Cinema of Reconciliation – Mending Social Fractures in Post-war and Post-Socialist Vietnamese Films

By

Đặng Vinh Khôi

Submitted to Central European University - Department of Undergraduate Studies

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts in Culture, Politics, and Society

Supervisor: Ulrich Meurer

Vienna, Austria

2025

COPYRIGHT NOTICE

Abstract

This thesis examines the construction of Vietnamese national identity since the country's independence in 1975 through the lens of Vietnamese cinema, particularly on the tensions between the state's 'official narrative' and the lived experiences of its people. In the aftermath of the Vietnamese-American War, the socialist government constructed an official narrative grounded in revolutionary fervor and self-sacrifice. Yet films such as *The Wild Fields* (1979) and *When the Tenth Month Comes* (1984) reveal contradictions within this narrative, particularly in how it marginalizes individual trauma and neglects domestic realities. While early films reflect state ideals through symbolic landscapes and the valorization of collective struggle, they also depict the burdens of filial duty and constrained grief. As the country enters the Đổi Mới (Renovation) era (1986-present), independent films such as *Bi, Don't Be Afraid* (2010) further challenge the official narrative by revealing the conflicting social forces that exert pressure on individuals and fracture the Vietnamese social fabric. Rather than simply resisting the official narrative, these films create a space for reflection and mediation, allowing for a more nuanced engagement with national identity. Vietnamese cinema thus becomes a site of reconciliation, where personal and political histories converge, and where fractured narratives may begin to be repaired.

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, Khoi Vinh Dang, candidate for the BA degree in Culture, Politics, and Society declare herewith that the present thesis titled *Cinema of Reconciliation – Mending Social Fractures in Post-war and Post-Socialist Vietnamese Films* is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright. I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

Vienna, 24 May 2025

Vinh Khoi Dang

Table of Contents

Introduction

In his book *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*, Pulitzer-winner Viet Thanh Nguyen begins:

> "This is a book on war, memory, and identity. It proceeds from the idea that all wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory." (Nguyen 2016, 4)

I find Professor Nguyen's words particularly poignant because they aptly embody the modern Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV). The two-decade-long Vietnam War (or as the Vietnamese would call it, the American War or the War for Vietnamese Liberation – henceforth referred to as the Vietnamese-American War) was a defining event for the country, with its violence, brutality, and trauma permeating all levels of society. In the years since, Vietnam has seen tremendous change and growth, developing from a decimated socialist authoritarian state to a booming post-socialist and open-market society. Yet as the country celebrates its 50th year of independence this year, the war's legacy and the resultant trauma continue to inform Vietnamese politics and society.

While Vietnam achieved victory on the battlefield, the struggle over the memories of the war has so far been a different story. Despite the historical significance of the Vietnamese-American War for the SRV and its people, discourse on the lived experiences and collective memory of the war has been dominated by the American perspective. This perspective situates the war within the broader Cold War geopolitical discourse and focuses on American combatants' experiences. This is certainly true for the vast number of cinematic works about the war, as global

audiences have become accustomed to the depiction of the war as canonized in Hollywood classics such as *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), and *Platoon* (1986) (Healy 2010, 326). The virtually unknown and underrepresented Vietnamese perspective in the cinema canon meant that the trauma of the war has been all but claimed by the Americans, with the Vietnamese "cast in a supporting role in a great American tragedy and dismissed as heartless, emotionless fanatics fighting in the name of a misguided ideology" (Healy 2010, 326). As I will discuss in this thesis, Vietnamese films over the years have revealed not only a distinct narrative of the war but also a glimpse into a fractured post-war society desperate to unify and rebuild, a sentiment that remains even in contemporary cinema.

This thesis serves to highlight the underrepresented Vietnamese perspective of the Vietnamese-American War and the resultant trauma that continues to inform Vietnamese society. It also extends upon previous studies on the development of the Vietnamese film canon, parallel to and reflective of the SRV's social development. Past bodies of work on Vietnamese film history have divided the SRV's film production (and its discourse) into two separate phases: the post-colonial, socialist authoritarian society (1975-1986), and the post-socialist society after the Đổi Mới ("Renovation") policy in 1986, with scholars focusing on either one or the other phases and its corresponding social influences and implications. This means Vietnamese cinema has transformed stylistically and narratively over the years, corresponding to political, economic, and cultural changes. What remains, I argue, is the desire of filmmakers to address the different social fractures prevalent in both periods and promote reconciliation and mutual understanding as important steps toward nation-building.

This thesis follows the two key phases in the SRV's history. In the first section, the reconciliatory practice of Vietnamese cinema is explored in the context of a traumatized and

divided post-war nation, desperate to rebuild and unite a country that has been partitioned along political and social lines. The need to unify the country and rebuild saw the socialist government employing an official mnemonic regime – a state-sanctioned narrative of the war that obfuscates the complex collective memory of the conflict. This clash of memories is mediated in films such as Nguyễn Hồng Sến's *The Wild Fields* (*Cánh Đồng Hoang,* 1979) and Đặng Nhật Minh's *When The Tenth Month Comes* (*Bao Giờ Cho Đến Tháng Mười,* 1984), which this thesis will analyze. The second section addresses a modernizing Vietnam, where new social and identity issues become more prominent, such as the rural-urban divide and the alienation of women. These issues are also addressed and reconciled in Phan Đăng Di's *Bi, Don't Be Afraid*! (*Bi, Đừng Sợ,* 2010), concerning the state's official narrative that now emphasizes rapid economic growth and urbanization.

Scholars like Paul Malone have noted this reconciliatory power of cinema, who demonstrated cinema's capability for truth-telling, forgiveness, mutual understanding, and supplementing lost memories (Malone 2008). As such, I argue that Vietnamese cinema cultivates these reconciliation practices in two ways. Firstly, Vietnamese cinema illustrates a more nuanced historical narrative that blends the official state narrative and lived experiences, ultimately enriching the complex Vietnamese social fabric rather than resisting the official narrative. Secondly, Vietnamese cinema reveals the contradictory nature of the official narrative, not only in and of itself but also in comparison to lived experiences. As this official narrative concerns everything from appropriate lifestyles and economic conduct to social roles and value systems, the contradictions create a multiplicitous pressure on Vietnamese people that often goes unacknowledged by the state.

