective relationships so that no single space-time can contain them all, and no version of narrative and image can encapsulate their identities. These intersubjective realms encompass multiple entities, where individuals are interconnected, and unity exists within diversity, making it impossible for anyone to fully grasp, exploit, or manipulate them. It conforms to a Foucauldian technology of the self; the ego is then able to escape from the dense surrounding power net, which, even though smooth and comfortable, is attempting to assimilate it into all forms of massively produced identities of subjectivity which can be produced in ways that are most beneficial to capitalists (Foucault).

III. I Dream Therefore We are: Construction of (Inter)Subjectivity and (Non)Human Subjectivity in the Unseen Landscape

When sharing thoughts about cinema as a means of healing and easing the trauma caused by urban dreams, director Việt Vũ wrote: "More and more areas of farming and forestry land are being taken for urbanization plans. As the primary jungles are narrowed down, the farming land disappears, the most intimate surviving habitat disappears, and the newly grown-up boys and girls from basic families in the native land are also split from a tradition of living

familiar to many generations of their forefathers" ("Eternal Springtime"). Similar to the protagonist in *The Unseen River*, young individuals, faced with uncertainty about their futures and the potential loss of their dreams and imagination, opt for an alternative way to dream: immersing themselves in the realm of cinema. This resonates with the character Vũ in *Cha và con và* (*Big Father, Small Father, and Other Stories*, 2015), who views photoscapes as an avenue to escape reality and recreate and reimagine his entire life within the frames made by photography, cinema, and the media. Resisting the influence of media, technology, representation, and urban architecture becomes a means of combating the erosion and deprivation of identity in modern life and a quest to find a personal path toward one's dreams. To combat the politics of being seen (through the manipulation of representation, films, photos, and media by "offering" themselves to visual culture and pursuing futuristic dreams), young filmmakers actively seek out unseen realities through the most effective means: dreams.

In contrast to perceiving dreams as a means of detachment and adopting someone else's aspirations within a grand narrative framework, the films mentioned earlier emphasize that dreaming is an active process of subjectification. It is a dynamic, courageous, and meaningful journey. Against the backdrop of spontaneous and unnoticed gazes from others, from the Western world, and urban dwellers, dreaming becomes an act of resistance against the politics of observation. The film shows an image of the largest hydroelectric dam in the country, a typical manufactured structure demonstrating national strength. This image haunts the characters' subconscious, causing them to often forget their dreams and only think about the shared dream. It is a means of preserving one's subjectivity in a realm where the subject can dissolve into the object, as if in an indeterminate place called Nowhereland—unfamiliar, geographically ambiguous, and resistant to spatial definition. There, the characters find the purest nature of the world and universe, where humans and nature interact, and humans interact in a harmonious whole, functioning as one extensive, wondrous, extraordinary living body. That is also how humans heal and find their original identities taken away by civilized routines. The young man's stolen sleep in *The Unseen River* is also his future, past, and identity. Modern people are deceived by the dream of looking for oneself and for individuality, but they are, in fact, increasingly alike, as their identities become commodities used for commercial purposes; the further you

go, the more you feel lonely and alienated from fellow human beings, no longer feeling the joy of living. When he finds solace by sitting by the river, allowing his thoughts to immerse in the universe's boundless depths, he can cry. At this moment, his soul is revitalized, shedding the weariness, fatigue, and inertia that once consumed it.

For these young independent directors, the unconventional portrayal of dreams is a compelling expression that calls for restoring life's enigma, sanctity, and accessibility through art. It is a form of resistance against the growing forces of marketization, utilitarianism, secularism, and rationalization in society. The river in the films can be regarded as an expression of eternal flow without randomly imposed spatial and temporal division of territories, domains, countries, regions, and eras. The male and the female, the young and the old, humans and animals, the past and the future, and the self and the Other are interconnected pairs that interact and coexist within a unified whole, where beings reflect one another. When individuals look deep into themselves, they can perceive themselves in diverse forms, variations, identities, and egos. They are always in the process of being themselves and becoming themselves.

