

# Cityscape Under the Gaze of Migrant Women:

## *The Reimagination of Urban World in Vietnamese Independent Films*

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### Abstract

In Vietnam, since the Reform era (1986) and the government's firm urbanization policy, replacing the pre-1986 discourse of the countryside as the Garden of Eden, a myth of the city as a place of endless pleasure has been gradually built up in mass media. As a result, the urban spectacle has become the ideal symbol of the speed of development, national strength, and masculinity in state-sponsored and commercial movies/dramas. Meanwhile, through the 'slow cinema,' independent female directors such as Siu Pham, Nguyen Hoang Diep, Bui Kim Quy, Pham Hoang Minh Thy, and Pham Nhue Giang have questioned the 'urban fantasy' from the standpoint of those who are twice marginalized in the city space: the poor female immigrants. In films from these directors, women suffer slow violence from polluted, substandard living environments and endure gender prejudice and abuse in cities. From that, those films present a new strategy of social justice in contemporary Vietnamese urban areas: ecological justice is associated with gender equity and visual equity.

**Keywords:** *Cityscapes, Female Immigrants, Ecojustice, Gender Equity, Visual Equity, Heterotopia, Vietnamese Independent Cinema*

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## Introduction

In 2021, the independent director Le Bao released his film *Vị* (*Taste*) as the Covid pandemic swept over Vietnam, devastating the nation's economic and cultural hubs - the most badly afflicted of which was Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), which served as the film's primary backdrop. (Van, 2021) The film was subjected to harsh censorship: it was not allowed to be screened domestically and was not permitted to participate in international film festivals. Its online teasers and trailers also sparked heated discussions among the Vietnamese population. Most domestic viewers notably remarked that the film (in both its content and images) perverted the image of Saigon's glamorous, busy urban area and Vietnam's landscape. They also opined that there were many images and details that "demeaned the dignity of Vietnamese women," "violated Vietnamese fine customs and traditions" (Pham, 2021), and that the film was a "miscellaneous product without a cultural root" (Nguyen, 2021).

In Vietnam, in the last ten years, such fierce debates have often erupted in response to independent art films set in big cities - considered symbols of national strength - such as Hanoi and Saigon, as evidenced in the critical and popular responses to films such as *Bi, đừng sợ* / *Bi, Do not be afraid* (Phan Dang Di, 2010), *Đập cánh giữa không trung* / *Flapping in the middle of nowhere* (Nguyen Hoang Diep, 2014), *Ròm* / *Rom* (Tran Dung Thanh Huy, 2019), and *Vị* / *Taste* (Le Bao, 2021). The conflict is between idealized visions of urban beauty and the allure of the city as a "dreamland," as well as between the demonstration of the process of Vietnam's "industrialization, modernization, and urbanization" after *Đổi Mới* (Renovation period) in TV series, commercial films, and state-sponsored films on the one hand; and on the other hand, demolished, seedy, stuffy, and gloomy scenes that conjure up images of the apocalypse in independent films. The audience is hugely divided and perplexed by such divisions. Independent films make up only 4% of the total number of films released annually in Vietnam and reach only a tiny percentage of viewers; these films are nevertheless impactful insofar as they offer a challenge to narratives of modernization and industrial progress.<sup>1</sup>

Vietnam's urbanization is accelerating swiftly in the twenty-first century. The rate of urbanization was 40% by 2020, and according to "The Resolution of the 13th Party Congress, the intended rate of urbanization has been set to 45% by 2025 and about 50% by 2030" (Ministry of Construction, 2021). Vietnam has recently been heavily influenced by the flow of urban romantic films from China and Korea. They have helped reinforce the perception that rural youth can, like the characters in the films, successfully establish their careers in urban areas (this is mainly in office and workplace romantic films, frequently regarded as being "modern"). These entertainment products accentuate and cherish the idea of a flawless cityscape with workplace romances, peaceful and lush parks, lakes, university campuses, etc. Urban life (especially in large cities like Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Da Nang, and Hue) is "beautified" through the mass media and popular arts, creating an image of the city as a place of dreams desired by people in rural areas. This strengthens the discourse of a "city dream" and "city lights" under new circumstances.