These practices also inform the thesis's focus on the visual and narrative representations of **female identity** and **landscape**, two elements that are the bread and butter of Vietnamese cinema.

The representation of these elements, oftentimes informing each other, is regularly tied to the construction of national identity. The Vietnamese female identity has been constantly politicized and in flux, caught between the monolithic Confucian patriarchal values and the predominant political ideology of a specific period. Common proverbs in Vietnamese culture support this conflicting identity, emphasizing the role of women as the bedrock of Vietnamese society while also subjecting them to patriarchal gender roles and domestic spaces:

> "Tại gia tòng phụ, xuất giá tòng phu, phu tử tòng tử." ("At home, follow your father; after marriage, follow your husband; after the husband's death, follow your son").

The landscape (specifically the rural landscape) has been integral to the Vietnamese civilization for more than two thousand years and has been the subject of endless metaphorical representations of Vietnamese society in literature for nearly as long. Scholars like John Charlot (1991), Giang Hoang (2023), and Man-Fung Yip (2019, 2024) have analyzed film representations of the Vietnamese landscape as a continuation or derivation of the centuries-long poetic traditions in Vietnam. The ever-changing representation of female identity and landscape over the years has made them significant sites for reconciliation, as they demonstrate most evidently the difference between the desired social reality of the Vietnamese nation and the lived reality of ordinary people. Through the selected films (*The Wild Fields, When The Tenth Month Comes* and, *Bi, Don't Be Afraid*), we can observe a continuous process of reconciliation in Vietnamese cinema, one informed not only by the pertinent social and identity issues at a specific period but also by the official narrative that often fails at fully addressing these problems.

4

1. Reconciliation in Post-war Cinema (1975-1986)

1.1. Historical Context

The First Indochina War (1946-1954) is foundational in the formation of the Vietnamese collective memory. The war, which ended in a decisive Vietnamese victory, was the conclusion of the nearly 70-year-long period of French colonization of the country. The resultant 1954 Geneva Accords divided the country along the 17th parallel, with the communist Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) to the north and the US-backed Republic of Vietnam (RVN) to the south (Hägerdal 2005). An uneasy peace between the newly formed states lasted only a few years before military engagements began in September 1959 (Anderson 2002). To the Vietnamese people, the war with the Americans was not seen as an isolated event, but a continuation of the war for national independence that started with the First Indochina War. Though many would consider it a civil war, it was seen by the Vietnamese as another war against foreign colonization, just against a different nation. This framing is conducive to both wartime and peacetime state-building. During the war, this understanding of the conflict allowed the DRV to carry the momentum of their victory in 1954 and the sense of righteousness to their cause, seeing that it was a fight for national independence against a foreign invader.

While the events of the Vietnamese-American War need no recounting, two important points should be mentioned. First, the war was extremely violent, with both sides committing heinous atrocities. It is a well-known fact that the Americans dropped approximately three times more bombs over Vietnam than the total tally in World War 2 (Hägerdal 2005). North Vietnamese soldiers were ruthless in their own right, as evidenced by the executions of South Vietnamese officials during the 1968 Tet Offensive. Secondly, while the war was officially declared as a conflict between the North and South Vietnamese people, there was little ethnic or ideological

5

difference between them. The partition split families and communities apart, and personal accounts detail family members fighting on opposite sides (Nguyen 2013). While the war is historically significant, it can often feel arbitrary and senseless to the average Vietnamese soldier on either side. This is perhaps best illustrated in the address of DRV Colonel Bui Tin to RVN ministers amid the Fall of Saigon on April 30th, 1975:

> "Our men are only celebrating, and you have nothing to fear. Between Vietnamese, there are neither winners nor losers. It is only the Americans who were defeated. If you are patriots, take this moment as a moment of joy. The war for our country is over" (Bui, quoted in Hägerdal 2005).

Rebuilding and reunification for the SRV was arguably as difficult as the war itself. While estimates vary, the death toll of Vietnamese soldiers and civilians (on both sides) ranges from 1 to 3 million (Anderson 2002). The traumatic experience of the millions of dead compatriots was compounded by the lasting physical wounds caused by unexploded ordnances and the 19 million gallons of herbicides sprayed by the US throughout the war, 11 million gallons of which was the infamous Agent Orange that caused physical disabilities and birth defects that last until today (Eschwege 1978). While this was a significant obstacle in rebuilding, the SRV also had to contend with a population divided for decades across political, ethnic, and religious lines. Not only was the North-South reconciliation needed, but there were also 54 ethnic groups within the country, as well as various religious groups (Buddhists, Catholics, Confucians, and indigenous religions), many of whom suffered persecution during the war (Eyerman et al. 2023, 45). While this divide speaks to the incredibly uphill battle that the central government has to contend with in unifying the country, it also shows a multiplicity of differing memories and traumata that are mostly excluded from the state-sanctioned memorialization.

However, it was the sense of unity and shared perception of the American aggressor that was crucial for the fractured country's transition to peacetime state-building. As seen by Colonel Bui Tin's quote (aforementioned), "We" – the Vietnamese people are from now on understood as a single unit, victims of foreign aggression. This view establishes a narrative of unity that would allow the SRV to mend the most significant political rift in the country. Yet, it also downplays much of the violence (and hence trauma) committed between the North and South, a political and cultural conflict that informs many Vietnamese people's memories of the war. Eyerman et al. analyzed monuments and museums and concluded that the central government constructed a "grand trauma narrative" towards the war that encouraged unified national mourning and commemoration (2023, 65). This hinged upon putting the imagined community of "the Vietnamese nation" at the forefront and downplaying the domestic differences, such as ethnicity and religion (Eyerman et al. 2019, 145). For one, this grand trauma narrative recontextualizes the trauma and suffering as homogenous and "in a context of historical necessity" (Eyerman et al. 2019, 145). Furthermore, this grand narrative also saw its 'actors' glorified and commemorated by the state as the embodiment of the victorious victim in a heroic struggle.