The logic of dreams is irrational, unbounded, and limitless. Dreams enable humans to witness the "unseen rivers," invisible landscapes, the essence of the world, and the unique nature of each being—a realm that the industrial age has forgotten and suppressed. When individuals confront themselves, they discover the universe, just as when facing it, they rediscover themselves. They once again find the forest of their being, the original and eternal spring. Modern humans have relied excessively on reason, rationality, and valuable life while neglecting intuition, emotions, instinct, the body, the unconscious, the spiritual, and the sacred—the very aspects that constitute most of the iceberg of consciousness hidden beneath the surface. Dreaming is an effective, if not the only, channel of communication that helps one reconnect and regain faith in the sacred things in life ("blessed *are* they that they have not seen, and *yet* have believed" [John 20.29]). It allows them to merge into the universe's vast, unknown, and unfathomable nature, avoiding the risk of becoming cyborgs or soulless mass-produced machines.

In general, the remarkable achievement of the avant-garde cinematic works mentioned above lies in creating intersubjectivity—a profound connection between subjects at the depths of the potential unconscious. It is not merely the moment when, in a dream, "the subject projects himself into another

subject, experiencing alienation and identification with the other" (Chevalier 169). Instead, it is a more difficult moment when the protagonist freely traverses from one dream/world to another, actively embodying both the "Me" and the "Other" within themselves—a moment of enlightenment about the nature of existence, as portrayed in the films by Phạm Ngọc Lân, Đặng Hải Quang, or Việt Vũ. It is also the moment when each rediscovers the vast, profound, transformative, and diverse nature of humans and humanity from the depths of their spiritual world, floating, vibrant, shifting, fantastical, elusive, strange, and extraordinary. All three films, *The Unseen River*, *Broken Being*, and *The Eternal Springtime*, are like dreams, realities in dreams, dreams amid reality, and they reside in one overarching dream created by cinematic narratives. The abrupt transitions between scenes, camera angles, the absence of physical connections between spatial fragments, the unusual positioning of the camera from multiple points of view, and the distant, illusory colors all enable the films to become a continuous channeling through individual minds, creating an intersubjective connection exceeding the bonds of normative rationality.

Instead of dreaming according to the collective unconscious and culture and the volitional models that aim to frame and collectivize people or turn dreams into marketing strategies as in advertisements and commercial films, the above independent short films propose that humans are both objects that observe and subjects that actively create within their dream narratives. Their dreams are not fueled by nostalgia or a longing for lost traditions, nor are they consumed by fantasies of a distant paradise attainable only through exhaustive labor. Instead, their dreams represent an active process of creating, recreating, and reorganizing their lives and minds, and the active observation, watching, contemplation, and experiencing of their appearances. This new generation no longer seeks to dream their parents' dreams, nor do they wish to define their entire cohort through a single collective dream. They dissolve all the implications, symbols, structures, and stories that make us think about the collectiveness of the individual unconscious.

In these films, we encounter a new cinematic language that can be described as the language of dreams—a magical realism cinema or slow cinema. Within this realm, dreams are a valuable asset for underprivileged film characters, allowing them to express themselves and find healing. Simultaneously, dreams also hold significance for young independent filmmakers, who often have less influence than state-funded directors. Cinema

becomes a medium for them to dream differently from the mainstream state-sponsored and Hollywood-based commercial cinema that dominates the global film industry.

In terms of the plot, the film *Broken Being* begins with the character "I" lying on a floating boat in the river of the Pure Land. It concludes when the main character, the narrator known as "God," is defeated by cyborgs (beings with natural and artificial body parts) in the Sky Palace. The filmmaker employs a minimalist storytelling approach to depict the expansive regions of the space universe. The character's life and thoughts lead to our knowledge of the world, and every little detail in the film contains its very existential, momentary nature. Despite lasting only fifteen minutes, the short film encapsulates the past, present, and future, as well as different levels of existence for individual humans, communities, and humanity as a whole.