Vietnam's national cinema is separated into three parallel tendencies due to the country's distinctive development process: state-sponsored, commercial, and independent films. Since 1986, a "new myth about the city" has been subtly woven into commercial films, television series, and state-sponsored films, along with the State's aggressive urbanization

strategy. The city has become the ideal symbol of growth, prosperity, and governmental power. In addition, it serves as a romantic metaphor for young people's high commitment and masculinity as they pursue successful careers. Given that Confucianism heavily influences the nation, Vietnamese films and television series frequently depict the city as having traits like "positivity" and "masculinity" – the glorification of successful men, male heads of family, and male business owners is common. This is in addition to the city becoming a symbol of individual freedom, development, and happiness like other nations. Particularly in state-sponsored films like *Em bé Hà Nội / Girl from Hanoi* (1974), *Truyện cổ tích cho tuổi mười bảy / Fairy tale for 17-year-olds* (1988), and *Vị đắng tình yêu / The bitter taste of love* (1990), *Giải phóng Sài Gòn / Saigon's liberation* (2005), the city is idealized as the embodiment of the nation's prosperity and identity. In the commercial films, the city assumes the role of the nation's dreamer and conduit for its assimilation into the process of globalization (for example, see: *Cho anh gần em thêm chút nữa / Diary of the Fireflies*; *Sài Gòn anh yêu em / Saigon, I love you*; *Sài Gòn trong cơn mưa / Saigon in the rain*; etc.) Meanwhile, independent films directed by women – a minority of the minority – challenge the preconceived notions about the city in state-sponsored and commercial productions. Independent female directors like Siu Pham, Nguyen Hoang Diep, Bui Kim Quy, Pham Hoang Minh Thy, and Pham Nhue Giang illustrate the urban dream from the perspective of the people who are "peripheralized" and "marginalized" twice: the poor women or poor women migrating from rural to urban areas.<sup>2</sup> For those possessing more than one marginalized identity like these characters, Kimberle Crenshaw's concept of *intersectionality* provides a framework for understanding the intricacies of lived experiences and their consequences by considering the combined effects of intersecting identities (such as gender, race, class, ability, sexual orientation, religion, caste, age, and nationality). (Crenshaw 1989) Crenshaw defines *intersectionality* as "a lens, a prism, for seeing how various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other (...) What is often missing is how some people are subject to all these and the experience is not just a sum of its parts." (Quoted from Steinmetz, 2020)

Besides, the mentioned female directors (along with several independent male directors who were particularly interested in the status of urban minorities) utilize the aesthetics of slow and everyday cinema. Through an intersectional approach to their films, combining the concepts of "heterotopia spaces" by Foucault, the "distribution of places" and "judgment of taste" by Bourdieu, and the "subject of desire" by Butler, we want to challenge discourses of eco-ambiguity and implicit gender stereotypes subtly present in films that have romanticized and idealized consumerism and urban life since the 1990s. The independent films present a new social justice strategy in contemporary Vietnam's urban areas where ecological justice is associated with gender and visual justice. This bold association is based on the unusual experience of "becoming a woman" in the urban space of female immigrants, through the tension between utopia and heterotopia and the aesthetic (and cultural, social, and political) inquiring of and the tug-of-war between the female body's narratives and cityscapes. (Beauvoir, 2011:283) (Mannheim, 1991)

### "Becoming a Woman" in Heterotopias: The Unwanted Estrangement<sup>3</sup>

The stereotypical images of attractive, vivacious, self-assured, well-dressed, educated girls working in opulent offices in harmony with the utopian urban landscapes are featured in commercial films or TV series. In contrast, in independent films, we tend to encounter women who have worked themselves to exhaustion in dystopian or heterotopia spaces.

Framed by an unabashed documentary camera lens and not visually polished or ‘pretty,’ these women appear to be on an arduous journey to adjust to the city environment.

For instance, we can observe how the urban landscape oppresses migrant laborers’ eyesight and actions in the opening scene of *Lạc lối / Aimless* (Pham Nhue Giang, 2013). Tham, a rural wife whose husband has traveled to Hanoi to seek a job, first emerges through the sight of spinning bicycle wheels on the street rather than through her face. Her worn-out, ragged bike matches her worn cycling shoes, clothes, and sandals. The camera is positioned at the level of the wheels, generating a long view of a broad, flat frame that makes the movements appear even slower and heavier. It is as if, despite her pedaling, the cyclist is immobile, as she is constantly being passed by a line of cars and motorcycles traveling at breakneck speed. All of the character’s possessions, such as her briefcase, her hat, and rattan or bamboo frame, not only indicate that she is from an impoverished and forgotten village. They also imply that those rudimentary items will be the sole resources with which she will have to “fight” on unequal terms with contemporary, industrial, and urban life.

For her part, Huyen in *Flapping in the Middle of Nowhere* (hereafter referred to as *Flapping* for short) first appears lying in a small bedroom along a railroad track near a city. Huyen is awakened by the loud, dry sound of the train rumbling through the rain at night. Her face is faintly lighted, but what stands out is the train’s shadow as it passes through the door’s opening. Its rhythm causes the character to be unintentionally drawn into it as each piece of shadow glides across Huyen’s face, acting as a warning and a tingling worry that is both there and invisible. Huyen then turns to gaze at her nipples, a first indication that she is pregnant. Although the urban backdrop in this scene is less clear than in *Aimless*, it nevertheless exerts a subtle strain on the character’s body and existence, mainly through the sound of the passing train. It is a harsh, haughty sound belonging to a particularly *violent soundscape*; it represents modernity, a quickening of time, industry, urban mechanics, rationality, “progress,” and constant movement. The fetus is growing in her belly, and she has yet to know how to deal with it; as the days pass, Huyen is warned of the delayed and trapped status of herself and her body - as a poor student migrating from the rural countryside to the city.