It is important to mention that one should look at the Vietnamese mnemonic regime as a political necessity at the time. Considering the destruction, political rift, and demographic diversity of Vietnam, this mnemonic regime was a sufficient bandage for a still-wounding nation, one that allowed the country to move forward and rebuild together. When looking at the artistic arena of memory at large, what is observed is an immense effort to fill in the critical gaps of memory that were left behind when the country needed to unify and rebuild, and to negotiate the positionality of individual memories within the mnemonic regime. In essence, cultural productions played a

crucial role in revisiting the diverse memories that were not prioritized by the state and looking at the memories of ordinary people in relation to the issues and concerns of a post-war society.

1.2. Filmmaking in the Post-war SRV

In his article *Vietnamese Cinema: First Views*, John Charlot perfectly encapsulates the crux of the Vietnamese film industry under the SRV, "Film making in Vietnam is clearly a government enterprise, but the impact this exercises on the films themselves is variable and not easily defined" (1991, 37). Under socialist governance, Vietnamese films (and cultural production at large) have always been conceived as a tool for propaganda, reflected in the formulaic films about heroic workers and the peasantry made during the war. The post-war Vietnam Cinema Department developed this idea into the principle of "authenticity" under the late General Director Nguyen Thu, who was also a member of the National Assembly (Hamilton 2009, 142). Thu emphasized that authentic Vietnamese cinema must arise from a study of society and the people as it is, not derived from foreign film traditions (Hamilton 2009, 142). The country's culture and 'personality' should be the focus of film production, and expressing notions of humanity, moral character, and national feeling should be the philosophical guide for Vietnamese filmmakers. While film censorship remains prevalent in the country in accordance with representing the desired socialist reality, the state's encouragement of aesthetic quality and telling stories of ordinary people set Vietnamese cinema apart from other socialist cinema traditions (Charlot 1991). Even within the industry that has been highly politicized from the very beginning, there are already possibilities of exploring subdued narratives that were not part of state rhetoric.

This philosophical underpinning of Vietnamese cinema meant that filmmakers have always retained a certain level of creative expression, as long as they align with the aforementioned

socialist principles. While any negative or satirical portrayals of Vietnamese society had to be as ideologically innocuous as possible to circumvent censorship, the emphasis on ordinary people and the state's encouragement of aesthetic development meant that filmmakers were given some room for creativity, even when the films were critical of the state or its government. This quasi-independence is also underpinned by the politics of the film industry, as high-ranking officials within the Vietnam Cinema Department and the Ministry of Culture were at the time artists themselves, which allowed artists working in the industry to navigate more easily between their creative expression and the state rhetoric (Charlot 1991, 38) This created what Charlot calls an "anti-authoritarian streak", where the concern is less about state interference but rather the integrity and merit of the official in charge (Charlot 1991, 38). This combination of quasi-independence, an emphasis on aesthetic quality, and strong guiding principles essentially created an ideologically charged peer evaluation culture that allowed filmmakers to rethink the dominant official narrative while respecting the conventions of state representation.

1.3. Post-war Female Identity in Conflict

The socialist governance in the DRV reshaped the Vietnamese understanding of gender relations. From a strongly Confucian patriarchal system, socialist ideology ushered in a period where women were considered on equal terms with men, especially in their ability to contribute to the revolutionary cause. As noted by Hamilton, socialist ethics opposed traditional Confucian gender relations, seeing them as a product of the archaic feudalist system (2009, 143). However, socialist ideology never fully overrode traditional gender relations, which remain dominant in familial dynamics, patrilocal practices, and communal rituals tied to agrarian village customs. The figure of the 'heroic woman' (phụ nữ anh hùng) emerged as one of the significant figures indicative

9

of how the state and the individual perceived the female identity differently. Women were integral to the war effort, as they were not only responsible for wartime production and sustenance but were also expected to be on the front lines. Within the grand trauma narrative, the mother/wife perhaps makes the ultimate act of self-sacrifice, as she sends her husband and sons to war, as well as bearing the suffering of their sacrifices (Eyerman et al. 2023, 65). The heroic woman not only embodied the revolutionary spirit but also became the locus for the nation's suffering; the memory and trauma of the individual woman came to represent the trauma of the unified nation. These multilayered gender roles and expectations, lying at the intersection of the state's glorification of women and the persistent traditional values and customs, constitute the contradictory Vietnamese female identity. This contradiction accumulates on the trauma of war, creating a multifaceted pressure that alienates many Vietnamese women. This is encapsulated masterfully in the character Duyên in *When The Tenth Month Comes*.

When The Tenth Month Comes is backgrounded by the state-sanctioned memory. The film revolves around Duyên, a widowed mother who asks a local teacher to write letters impersonating her husband, who died in the war, to hide the devastating truth from her bedridden father-in-law and the community. At the beginning of the film, the central conflict is intensified as we see the family and community talk about Duyên's husband, who, as a soldier for the revolutionary government, is seen as the pride of the community. He is seen as a role model for the younger generation, and his status as a celebrated soldier also brought the family much prestige in the community. This only exacerbates Duyên's internal grief, as she comes to bear the responsibility of hiding the truth to maintain the pride of her father-in-law and the community, while at the same time being unable to grieve her husband. She continues to go through her daily peasant life, pretending nothing has happened, yet also unable to move on. The central conflict of the film comes

when Duyên is wrongfully accused of having improper relations with the teacher, an accusation she cannot refute without revealing her husband's death.

Duyên, as the figure of the heroic mother, bears the grief of the community and the responsibility of unifying it, embodying the country's national trauma and unification narrative. Rather than portraying Duyên as a celebrated figure, however, director Đặng Nhật Minh depicts her life as one that is suffocating and oppressive (Healy 2019). The state-sanctioned memory of the heroic mother came into conflict with traditional values of filial piety, which became an emotional burden on Duyên (and many Vietnamese women), as she has to live in a society built upon this mnemonic regime while carrying with her the trauma that is obscured by the state.