Interestingly, in the second ending, the wanderer appears in his supine form (as a reincarnation when the boundary between the inside and outside of the narrative is broken, and the credits run) after he has accepted death, and ended his/her narrative mission/function/role. This represents another form of transcendent thinking, as it breaks the barriers between realms, worlds, and between the actual and dream dimensions. Consequently, these elements interact, intertwine, overlap, and question each other, resulting in the complexity and difficulty of deciphering the subject's existence. This concept encourages viewers to interpret the work from the perspectives of Laozi's thoughts and Zen Buddhism.
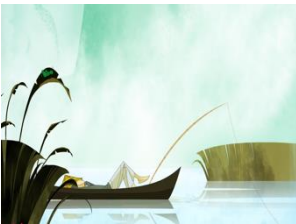
Opening scene (Full/Left–Existent)

Ending scene: (Empty/Lost–Non-existent)

Ending scene 2 (with ending credits and the song): (Full/Left–Existent)

First and foremost, the film structure exemplifies Taoist philosophy through "countering" and "returning," as described earlier.[9] Countering, from Laozi's point of view, has an important connotation: to counter to complete, and there is no completion without countering; oppositions are what motivate everything to move, because without contradiction there is no movement. "Countering-returning" embodies the idea of cycles, repetitions, and completing a full circle. All movements eventually revert to the original starting point. This perspective not only aligns with the principles of Taoism but also reflects a thinking model shared by Confucianism and other philosophical schools of thought during the pre-modern (as they look at history, the four seasons, and the rise and fall of the times, not as developments but cycles and repetitions). In this narrative world, everything revolves and moves due to cycles, leading to what can be termed ontological regression, infinite regression, a "return to the fateful," a return to the original state of natural existence, and a return to the Dao (Laozi 164).

In addition to the profound implications of ontological regression and infinite regression within the Eastern universe, as interpreted by Laozi, the images mentioned above are also connected through the logic of being full-empty-full, left-lost-left. Consequently, one can envision a narrative world constructed by dreams, drawing inspiration from the perspectives of Zhuangzi and Buddhism. Within this framework, everything depicted in the film can be perceived as the manifestation of a dream experienced by the wandering character while asleep on the boat.

The themes of reality and the virtual, as well as the real and the dream, resonate with the sentiments expressed by Zhuangzi in his book and the post-human feeling, as elucidated by Đặng Hải Quang in the film (2017). In the film, the fisherman, the dog, and the alien spacecraft are interchangeable entities, representing "the transformation of things" as "differences between things are not absolute" (Fung 55), resonant with the classic "Zhuangzi dreams of being a butterfly."[10] In just a few minutes, through unexpected breaks and turns,

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[9] I translated these Taoist terms from Vietnamese to English. All translations herein are mine unless otherwise specified.

[10] "Once, Zhuangzi dreamed that he turned into a butterfly happily flying, but didn't know that he was Zi anymore, then suddenly he up and became surprised to see that he was Zi. I do not know if I am Zi dreaming and turning into a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming of becoming Zi. Zhuangzi and butterflies are different. That's called "transformation"" ("Trang Chu dreams of a hoax." *Zhuangzi*, translated by Nguyễn Hiến Lê, Hồng Đức Publishing House, 2020.)

modern speed and sounds, and a minimal yet illusionary setting, the filmmaker immerses both the characters and the viewers in an endless play of dreams and reality. Thus, the film reminds us of the core spirit of Zhuangzi: freedom. From nature comes freedom—natural freedom. A struggle of humans to achieve freedom is striving for the Equality of Views on things.[11] To achieve unity with all things and events, humans must be one with all things and phenomena and follow the Way. To view things with equality means returning to one's being, to the original state, and attaining freedom akin to all elements in nature. During the process when the fisherman dreams of becoming an alien saucer, or the flying saucer itself dreams of becoming a fisherman, in the humorous, lighthearted language of *Tỉnh thức* (*Awaken*), viewers can see that the humans there really reach the "equal views on things"; and at the same time, they are not tied to or self-attached to anything in modern society. Objects, animals, humans, science, and technology do not impose norms or frameworks upon one another—in other words, this is where Zhuangzi's philosophy seems to find its place.