Female characters in independent films are often represented visually as urban “parasites” who have been engulfed, swallowed up, and even rendered invisible by their urban surroundings and the crushing pace of city life. Like the insect that Gregor Samsa becomes in Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*, the old woman in *Căn phòng của mẹ / Homostratus* (Siu Pham, 2013) crawls on the floor of a filthy, musty room before choking on the chocolate that her son brings home as a “present from the city” after he has endured a hard day’s work. In the heart of Hanoi’s oppressively hot summer, the hair-washing girl in *Bi, Do Not Be Afraid*, struggles to achieve her goals while serving men in a dimly lit basement room of an ancient apartment building. The female character in *Cha và con và... / Big Father, Small Father, and other stories* (Phan Dang Di, 2015) works in an old metal factory, eats a light lunch in a rush, and dwells beside the Saigon River in a decrepit wooden-plank slum.

It can be seen that the lives of these migratory female workers are constantly in conflict with the places they were never a part of and which they neither own nor control but must instead withstand. The physical places in which these women find themselves often

feature enormous, industrial, opulent constructions that tower over their gaze, separating their bodies from the vast, structured mass of “urban architecture.” These include streets, buildings, construction sites, factories, shops, stores, and landowners’ private homes. Their primary vocations are street vendors, barbershop employees, and maids; their routine activities, drifting and wandering through the never-ending traffic; their gaze and motions, wearied. Accordingly, in many long shots, the structure of these films also becomes sequences of images without a central identifying element; the shots gradually blend to the point of indistinguishability, in which music is cut, leaving only the streets’ sounds that create a detached effect. After a while, as the scenes repeat themselves to demonstrate the character’s weariness and exhaustion, the audience likewise starts to get disoriented amid a confusing array of unfamiliar landmarks. In addition to making the audience feel the sensations and take on the perspectives of the female outsider to the modern urban environment, these scenes, with their close focalization on drifting characters and their use of jarring and discomfoting filming techniques, also serve as a manifesto against the “romanticized” or “sensationalized” approaches used in mainstream romantic films and action movies.

This kind of drifting is also very different from the wandering action of the “*kẻ lãng tử giang hồ*” (“globetrotter” - primarily men or women pretending to be men) in medieval swordplay or the artists and elite intellectuals in Vietnamese romantic poetry (1930-1945). Wandering, then, is a sign of romance, individualism, and a noble separation from the mundane life.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, the drift of Tham (a scrap dealer in *Aimless*), Huyen (a poor student in *Flapping*), Mien (a maid in *Memoryland*), evokes the sense of insecure floating associated with a lack of agency. They risk giving their whole body and being to the city’s vast, unfamiliar, dangerous space to make a living without knowing the destination or outcome. A state of drift means no awareness, coordination, or mastery of one’s relationship with space: not knowing the true destination also means being vague, insecure, and not grasping their existence. They cannot establish a relatively solid social relationship (according to a residence, village, or clan as in rural areas). The concept of “urban foam,” or even heavier, “urban garbage” (as the alienated protagonist in Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* calls it) - is associated with impurity and the need for cleaning. In these Vietnamese indie movies, it is also often associated with torrential rains pouring down the streets, as if to wash away its “plankton,” like the heavy rain at the beginning of the movie *Flapping* or the end of the movie *Aimless* or the sad endless rains in *Miền kỷ ức / Memoryland* (Bui Kim Quy, 2021).<sup>5</sup> The rain is no longer a symbol of city romance, as it is in commercial movies (*Sweet 20, Win my baby back, Once upon a rain, etc.*). Instead, the rain calls attention to urban squalor and the desire to return to a state of imagined cleanliness and purity.