1.4. Landscape and the Nation

Defined by the European Landscape Convention as "an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors" (Council of Europe 2020), landscape is understood here as occupying narrative, aesthetic, and symbolic roles within films. Martin Lefebvre argues that "[the] form of landscape is […] first of all the form of a view, of a particular gaze that requires a frame. With that frame, nature turns into culture, land into landscape" (2007, xv). He later elaborates that this view of landscape "corresponds to the form of our experience of it, with the latter including representation of the different personal, cultural, and social function it can associate to or serve" (2007, xv). Up until the Renovation in 1986, the Vietnamese population was largely agrarian, having a profoundly symbiotic connection with the natural world and the rural landscape. Hence, the natural world and natural elements have served a metaphorical function of embodying the Vietnamese nation and its values, as well as the identity and emotions of its people. As noted by Lan Duong, Vietnamese revolutionary filmmaking captures

landscape not only as an "ideological placeholder" but also as an "expressive tool to aestheticize sentiment about the nation" (2004, 262). These functions are visualized by directors Nguyễn Hồng Sến in *The Wild Fields* (1979) and Đặng Nhật Minh in *When the Tenth Month Comes* (1984).

The Wild Fields tells the story of a guerrilla family living in the wetlands of Central Vietnam, serving as local guides and communicators for the Viet Cong. The film's opening credits see the husband, Ba Đô, rowing a boat in the floodplains, calling out to his wife, Sáu Xoa, in a nearby boat, and courting her through song. The two then perform a song in the southern *quan họ* (alternate singing) style as they weave through the dense floodplains. The scene establishes a bucolic, harmonious space where the family exists in unity with nature. Not only are their lives symbiotic with the natural landscape, but the war efforts are also heavily dependent on the natural world and its elements. The family is stationed in the floodplains to help North Vietnamese soldiers navigate the terrains of Central Vietnam as they move towards the South. They evade detection from US troops by sticking close to the large grasses of the floodplains, diving underneath the floodplains when they see American helicopters, and holding important meetings on fishing boats in the middle of the densely wooded swamplands. Between aiding the war effort, the family spends their days on mundane tasks, living out of a small shack built into the forested parts of the floodplains. Between these quotidian tasks are montages of the blissful natural landscape, from water lilies and rows of trees in the floodplain to a flock of birds flying and feeding each other. These montages linger much longer than one would expect, disrupting the pace of the film to emphasize the presence and importance of the natural landscape. In interspersing the family's life and their war effort with shots of the natural landscape around them, Nguyễn Hồng Sến emphasizes the interconnectedness and unity between not only the Vietnamese people and the natural world but also the war and its representation to the representation of the landscape.

The interconnectedness of the Vietnamese people and their war effort to the landscape is further emphasized by Nguyễn through his shot composition. For one, the film bucks the convention of shooting any helicopter scenes with a bird's eye view. Instead, the camera is kept on the ground, following the gaze of the protagonists as they evade the Americans, maintaining the proximity of the Vietnamese soldiers to the natural landscape. Nguyễn employs this shot several times throughout the film, panning upwards from the ground to depict not only the stature and heroism of the soldiers but also the natural landscape that surrounds and supports them (Fig. 1). Through this shot composition, the natural landscape that the family and the soldiers occupy is imbued with the revolutionary spirit, and the destruction of the natural landscape is equated to the destruction of the Vietnamese national identity itself. This is reflected in the scene of a war meeting between American military personnel, who identify the floodplain as "the veins of the battlefield" ("mạch máu của chiến trường"), and that destroying the floodplains is critical to securing American victory in Central Vietnam. This is immediately followed by a montage of American troops burning down the villages around the floodplains as well as the surrounding vegetation.

Fig 1: Posing the protagonists and their heroism in unity with the natural landscape – *The Wild Fields*

The unified Vietnamese identity is articulated from these representations of the natural landscape. In creating an emotional resonance between the identity and spirit of Vietnamese people and their harmonic existence with nature, the official narrative frames the unity and peacefulness of the post-war society with the tranquility of nature. The idyllic and monolithic natural world symbolizes the resilience of Vietnamese people, for as much as the natural landscape bears the scars of war, its regeneration and continuity signify that the people will also endure and thrive. This symbolization also recontextualizes the narrative of national mourning, suggesting a sense of immortality of the natural landscape that also equates to the endurance of the nation, transcending the trauma and suffering of the post-war years.

However, as mentioned earlier, the natural landscape is also a repository of character affect, an approach taken by Đặng Nhật Minh in *When The Tenth Month Comes* to reflect the emotional development of Duyên. This emotional reflection is illustrated in one scene where a shot of the river at night fades into a scene of Duyên grieving alone, imprinting her sorrowful tears onto the river. Her suffocating dilemma is imbued in the image of the river; its quietness is akin to a sense of loneliness rather than tranquility. The river is a site of reflection for Duyên, a signifier of her emotional journey. It is also by the river that she finds solace in her conversation with her husband's spirit, which gives her a chance to express her grief and seek guidance from him. One of the film's most poignant scenes sees Duyên talking to an apparition of her husband during the Ghost Festival (Lễ Vu Lan) celebration. In between their conversation where Duyên divulges her grief and dilemma to the spirit of her husband, the scene cuts to a long pan shot of the nearby river. Rather than looking at each other in a solemn moment, the couple looks to the river, with her husband's spirit not even glancing at Duyên. As the conversation finishes and the apparition disappears, a zoom-out shot sees Duyên all alone by the river. While scholars like Dana Healy (2020) have

14

analyzed this scene, focusing on the importance of spirits (and the practices of worshipping spirits) as a juxtaposition to the state's mnemonic regime, the focus on the river is equally significant. This lends credence to the idea that natural landscapes act as repositories of emotions; in this case, the river becomes the locus of Duyên's emotional reflection and growth, one that is detached from any social pressure that caused her grief.