Bringing a unique nuance of its own, Việt Vũ's *The Eternal Springtime* presents scenes captured through a lens that appears as if covered with water.[12] The camera assumes the role of a blurred, intense, and limited eye, distinct from the invisible and all-powerful cinematographic lenses commonly found in Hollywood-style cinema. The imagery of two individuals carrying a hammock near a waterfall fades away like a dream, symbolizing the indigenous people vanishing into untouched nature and rejecting modern society. The juxtaposition of burning trees, creaking wood, flowing water, and feet immersed in water signifies an obsession within a trapped consciousness: "How can one escape from it?" (00:07:00). Caves and ravines are primordial landscapes. They transcend functional and utilitarian spaces categorized by human needs. These natural formations also evoke the notion of the dark and infinite source of life. When individuals feel insecure and weary, they seek solace by delving into the depths of their being, using their limited rationality to find a sense of equilibrium amidst those states of mind. A child places their

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[11] Name of a chapter in *Zhuangzi.*

[12] *The Eternal Springtime* (2021), a 26-minute experimental documentary by director Việt Vũ, was selected to compete in the Best Documentary Short category at the 2022 Oscars. The film's main idea is that the son follows his mother to live in a cave with the desire to find rebirth because the earth is on the brink of extinction. In this movie, Việt Vũ imagines his struggle to overcome anxiety about the future and find himself.

face against his mother's, where wrinkles and skin, representing the years of human life, exist indifferently. This exemplifies myths where people dare defy sanctimonious social norms and challenge conventional cinematic models. They sit like statues in a cave, doing nothing and waiting for nothing, and time seems to stand still in the intervals between the scenes. This state represents a fantastical escape for the characters—as modern individuals often feel lost, alienated, empty, damned, and exhausted within their civilized society. The cinematic language here has reached a state of spontaneity and liberality, not limited by such categories as fiction or non-fiction, Hollywood or European— it has entered into a state of harmony between epistemology and ontology, just like the language of dreams.

In *Mother, Daughter, Dreams* (2018), the setting of an old dormitory with dark, winding corners is like a space left over from the previous socialist legacy. The film brings a dream narrative imbued with the style of magical realism based on two parallel film strands: the family story and the transformation dream of the main character Phương.[13] The traumatic relationship of Phương's family is placed in the context of the oppressive, desolate reality of the city, with the absence of an ungrateful father, the presence of an irritable, sad mother, and a taciturn daughter who always appears cold and emotionless. After finding her father's young girlfriend to ask about his whereabouts, Phương took her mother to find her father to mend the long-broken family. However, on that journey, the mother was angry when she learned the purpose of the trip and demanded that the car stop, after which she disappeared into the forest. Phương slept in the car, waiting for her mother to return. The film ends with Phương's floating dream. When the car moved, Phương lay in the back, seeing her father and mother lying hand in hand, sitting in the upper row; she smiled happily. Not as emotional or psychological as the first circuit, the second circuit of the film is associated with Phương's strange body changes. Firstly, there was the feeling of nausea and itching when Phương knew she was pregnant. Then, there was the dream of Phương trapped in a mucous bag like a fetus.

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[13] *Mother, Daughter, Dream* (2018) is an autobiographical short film about women suffering in the city (Phương, Phương's mother, and other women.) Phương rushed home and found that her father had disappeared after an argument with her mother. Searching helplessly, Phương had to seek help from his lover. At the same time, Phương is also hiding a secret from her mother that could tear the family apart. The two women went to the mountain at the suggestion of the father's lover. Moreover, this time, her mother turned to disappear.