Commercial films frequently feature the presence of prominent, open public places that are spacious and filled with lush trees (such as parks, squares, airports, and cafes) - where anybody from any class can relax and take in the city’s modern, civilized surroundings. Meanwhile, those areas are hardly present in indie films. Instead, through the stories of female immigrants, odd, unsettling, or distant “heterotopias – such as landfills, cemeteries, bars, brothels, slums, and alleys – are highlighted and accentuated. “Heterotopia” is a concept elaborated by philosopher Michel Foucault to describe specific cultural, institutional, and discursive spaces that are somehow ‘other’: disturbing, intense, incompatible, contradictory, or transforming. (Foucault, 1967). Moc Mien is portrayed as wandering through a

cemetery in the entire film *Memoryland* as she searches for solitude and consolation from her deceased loved ones. The film's final scene shows her body cremated in the city (after she takes drugs to kill herself), having felt the unwelcome atmosphere in the urban environment. Van in *Big Father, Small Father, and Other Stories* works at a bar and is passed around among the city men eagerly staring at her body like a cheap, dazzling product. Mrs. Ba, Mrs. Ghi, and the poor neighborhood in *Rom* live in a "no tomorrow" state in a decaying apartment complex full of "residual mud and stagnant water," waiting to be relocated. These dispersed, marginal, unclassified areas are frequently connected to migrant working women who have little control over where they live or work in the city. In the language of Vietnam's urban management, such heterotopias (as well as street vendors who do business on sidewalks) are often viewed as undesirable elements of urban life that need to be removed and cleansed to achieve "sanitary standards" and the synchronization, regularity, and order of contemporary urban planning.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, as a result of their status as low-income immigrants, the characters in the indie films discussed above exhibit a "spatial injustice" that is becoming increasingly evident as Vietnam's urbanization progresses rapidly and noticeably. Relegated to "unsanitary" heterotopic spaces, they themselves come to be associated with that which needs to be reorganized, cleansed, and done away with.

The profound contrast in experiencing many places at the same site, between the place they serve/work and the place of residence/rest, between images of utopia and dystopia, will instill in them the contrast between mind and body, as Amita Baviskar argues in "The social experience of heat: urban life in the Indian Anthropocene" (Baviskar, 2022). Their minds are forced to get used to the harshness of the places they live (dystopia) and where they work (utopia). However, their bodies cannot get used to that - evidenced by the fact that day after day, their bodies are constantly struggling to be unable to sleep in their squalid boarding house (in *Aimless, Flapping*). It is an existentially irrational and incredible experience - thus causing them to be disoriented, lost, and vulnerable, causing an "identity crisis," feelings of bitterness, failure, and even extremes and disorientation in behavior. They no longer know who they are, where they belong, or their present and future. They submit and "surrender" to the city when their health is exhausted; they no longer have capital, labor, property, faith, or hope (such as Tham in *Aimless*, Mien in *Memoryland*, Huyen in *Flapping*). Moreover, most importantly, their souls become "concrete" and inert or indulge in endless melancholia - like those "strange diseases" that appear after they enter the city.

The question is whether these female characters entirely accept the hostile alienation they passively experience in that mechanized environment. At times, the female immigrant characters in the films above (such as Huyen - *Flapping*, Tham - *Aimless*, Mien - *Memoryland*) desire to *immerse their (allegedly) defective bodies into the fullness of the men* and connect with them emotionally through the "body's story." For example, after her lover Hoang leaves, Huyen (*Flapping*) shares with her boyfriend Tung the exact words Hoang used to say to her to intensify the feeling of desire when they were close: "Your breasts are full of milk now." It is interesting to note that in this instance, to draw on the language of Butler, Huyen turns into a "subject of desire" when she absorbs the authoritative male voice and discourse from Hoang and uses it to converse with another authoritative masculinity-centered discourse (from Tung) (Butler, 1987). As for Tham, though she counsels Thuat in *Aimless* to avoid depending on others, she is living like a "parasite" off of her urban lover's fictitious affluence. The subject of desire "follows a narrative of want, illusion, and failure centered on brief

moments of recognition as a source of temporary salvation” in a world in which they are empowered only momentarily and then only by appropriating the agency of another (Butler 1987:10). The image of a ball floating on a lake’s surface in *Flapping*, a mess tin drifting on a flooded road (*Aimless*), or Mien’s ashes soaring in the painter’s rented room (*Memoryland*) strongly reflects the subject’s *evanescence, ambiguity, and “brief recognition.”*

It is evident that in the hopeless and depressing process of “adapting to the city landscape,” the female immigrants have received the reverse effect from that landscape, which causes them to become other versions of “women” struggling with gender issues and having serious doubts about themselves as well as the world at large. *Becoming a woman* in a world that is neither a utopia (as they initially imagined) nor a typical or familiar environment (such as their former hometowns) is a form of entrapment. On a deeper level, it is a trauma of gender identity in a bizarre, congested society that is cut off from both nostalgic memories of the past and optimistic visions of the future, and where female identity itself is heterotopic, never fully coming into being. The uneven distribution of gender power, visual injustice, and spatial/landscape injustice all exacerbate this pain.