Vietnamese feminist scholar Lan Duong has argued that landscape "serves as an affective site for a gendered construction of nationalism within key moments in Vietnamese history" (2014, 258). National identity in Vietnamese cinema is built upon a specific portrayal of men and women and their idealized roles and positions in relation to the state, positions that are depicted through the landscape. Through the association of Duyên with natural elements or the family's harmonious existence with nature in *The Wild Fields*, we can see how landscape is used to evoke mutual feelings and understanding of national identity. However, while the story of *When The Tenth Month Comes* is predicated on this state-sanctioned understanding of national identity, Đặng Nhật Minh does not shy away from offering a perspective of female identity (and by proxy national identity) in conflict. Characters like Duyên, who is universally loved in Vietnam, speak to the paradoxical social identity of women that is situated "precariously in the interstices of diverse systems of ownership" (Trinh 1991, 104-5). In this case, Đặng reveals the contradictions between the revolutionary promise of gender equality and the persistent masculinist society. Whereas *The Wild Fields* shows the construction of national identity through the landscape, *When The Tenth Month Comes* reveals not only the various oppressive forms of power that are contested in the course of constructing this national identity but also reconciles the conflicted female identity by demonstrating the cumulative and intersectional effect of these forms of power on Vietnamese women.

2. Reconciliation in Đổi Mới Cinema (1986-Present)

2.1. Historical Context

In 1986, the Vietnamese government instituted the Đổi Mới policy (Renovation), a series of economic reforms that transformed the country from a command economy to a socialist-oriented market economy. While the reforms were extensive, notable policies included the dissolution of agricultural collectives and the opening up of the country to foreign investment. The most significant change, however, was the rapid modernization and urbanization of Vietnamese society, a movement that had already begun in the early 1980s. As such, the implications and consequences of this rapid social change occupy much of the state discourse on modernization. As noted by Dang and Pham, while economic development remains the overarching goal, the primary concern of the country's leadership was retaining traditional culture and national identity while allowing the people to achieve material wealth (Dang and Pham 2005, 192). This is corroborated by Huu Tho, the Director of the Vietnam Communist Party Central Committee's Ideology and Culture Commission, in a press conference in 1998:

> "Vietnam wants to develop an advanced culture with the population having a high standard of education and culture and a better community life while ensuring that the national traditional culture can absorb the essence of others" (Vietnam News 1998).

Immediately, we see the emergence of the state's official narrative regarding the Vietnamese Đổi Mới society. The revolutionary fervor and communal solidarity that characterized Vietnamese national identity during and after the war are now replaced with economic interests and individual initiatives. Dang and Pham encapsulate this new official narrative succinctly:

"Individual efforts to achieve material success have become no less important than selfless acts of patriotism were in the past, for, by improving one's own living conditions, one is contributing to the prosperity and enrichment of the whole nation." (2005, 198)

In line with this official narrative, the state perpetuated an ideal modern Vietnamese society where Confucian gender roles are re-appropriated to be compatible with the pursuit of material wealth and rapid economic growth. Scenes of empowered, enthusiastic, and neatly dressed men and women working in opulent high-rises became a constant in commercials, serialized television, and commercial films. Urban areas became associated with better economic opportunities and access to education, materialist lifestyles, and more personal freedom as opposed to the strict customs of rural life. As such, metropolitan cities like Hanoi and Saigon became the ideal symbols of prosperity and the new 'renovated' Vietnamese national identity. This is juxtaposed to rural areas and lifestyle, which, while still important to the Vietnamese economy, are seen as stagnant and undeveloped.

However, this rapid urbanization and social change are not without their consequences. Firstly, what the state perceives as an appropriation of traditional values onto Đổi Mới society instead manifests as a transposition of rural customs onto urban lifestyles as people migrate from villages to cities, a transposition that is compatible in some respects and incompatible in others. This incompatibility creates fractures in the familial and social fabric of Đổi Mới society, which goes unacknowledged by the state narrative, which sees the rural and urban value systems as compatible. Secondly, the official narrative itself, particularly concerning female identity, is fraught with contradictions, coming not only from the incompatibility between the persistent

17

Confucian principles and modern values and desires but also from the different social and economic demands placed on women in the pursuit of constructing the Đổi Mới Vietnamese identity.

2.2. Filmmaking after Đổi Mới

The shift to a market economy in Vietnam also coincided with a steady decline in the popularity of Vietnamese films. State funding for film production was reduced drastically by the late 1980s, with an annual budget allocation that would only suffice for the production of two or three feature films annually (Ngo 1998, 92). Most damning of all, however, is the criticism levied by Vietnamese filmgoers that Vietnamese films had become uninteresting. By the 1990s, state-funded films had become formulaic, revolving around the same storylines and themes of rural life and socialist reconstruction (Dang and Pham 2005, 192). Vietnamese filmmaking had mostly outgrown the storytelling and filmmaking conventions of socialist realism, taking on new influences from France, Hong Kong, and the US. Yet what has steadfastly remained for Vietnamese filmmakers old and new is the spirit of reconciliation and portraying the aspirations and concerns of ordinary people. In the context of Đổi Mới society, the reconciliatory practices reside in exploring the effects of rapid economic growth and modernization on personal and social relationships.

Đổi Mới society also saw the emergence of independent films, which are much less restrained by state funding and influences. While the government still acted as the final arbiter in whether a film could be distributed, these new avenues of filmmaking allowed filmmakers to explore new aspects of Vietnamese life. Interestingly, these independent films still maintained the philosophy of 'authenticity' of the post-war cinema culture, telling simple stories focusing on the lives of ordinary people. Through these films, we observe the consistent practice of reconciliation

18

as filmmakers reveal the underlying contradictions that cause social fractures in Đổi Mới society. Reconciliation in this case, I argue, comes not only from addressing the prevalent and multifaceted social issues of Đổi Mới society but also from revisiting the representations (both in film and the official narrative) that characterized the Vietnamese identity of the past in pursuit of forming a new, post-socialist Vietnamese identity.

Independent films like Phan Đăng Di's *Bi, Don't Be Afraid* are at the forefront of reconciliation, presenting a 'quotidian cinema' that is heartfelt and relatable while also employing a perspective that allows for critical reflection of the various contradictions and social fractures from the audience. *Bi, Don't Be Afraid* tells the story of members of a middle-class family in urban Hanoi, each navigating different social pressures, familial responsibilities, and personal desires. The film follows Bi, a toddler who spends his days playing with his bedridden grandfather and exploring the areas around him, from the neighboring ice-making factory to the meadows and sandbanks along the Red River nearby. Through Bi's perspective and the spaces he occupies, Phan Đăng Di relays the daily struggles of the adults around him, caught between traditional values, modern realities, and social expectations.