Furthermore, finally, when the family story was utterly broken, Phương tore off the membrane, crawled out, and became a child again. The time Phương lived in dreams and found a way out of her suffocation was when she transformed from one being to another. In other words, Phương is the subject, the creator for other forms of existence, for one's own Other.

At this junction, the narrative style of daydreaming combines with the parody and degradation of "sacred dreams," the transformation into Kafkaesque metamorphosis and magical realism, and the ambiguous areas of cinematic language and narrative to make each film an indefinable dream-reality. For instance, films like *The Unseen River* or *Broken Being* lead us to question whether the entire film is merely a dream experienced by a river tourist or a boat wanderer. *Live in Cloud-Cuckoo Land* and *The Eternal Springtime* evoke a sense of daydreaming within the heart of reality. Meanwhile, in *Awaken*, the wanderer may exist as the product of a butterfly's dream (akin to Zhuangzi's philosophy) or a UFO's dream. It is intriguing that within the realm of film as a unique medium, the characters' dreams are nested within the dreams of the cinema and the director, resulting in highly self-reflective works.

IV. Conclusion: From the Politics of Dreams to the Politics of Space

In conclusion, the modern individuals portrayed in Vietnamese independent films are products of awakening and disillusionment, and in this context, awakening and disillusionment (seen as negating the known) are synonymous with maturity. Interestingly, even after awakening from their dreams, these individuals continue to dream, but now their dreams are actively sought and pursued with utmost determination as autonomous subjects.

Storytelling through dreams is also a political solution/behavior/expression. If the filmmakers were to adhere strictly to realism, they would be unable to create the visionary and introspective worlds they desire, or rather, a world that prompts people to awaken. In the works of these young independent directors, they present their perspectives to the world through innovative, avant-garde, and revolutionary language while also dealing with the constraints imposed by the socialist cultural management system. Thus, many have chosen to express themselves through dream storytelling, involving the stream of consciousness and magical realism. This essay has dealt with various cases that use different approaches to dreams and engage different slices of reality. However, all share

the same possibility of resisting society's homogenizing postulates and discourses through images/films: *The Unseen River* is the escape from the tragedy and breakdown of modern people in the era of globalization, industrialization, and the loss of dreams and memories. It reflects a reality where life is so exposed and vulnerable that dreams are constantly interrupted and stolen, compelling the subjects to undergo deformations to attain freedom. *Awaken* is a journey back to the dream of Zhuangzi to see the ephemeral nature of all things in that even the language of post-humanity or the future is not outside the laws of the universe. So whether awake or dreaming, one still understands that life is a vast, fruitless illusion, and one should not delve into suffering, anger, or delusion. In this context, dreams become a harmonious amalgamation of Eastern and Western philosophies and ancient and modern ideals, forming a healing expedition for individuals in the age of civilization and super intelligence, when technocratic capitalism also ultimately lies in the hands of the creator.

Through various levels, scopes, and forms of dreams—individual, impoverished urban communities, and humanity as a whole—using the most "illogical" cinematic language possible, even resorting to simple logic and populism, the young Vietnamese filmmakers have managed to show the deepest wounds and fractures of postsocialist humans.

There, dreaming runs counter to the collective images and influences of hegemonic cultural systems deeply ingrained in the collective and individual unconscious, such as the drive for progress and veneration for national tradition. The negotiation, interaction, and struggle between the personal unconscious and historical images and between reality and images/symbols, transform dreams into a glorious battleground within the minds of young people. *I dream, and I know what I will (not) dream*. Through dreams and exploring themselves as others, young people have the right to choose or reject those experiences (in this situation, these two things have equal performative value). Like fish in water, they had never previously considered the need to choose or the possibility of having options. Now, they establish a position of dreaming, a position of being and existing through their unique ways of dreaming.

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