#### **Landscape: The Distribution of Gender Power and Visual Injustice**

According to Pierre Bourdieu, who underlined this point in his book *Masculine Domination*, the “distribution of places” is another manifestation of the social order in which male dominance exists. “It is the gender division of labor, the extremely rigid distribution of advantageous activities for each gender, the distribution of its places, times, and means” (Bourdieu 2001:21)<sup>7</sup>

While in romance films, interiors and exteriors are easily navigated by rural Cinderellas in search of their Prince Charmings and an escape from their unfortunate fates (*Sweet 20*, *The Aroma of Affection*, etc.), the “love-like” spaces in many independent films are frivolous and temporary, offering no ontological cohesion. Due to this spatial arrangement, the low-income female immigrants who sell their labor to urban bosses are portrayed as passive objects in everyone else’s sight, especially the urban men. The minor housemaid in *Mây nhưng không mua* (*Live in cloud-cuckoo land*), for instance, is someone who is constantly scrutinized, monitored and ordered around. Huyen (the prostitute in *Flapping*) “takes a deep entrance” into Hoang’s (who pays her) house in the mountains for the first time - like stepping into a temple to worship a god. Hoang is not present; alone in the house, Huyen sees the skull-shaped music box, the surveillance camera, and other items. Hoang (the “god” of the temple) is both present and absent in that landscape; Huyen is small, fragile, and exposed as if Hoang’s eyes are following her everywhere (both literally and figuratively).

In addition, the male protagonists in these movies are frequently individuals who are drawn to the “remote” “countryside” setting, which is where the female immigrants were originally from. For instance, Thuat drives Tham to visit the romantic suburbs of *Aimless*. Hoang also takes Huyen to her village’s gate in *Flapping*, but she refuses to cross it and see her parents since she is humiliated and reclusive due to an unexpected pregnancy. Independent filmmakers have uncovered and probed the ecological contradiction here: These young rural girls cannot own or enjoy the pristine rural environment rightfully theirs. When urbanization reaches the countryside, the land cannot be maintained and is gradually purchased by corporations to build apartments, resorts, or companies’ headquarters

(as in 2030, *Flapping*, *Live in cloud-cuckoo land*). Because their hometown is becoming progressively impoverished, they must go to the city to make a livelihood. However, once there, they must live in unkempt, polluted environments. Institutions of social welfare (such as hospitals and schools) do not support them either when the majority of the impoverished employees from peripheral provinces become undocumented immigrants.<sup>8</sup>

*The symbols of or associated with masculinity in independent cinema are frequently industry-oriented; they are enormous, rough, and awkward but also fixed, haughty, aggressive, and out of place with the surrounding scene: the night train that rattles past Huyen's house every day; the crane of the lamp maintenance workers swinging in the middle of the street; the water pipe shaped like a phallus lying ungainly at the center of the broad field (Flapping); the Bitexco building resembling an enormous phallus that is about to collapse (Homostratus); the old factory with heavy gray machines and engines engulfing the workers (Big father, Bi). At the same time, the male characters are also associated with the central landscapes of society and high-rise, macro views, such as the public entertainment venues (Aimless), opulent hotels, tall buildings, pricey villas (Homostratus, Live in cloud-cuckoo land), and the regal school (Flapping). Women and nature, such as the four worn-out women living in the cramped, filthy slums along the Saigon River, the pig and the rat running around the four walls (Taste), the underprivileged student living next to the railroad tracks, and a small fish stuck in a broken light bulb under the rain (Flapping), the perplexed maid in the suburban wedding dress shop and the expelled cockroach (Live in cloud-cuckoo land) - all are drifting towards the periphery, the lower floors, and the minor figures that stand silently on the outskirts of the city and the fringes of the projects, removed from the throbbing scenes of pleasure and enjoyment that function as sites of patriarchal order.*

*Ironically, only men – or, more specifically, urban, wealthy men – seem to be able to enjoy nature's lush, vibrant vistas. Only they have enough power, money, and time to benefit from them (like in the case of Hoang's villa in Flapping, featuring a sizable pool in the center of a mountain, or a resort villa in Aimless, which is surrounded by lush trees, or an opulent residence along the Saigon River in Live in cloud-cuckoo land). In the meantime, women like Mien in Memoryland, who produce agricultural goods and food and care for the people in society, must exert their energy to work exhaustively. Additionally, like Huyen's mother in Flapping, they naturally never have the chance or the leisure to properly appreciate the scenic beauty of the land they work on. Young girls who go from rural to urban areas to study and live (like Huyen), or older women forced to live on their own in the city (like Mrs. Ghi in Rom and the four women in Taste) must put up with filthy, claustrophobic, humid living conditions, a lack of clean water and clean air, and extreme noise pollution. They have no option but to continue serving and giving themselves as objects satisfying the men's demands in the city.*