2.3. Incompatible Identities and Peripheral Landscapes

As much as the official narrative attempts to re-appropriate traditional values associated with rural life to urban lifestyles (or at least justify its compatibility), *Bi, Don't Be Afraid* demonstrates that the rural lifestyle and its associated values and customs never left the Vietnamese consciousness, which in turn clashes with urban values and sensibilities. This is shown in the film through the clash between rural and urban customs and the spaces that the character occupies. Phan Đăng Di situates the film within the peripheral spaces: suburban areas, the canebrake meadows and

sandbanks along the Red River, and neighborhoods within city limits but far away from the city center. These peripheral spaces make up most of the film, where the rural-urban boundaries are blurred beyond distinction. Phan Đăng Di emphasizes this rural-urban blurring through extreme and often contradictory cinematography and shot composition. At times, the cityscape is portrayed as cramped and claustrophobic, using overly narrow camera angles shot from as low as the eyeline of a toddler (Fig. 2a) to distort the expected size and volume of the urban sprawl, while at other times, a lingering panoramic shot of the city shows overwhelming chaos. Through Bi's daily adventures, the film weaves together urban and rural spaces seamlessly. In one scene, Bi is chatting with his grandfather in their house, in the next scene he is playing around with the workers at the ice factory, which is immediately followed by a scene of him playing in a vast meadow where no buildings can be spotted as far as his eyes can see (Fig 2c).

Fig 2a-c (left to right): Distorted urban landscapes and peripheral spaces – *Bi, Don't Be Afraid.*

Kathryn McMahon elaborated on this blurring of the rural-urban boundary with the notion of "paradoxical space" – an imagined position where one occupies both the center and margin, the inside and outside, a cross-sectional space between different cultural, political, and historical layers (2002, 108-9). From this space, one can observe critically the various social forces and their effects, as even the quotidian becomes defined by different forms of power and its contradictions. For one, Di's focus on the peripheral spaces and cinematic blurring of the rural-urban boundary is arguably a physical manifestation of this imagined paradoxical space. Bi occupies this space within the film; his innocent and unbiased gaze navigates aimlessly through the different settings: from the narrow passages of his old house and the nearby ice water factory to the cornfields and sandbanks along the Red River, from the bustling Hanoi streets to the vast rice fields in his hometown. He makes friends with the rugged workers at the factory, plays with rural kids near the sandbank, shares secrets with his distant grandfather, and frolics through the meadows plucking flowers and leaves. Bi's perspective weaves between the territorial and social boundaries: urban and rural, rich and poor, childish and adult, natural and humanistic. His perspective allows for the viewer's critical reflection of the dynamic between rural value systems and urban desires, which is seen through the adults around him.

The transposition of rural customs onto urban living means that the virtues of individual development and material prosperity came to clash with the long-held values of Vietnamese society associated with agrarian communal solidarity, such as communal living and acts of compassion and gratitude. A semblance of these customs and values resides in the household where rural communal living is maintained among family members but often clashes with the urban lifestyle. This is seen during a dinner scene in *Bi, Don't Be Afraid,* where Bi's entire family sits at the table and waits for his father (who is out drinking) to return before eating, a common practice for

Vietnamese families. Bi himself is scolded by his mother for eating first, questioning why he has to wait at all. Towards the end of the film, after the funeral service of Bi's grandfather, the family's caretaker insists that Bi's father stays to complete the appropriate ceremonies. He declines, saying "I have people in the house [his wife] to worry about that", after which he goes out to drink again. This abandonment of traditional customs (for the pursuit of desire) demonstrates the incompatibility of the different value systems present within Đổi Mới society.

The clashes between rural values and modern realities exhibited in Bi's father (and seen through Bi) reveal a Vietnamese identity that is much different from the official narrative. Whereas the official narrative saw compatibility between rural and urban value systems, *Bi, Don't Be Afraid* shows a process of navigating these different social spaces and associated value systems, constructing one's own identity at the intersection of the old and new, traditional and modern, outdated and updated. The peripheral spaces and blurring of rural-urban boundaries employed by Phan Đăng Di work to illustrate this identity conflict and the subsequent navigation through the different lifestyles and value systems. As noted by Hoang, the blurring of these spatial boundaries leads to a state of de-identification where "rural and urban areas no longer contain fixed identities as construed by former viewpoints" (2017, 70). I argue that this de-identification, seen through the characters and the landscape, allows viewers to reflect critically on the process of identity construction in Đổi Mới society, one that is not only abundant with opportunities and risks but also fraught with contradictions. As these personal navigations and compromises differ between people (and family members), the social order that was built upon a monolithic value system associated with rural life begins to crumble, causing fractures not only within the family (such as Bi's) but also in the Đổi Mới social fabric.

2.4. "Renovated" Women and Contradictory Narratives

As discussed in my analysis of *When The Tenth Month Comes,* the Vietnamese female identity is often paradoxical, embodying the contradictions between the official and personal narratives. The state's official narrative venerates their symbolic self-sacrifice and acknowledges their equally important role in Vietnamese revolutionary society, yet their personal struggles are mostly ignored. The Đổi Mới period and the state's incorporation of capitalist growth with traditional Confucian values only make these contradictions more complex and intersectional. For one, as the revolutionary fervor gradually fades in Đổi Mới society, so too does the symbolic "equal status" that was granted to Vietnamese women, as the Confucian social dynamics that governed Vietnamese society became re-emphasized to maintain social balance in a rapidly growing country. As suggested by Turner, "[the] woman warrior who fought with men to save the nation now takes second place to the moral mother who replenishes and nurtures further citizens" (2007, 116). Women, however, are also expected to engage equally in the economy, yet the predominant Confucian ideals still confine them to a domestic social role. In essence, the Đổi Mới female identity embodies the contradictions of the official narrative in attempting to fit various and conflicting virtues of the state onto the female figure.