As in these independent films, the systems of urban privilege and male privilege patriarchal institutions are the primary cause of the tragedies that affect both the non-human world and migrant women, a parallel of both *ecological* and *gender injustice*. For instance, in *Flapping*, Tung caresses a fighting cock in the hopes that it will win; in the following scene, the cock is brutally killed by Tung because it loses the match; in another scene, Hoang takes a Huyen to enjoy the romantic backdrop of the lake; in the following scene, he quietly departs and does not return. Noticeably, Tung treats Huyen's body like how he treats

a fish or a chicken. Just as Hoang tries to change a natural mountainous area into a site for a villa, which he can use as he pleases, he digs deep into Huyen's psyche, abuses her affection, and then abandons her without an explanation. The men in these two films appear to value the gratification of desire above all else. Their interactions with women and non-human animals are initially motivated by enjoyment, amusement, and personal fulfillment; this later evolves into what Lefebvre refers to as the "everyday life's" ultimate purpose (Lefebvre 1947:40). In a similar vein, Papastergiadis stresses the following in his book *Spatial Aesthetics: Art, Place, and the Everyday*: "At the micro level of everyday existence, the person is now required to deploy intelligence, cunning, and deceit, both in order to live and to enjoy life" (Papastergiadis 2006:26). In the context of consumerism and the market, the robust patriarchal system, primarily motivated by the pursuit of pleasure, encourages the maltreatment of women or non-human species more severely and indiscriminately. Confucian patriarchal thought keeps coming up with justifications for a "new type" of a male-dominated society when men exploit women as they exploit nature, seeing each as something manipulable for pleasure.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, in independent filmmaking, the visual injustice (as well as gender and social injustice) that immigrant women experience is not only in the social differences but also in the artistic contrasts of design elements within the architectural composition of a given place - something that has long been "ignored" in commercial films. Modernism is linked to the rationalization and optimization of urban planning techniques. The most crucial factor is achieving architectural synchronization, eliminating exotic spaces, preventing disease spread, increasing labor productivity, and maintaining a representative national image (Ewen, 2015).

In the romantic films and TV shows mentioned in section 1, we can all notice an emotional surface connection between the "beautiful woman" and the "beautiful scenery," which is in conjunction with the ideal design of the city, just as Bourdieu noted: "People are fanatical about beauty (...) they want characters with attractive shapes. There is and will always be a school of thinking that believes art should only be acceptable when it lies and that nature needs to be tamed." (Bourdieu 2018:105) In a romantic film, a male character frequently recalls or defines a woman, a lover, or a wife as having a specific flawless, glittering background attached to her (such as a childhood friend sitting in a romantic garden in *Đẻ mai tình / Fool for Love* (2010) or a woman who makes a musician's heart melt as she sings in a restaurant under a green line of trees in *Em là bà nội của anh / Sweet 20* (2014). It gives the impression that everything (both nature and humans) is given a sense of (illusory) unity and balance because of the sustainable, unchanging beauty of the environment and the subject in the urbanscape.

In the urban independent films under consideration, in many cases, as an aesthetic antithesis, the filmmakers frequently demonstrate an aesthetic of everyday cinema, a "beauty of the Ugly," which contrasts sharply with the slick, eye-catching frames of the sceneries in commercial films.

Most of the actions of the four women and the black man in *Taste* occur in darkened rooms in a Saigon slum, which is presented as in prison. The interiors of the film are oppressively "dark"; this "darkness" belongs in the visual realm, but it also evokes suffocation, that is, a "sensation" of being trapped, enclosed. When the camera captures the characters' bodies, we see the decay of the bodies, the end of the world, extreme alienation, and the point of

no return concerning their original humanity. This is because they have to endure the strict confines of modern life, which, as the trailer observes, is a “one-way path where one cannot backtrack” (quoted from the trailer in Nguyen Hoang Diep, 2021; Pham, 2021). In addition to the idea of a murky, grimy, low-class living environment, the notion of the female body is also presented (through the perspective of urban, male characters) in the films as something filthy, unfortunate, terrifying, and a “bad omen” for males (as a male character says of the pregnant girl named Huyen in *Flapping*). Far from commercial cinema’s robustly healthful images of female beauty framed by the beauty of nature, here, the images of the female body and the urban environment evoke a sense of regression or deterioration.

Scrutinizing the visual/aesthetic portrayal of women and nature in the independent films discussed here, we can identify a process where the Vietnamese independent directors redefine ideas concerning “the bad,” “lowliness,” “debauchery,” “sin,” “nausea,” “disgust,” and the general sense of cursedness associated with decadence - the polluted nature - the dirty body that leads to dysmorphophobia. This seems to contradict the “body genres” when Linda William asserts that commercial films’ representation of the female body reinforces the film’s entertainment based on the male audience’s need to consume female body images. (William, 1991) In other words, this is a deliberate visual rejection of popular TV shows and commercial movies’ framing and mass-production of clichés of “beautiful bodies” in a “beautiful space.” It opposes the masculine capitalist portrayal of female bodies and other natural creations as alluring, exotic items that male audiences or clients may consume at any time.

Interestingly, by drawing on documentary filmmaking techniques, the independent filmmakers make more poignant the “visual injustice” that immigrant female characters endure as they live under the domination of mass media and popular art in the city.

This occurs primarily through the “un-Hollywood” lighting design, which gives us a fresh perspective on the city, as seen through the eyes of the female immigrants.<sup>9</sup> There is nowhere for people to hide or seek sanctuary as *the electric light*, a byproduct of colonization and capitalism, reaches every corner of the city. It symbolizes the sun, the yang, civilization, masculinity, and male authority. Many scenes in the films *Flapping*, *Aimless*, *Memoryland*, *Homostratus*, *Live in Cuckoo Land*, *Taste*, and *Rom* are dark, blurry, and unseeable with the naked eye. Examples include the dimly lit corner of the rental room (in *Flapping*, *Aimless*, *Memoryland*), the distorted toilet behind the curtain (in *Flapping*, *Homostratus*), the night train track (in *Rom*, *Live in cloud-cuckoo land*), the staircase section (in *Taste*, *Aimless*), and the deserted street corner (in *Flapping*, *Aimless*, *Homostratus*). The shadows - or, more correctly, the dimly illuminated scenes - represent places as ruinous, already ruined, and as the sites of still more ruin to come rather than as splendid images of urban promise.

Contrary to state films or commercial films set in the city, Vietnamese independent films do not have wide top-down shots (as in *Bargirls*, *Bargirls 2*) or “lyrical persons” freely wandering, observing, and exploring a beautiful city, dreaming and immersing themselves in their world (as in *Tháng năm rục rờ / Go-go sisters*, *Em và Trinh / Trinh, and his muses*). The “restricted point of view” of immigrant female characters in *Flapping*, *Aimless*, *Memoryland*, and *Live in Cuckoo Land* frequently reduces the characters’ vision, which fluctuates with insecurity like the typical hand-held and jump shots. An extensive background obscures the characters’ complete outlines and is not supported or honored by it. We only see tight, suf-

focating angles where the shadows of tall buildings, erections, bridges, and so on fill, cover, and swallow the shadows of the characters (in *Memoryland*, *Homostratus*, *Flapping*)

In the films under consideration, every immigrant woman is portrayed alongside her daily activities (working, eating, sleeping, being pregnant) in a *monotonous flow* that prolongs their toil and suffering and gives the impression that it is changeless. This leads to a sense of burnout in both the characters and the audience as a whole. The slow pace and, numerous long shots and medium-sized frames create a sense of space oppressive to the actors and the audience. Viewers thus experience the film more viscerally due to the exhaustion they experience while viewing the film. The urban workers in this situation, and the enjoyment and entertainment of the audience, have been mentally encircled by the ugly and the dirty, combined with a physical and psychological sense of weariness, exhaustion, disintegration, and tediousness.

Pierre Bourdieu once said, “Taste classifies, it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar” (Bourdieu 1987:6). Therefore, the conception of any person as beautiful or ugly depends on social class, which shapes tastes and trains the subject to understand vulgarity rather than only subjective individuality. This is because a person’s social and cultural capital must have been acquired due to their family, educational, and economic background since birth. The ugliness depicted in the films, as mentioned earlier, demonstrates an “unjust distribution of value and power to the workings of gender, aptitude, color, class, beauty norms, body size, health, sexuality, and age” (Rodrigues, Przybylo, 2018:2).

### Conclusion

Recent independent films in Vietnam depict a world where the power of the landscape casts shadows on the body, and architecture delves into the sensation and not just the sight. The often dystopian landscapes of this growing cinematic tradition present an intense resistance of the subject to the urban environment and a return to and rediscovery of solace in the original, primordial, and most primal. It is no accident that so many of the articles condemning *Taste* used words like “herd instinct” and “primitive” (Viet, 2022).

In contrast to the general public’s expectations, independent film directors in Vietnam often brutally expose contradictions between social values and practice and peel back all the shiny “cliches” and coatings of social relations as they are packaged in state and commercial films. They expose the oppression and brutality perpetrated by a male-dominated society towards women and animals - the weakest, most voiceless, and most defensive objects in the ranking of power and strength in society. Beauty does not lie in the splendid glazes of pristine and poetic nature; instead, ‘nature,’ which has been worked upon by the urban elite, by city authorities, and by other institutions of power, hides the silent injustices and discriminations that women and non-human animals must undergo. By portraying ugly bodies perishing in a thick, greasy space, the mentioned independent films dare to open a dialogue and question the romantic and poeticized aesthetics of urban landscapes that have long penetrated the mass audience’s acumen and become a familiar and naturalized form.