The contradictory Đổi Mới female identity and its consequences are represented through the character of Bi's aunt. Her story is that of alienation; she is bound by both the societal pressures of economic growth as well as familial responsibilities – expectations that overwhelm and suffocate her. While the urban environment is abundant with opportunities and freedom (and the official narrative encourages people to pursue them), the persistent social and gender roles nevertheless confine them to either domestic or peripheral spaces. As such, her character development within *Bi, Don't Be Afraid* revolves around her finding her freedom and agency in a society that

23

increasingly suppresses her desires, which the film (and many independent Vietnamese films) explores through sexual intercourse. Bi's aunt, a teacher, is unmarried because she is considered by the community as "past her prime" ("luống tuổi"), a form of societal alienation that is depicted through her sexual frustration. As such, throughout the movie, she satisfies her romantic and sexual desires in unlikely places: courting with a sexual partner in a brothel-like boarding house or stalking a student she is infatuated with across the city. The stories of these women demonstrate the effects of the contradictory official narrative, as it is extremely difficult to navigate life in Đổi Mới society when they are burdened with conflicting demands of familial responsibilities, social perception, and economic pressures.

In her paper exploring the representation of Vietnamese femininity in the context of economic reforms, Nguyễn Võ Thu Hương highlights the interconnected contradictions in the Đổi Mới construction of female identity, arising at the intersection of the state discourse, global economic demands, and lived experiences of women workers (Nguyen 2006). One such contradiction arises between the official narrative regarding women workers and their material reality. The socialist government continues to valorize women workers, retaining its proletarian affiliation and support for unions, yet the "materialist premise of the valorization of the working class has been vacated" (Nguyen 2006, 269). The official narrative of valorization feels detached and empty when women workers feel unable to speak about issues such as wages and working conditions, despite the continued 'support' in the official narrative. This leads to what Nguyễn calls "wagering the body" (Nguyen 2006, 277), where women workers put their subsistence and safety on the line to demand better wages and working conditions. This, Nguyễn argues, is an act of "materialist resignification", as women use their bodies to inject materiality into the official narrative that has long been empty

of practical support (2006, 277). By "raising bodily stakes" (Vo 2006, 278), the workers highlight the tangible consequences of the contradictory values and demands they are subjected to.

I extend Nguyễn's arguments by considering the persistent traditional patriarchal ideals that embed themselves in the state discourse and lived experiences of Vietnamese women, further exacerbating the contradictions of female identity. As these ideals permeate across all levels of Vietnamese society, its contradictions with state discourses, global economic demands, and lived experiences create an even more encompassing pressure on Vietnamese women, as not only are they confronted with these contradictions in their role as women workers situated in the workplace but as women in all social and familial spaces. What is more distressing is that the act of wagering the body (an act of resistance meager in and of itself) is further suppressed by the traditional value systems that continue to govern female bodies. This is reflected in the mark of being 'past her prime' to which Bi's aunt is subjected. Where her sexual liberation would be considered an act of wagering her body, the perceived shamefulness of these acts, perpetuated by the traditional value systems, forces her resistance to the peripheral, hidden corners of Vietnamese society, far away from public consciousness. Phan Đăng Di illustrates this by situating the tryst with her sexual partner on a rocky beach two hours away from where she lives (Fig. 2b). One of the most provoking scenes in the film sees her using an ice cube to relieve her sexual frustrations at night, doing so in a small, cramped storage space. The discreet and isolated nature of these spaces speaks to the alienation of Bi's aunt, her struggle forced upon her by the contradictory social forces that construct the official narrative, which in turn governs her. Through Bi's aunt, Phan demonstrates how contradictions in the state's official narrative regarding female identity create multifaceted pressures that alienate women. In his effort for reconciliation, Phan reveals the extent of the conflict and alienation through peripheral spaces.

Conclusion

Vietnamese cinema from the postwar socialist period to the Đổi Mới era reveals the construction of national identity as a fraught and contested process, an ongoing negotiation between the traumatic past and the ever-changing present. While the state promotes an official narrative tied to unity, progress, and valorization, the films examined in this thesis reveal how that narrative suppresses enduring contradictions between state memory and private grief, revolutionary fervor and lived experience, and gender identity and persistent Confucian patriarchal ideals. Films of the postwar era, such as *The Wild Field*s and *When The Tenth Month Comes,* reflect the state's agenda to construct a unified, heroic identity rooted in sacrifice and the contradictions within these constructions. Whereas *The Wild Fields* demonstrated the construction of the post-war Vietnamese national identity through a symbolic representation of the landscape, *When The Tenth Month Comes* shows how conflicting ideals in the official narrative cause emotional and psychological burdens. This is shown through characters like Duyên, who must navigate impossible expectations: to grieve discreetly, to honor the dead without disrupting national pride, and to remain loyal to both revolutionary ideals and traditional family structures.

The tension between these ideals becomes more pronounced in Đổi Mới cinema as Vietnam undergoes rapid social and economic transformations. The increasing prevalence of Vietnamese independent cinema became crucial in exploring how shifting social forces such as urbanization, liberalization, and generational change destabilize the pre-existing familial and national narratives that continue to be perpetuated in drastically different urban realities. Phan Đăng Di's *Bi, Don't Be Afraid*, through the use of paradoxical spaces and blurring the urban-rural divide, not only provides a critical lens from which the audience can observe these shifting social forces but also

demonstrates how the contradictions between these social forces and the official narrative can alienate and repress people, especially women.

There remains much to be discussed on how Vietnamese cinema can navigate the various social forces and contradictions in the official narrative, particularly in how films can explore the intersectional systems of oppression caused by an aggregation of contradictions and conflicting forms of power. Representations of other cinematic elements beyond the landscape and female identity can also be explored concerning Vietnamese cinema's pursuit of reconciliation, namely, the figure of ghosts and apparitions acting as a bridge between a haunted past and the reality of the living present, demonstrating disparities in historical narratives. Nevertheless, the films analyzed in this thesis expose how the official narrative often requires neglect and erasure – of loss, of contradiction, and of affect. However, Vietnamese cinema becomes a space where these silences are made visible. Through the representations of female identity and the landscape (both rural and urban), filmmakers interrogate what is left unresolved in the wake of war and post-war nation-building. Ultimately, Vietnamese cinema does not merely illustrate national healing; it broadens its foundations. By confronting the legacies of war, the constraints of Confucian patriarchy, and the emotional toll of ideological conformity, these films suggest that true reconciliation can only emerge through truth-telling and confronting the multifaceted social fractures that the official narrative imposes or seeks to forget.