Significantly, the misrepresentation and “visual injustice” that immigrant female characters experience in the media and other popular arts in urban areas (primarily through the “beautification” and synchronization of women’s bodies and the cityscape) is made explicit by independent filmmakers through their documentary and experimental cinematic language. Additionally, the narrative of urban space in independent films is precisely the narrative of the body and how it endures, transforms, interacts with things, and resists the subtle and overt pressure of the city. Visual injustice, the asymmetrical distribution of gender power, and spatial/landscape injustice make these traumas more profound.

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### Endnotes

- 1 According to our statistics, in 2020, there were 95% commercial films, 1% state-sponsored films, and only 4% independent art films (Nguyen 2020:25).
- 2 In this study, in addition to focusing on works by female independent filmmakers portraying the image of female migrant workers, we also include analysis, synthesis, and comparison with films by male directors (such as Phan Dang Di, Le Bao, and Tran Dung Thanh Huy.) It is interesting that, although immigrant women are only supporting characters in the films by male independent directors, unlike those by female directors, all share a common sentiment and perception of an aesthetic that uniquely expresses the image of cityscape and women.
- 3 This part was inspired by Simone de Beauvoir’s much-quoted phrase in her famous work *The Second Sex*: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (Beauvoir 2011:283). According to Beauvoir, the characteristics conventionally attributed to women are not inherent in the nature of women but are imposed on them by patriarchal power structures.
- 4 The commercial mainstream movies have inherited, or adopted, the trope of the wanderer from Vietnamese romantic poetry and do not problematize it. On the other hand, these independent films do problematize it. In commercial films, besides functionality, the cityscape becomes a stylized, decorative framing and highly visual synchronicity. This suggests that the city is a realm of entertainment and pleasure connected to the “centers” of production and consumption (such as in *The Diary of Fireflies*, *The Tailor*, *Win My Baby Back*, etc.)
- 5 As Travis Bickle (famously played by Robert De Niro) says, “All the animals come out at night - whores, skunk pussies, buggers, queens, fairies, dopers, junkies, sick, venal. Someday a real rain will come and wash all this scum off the streets” (*Taxi Driver*)
- 6 For further reading about the campaigns to remove sidewalks, street vendors, slums, etc. See the following:

Dinh, Thao. “The battle to reclaim the sidewalk: looking back after 40 days of launching” (“Cuộc chiến giành lại vỉa hè: nhìn lại sau 40 ngày ra quân”) *Dan tri Magazine*. February 2017. <https://dantri.com.vn/xa-hoi/cuoc-chien-gianh-lai-via-he-nhin-lai-sau-40-ngay-ra-quan-20170226154114709.htm> (accessed June 1, 2022).

Hai, Yen and Nguyen Nhu. “The unkempt living scene in the ‘slums’ in the heart of the capital” (“Cảnh sống nhếch nhác ở những ‘khu ổ chuột’ giữa lòng Thủ đô”) *VOV Magazine*. November 2017. <https://vov.vn/xa-hoi/canh-song-nhech-nhac-o-nhung-khu-o-chuot-giua-long-thu-do-689806.vov> (accessed June 1, 2022).

Quoc, Hai. "Ho Chi Minh City: Relocating nearly 14,000 'slums' on canals, needing an opening mechanism" ("TP. HCM: Di dời gần 14.000 'ổ chuột' trên kênh rạch, cần có cơ chế mở") *Dan Việt*. November 2021. <https://danviet.vn/tphcm-di-doi-gan-14000-o-chuot-tren-kenh-rach-can-co-co-che-mo-20211118123641166.htm> (accessed June 1, 2022).

Mai, Ha. "Hanoi decorates streets to prepare for SEA Games 31" ("Hà Nội chỉnh trang đường phố chuẩn bị cho SEA Games 31") *Thanh nien Magazine*. March 2022. <https://thanhvien.vn/ha-noi-chinh-trang-duong-pho-chuan-bi-cho-sea-games-31-post1442546.html> (accessed June 1, 2022).

- 7 When exploring the formation of recreational landscapes in Weltevreden (now the central part of Jakarta) during the colonial age, Ellisa noted that "Recreations formulated as part of the essential elements of personal development and civilization to reflect the values of the daily life and introduce modernity. The study found that the prototypical play spaces in Weltevreden were discriminatory accessible to the public and sporadically provided." (Ellisa 2021:12) Thus, the design of recreational spaces in modern cities always contains unequal distribution possibilities.
- 8 Linh (Flapping) does not even dare to go to the hospital, fearing she has to report being in a scene of jealousy; Huyen is scolded when she goes to the hospital to find a way to solve her problems or when she goes to school to "beg for good grades in gymnastics" so she can gain a meager scholarship.
- 9 That means being unlayered, incomplete, unclear, and not brilliant as in the style of "three-point lighting" of Hollywood (Thompson 2008:129).

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