Bibliography

Anderson, David. *The Columbia Guide to the Vietnam War*. Columbia University Press, 2002.

Bi, Đừng Sợ. Motion Picture. Acrobates Films, 2011.

Cánh Đồng Hoang. Motion Picture. Giai Phong Film Studio, 1979.

Charlot, John. "Vietnamese Cinema: First Views." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 22, no. 1
 (March 1991): 33–62. doi:https://doi.org/10.1017/s0022463400005452.

Council of Europe. "The European Landscape Convention (ETS 176)." Florence: Council of
 Europe, 2000.

Dang, Nhat Minh, and Thu Thuy Pham. "Representations of Doi Moi Society in Contemporary
 Vietnamese Cinema." In *Consuming Urban Culture in Contemporary Vietnam*, edited by
 Lisa Drummond and Mandy Thomas, 191–200. Routledge, 2005.

Duong, Lan. "Gender, Affect, and Landscape: Wartime Films from Northern and Southern
 Vietnam." *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 15, no. 2 (April 3, 2014): 258–73.
 doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/14649373.2014.911456.

Eschwege, Henry. "Use of Agent Orange in Vietnam." *US Government Accountability Office*.
 USGAO, August 16, 1978. https://www.gao.gov/assets/ced-78-158.pdf.

Eyerman, Ron, Todd Madigan, and Magnus Ring. "Cultural Trauma and Vietnamese-American
 Arenas of Memory." In *Vietnam, a War, Not a Country*, 42–101. Amsterdam: Amsterdam
 University Press, 2023.

Eyerman, Ron, Todd Madigan, and Magnus Ring. "Cultural Trauma and Vietnamese-American
 Arenas of Memory." In *Vietnam, a War, Not a Country*, 42–101. Amsterdam: Amsterdam
 University Press, 2023.

Hägerdal, Hans. *Vietnams Historia*. 1st ed. Lund: Historika Media, 2005.

Hamilton, Annette. "Renovated: Gender and Cinema in Contemporary Vietnam." *Visual
 Anthropology* 22, no. 2–3 (March 20, 2009): 141–54.
 doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/08949460802623580.

Healy, Dana. "From Triumph to Tragedy: Visualizing War in Vietnamese Film and Fiction."
 South East Asia Research 18, no. 2 (2010): 325–47.
 https://www.jstor.org/stable/23750941.

Healy, Dana. "The Lyrical Subversions of Socialist Realism in Đặng Nhật Minh's New Wave
    Cinema." In *The Oxford Handbook of Communist Visual Cultures*, edited by Aga
    Skrodzka, Lu Xiaoning, and Katarzyna Marciniak, 541–65. Oxford, 2019.

Hoang, Cam Giang. "Cityscape under the Gaze of Migrant Women: The Reimagination of Urban
    World in Vietnamese Independent Films." *Journal of Urban Culture Research* 27 (2023):
    3–17.

Hoang, Cam Giang. "Rural-Urban Boundaries in Contemporary Cinema: A Look from Phan
    Dang Di's Films." *Journal of Urban Culture Research* 13, no. 6 (January 7, 2017): 63–
    73.

Hoang, Cam Giang. "Transcultural Narratives of Vietnamese Landscapes in Literature and
    Cinema." *Landscapes* 24, no. 1 (January 2, 2023): 3–17.
    doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/14662035.2023.2298101.

Lefebvre, Martin. "Introduction." In *Landscape and Film*, edited by Martin Lefebvre, xi–xxxi.
    Routledge, 2007.

Malone, Peter. "From Conflict to Reconciliation in World Cinema." *Studies in World
    Christianity* 14, no. 2 (July 2008): 108–24.
    doi:https://doi.org/10.3366/e1354990108000105.

Man-Fung, Yip. "Art in Propaganda: The Poetics and Politics of Vietnamese Revolutionary
    Cinema." In *The Cold War and Asian Cinemas*, edited by Poshek Fu and Man-Fung Yip.
    New York: Routledge, 2019.

Man-Fung, Yip. "Landscape, Identity, and War: The Poetic Revolutionary Cinema of North
    Vietnam." In *Remapping the Cold War in Asian Cinemas*, edited by Sangjoon Lee and
    Darlene Espeña, 53–72. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2024.

McMahon, Kathryn. "Gender, Paradoxical Space, and Critical Spectatorship in Vietnamese
    Film." *Trans-Status Subjects*, (2002), 108–26.
    doi:https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822384236-007.

Ngo, Phuong Lan. "The Changing Face of Vietnamese Cinema during Ten Years of Renovation,
    1898-1996." In *The Mass Media in Vietnam*, edited by D.G. Marr, 91–96. Department of
    Political and Social Change, The Australian National University, 1998.

Nguyễn Võ, Thu Hương. "The Body Wager: Materialist Resignification of Vietnamese Women
    Workers." *Gender, Place & Culture* 13, no. 3 (June 2006): 267–81.
    doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/09663690600701038.

Nguyen, Nathalie Huynh Chau. "War and Diaspora: The Memories of South Vietnamese
    Soldiers." *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 34, no. 6 (December 2013): 697–713.
    doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2013.846895.

Nguyen, Viet Thanh. *Nothing Ever Dies*. Harvard University Press, 2016.

Trinh, Minh-Ha. *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender, and Cultural Politics*.
    Routledge, 1991.

Turner, Karen. "Shadowboxing with the Censors: A Vietnamese Woman Directs the War Story."
    In *Cinema, Law and the State in Asia*, edited by Corey Creekmuir and Mark Sidel, 101–
    22. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Vietnam News. "Party Ideologist Talks with Foreign Press." *Vietnam News*, 1998.

When the Tenth Month Comes. Motion Picture. Vietnam Feature Film Studio, 1984.