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Film Review: *Ròm*

Beginning in the 2000s, Vietnamese cinema has ushered in a series of tide-shifting Vietnamese-language and Vietnam-based films that engage with contemporary issues. Some more recent titles include *Vợ Ba* [The Third Wife] (2018), directed by Ash Mayfair, and *Song Lang* (2018), directed by Leon Le. These films capture subject matter shaped by Vietnam's emerging interactions with global forces and urban development. For example, both *Vợ Ba* and *Song Lang* explore themes of gender performativity, hidden desires, and the crossing of traditional sociocultural boundaries. These films have transcended the enduring focus on war in Vietnamese cinema.

*Ròm*, the newest motion picture from thirty-one-year-old Vietnamese national and first-time feature director Trần Thanh Huy is a critical addition to the Vietnamese film scene on account of its experimental blending of fiction and urban storytelling. *Ròm* is an urban tale of the lives of neighbors residing in an apartment building in Hồ Chí Minh City. Its narrative portrays the daily monotony and tribulations of city residents as they attempt to eke out a living. The audience is invited into the mundane daily routine of this urban precariat: petty labor, money-making schemes, family obligations, and the perils of debt. While *Ròm* is fictional, it effectively captures the daily struggles of Vietnam's precarious and socially marginalized populations, most notably, disenfranchised youth.

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The lives of Vietnam's precarious youth, including the film's central character, Ròm, are made highly visible in the film. Youth are shown walking the city streets, laboring as shoe shiners, fixing sandals, and selling a variety of goods, from food to cigarette lighters. The film thus brings attention to the plight of precarious youth carving out an economically sustainable life in a modern, global city, whose well-being is often ignored by society as well as the Vietnamese state.

*Ròm* parallels other recent films with its critique of contemporary capitalism. The South Korean Oscar-winning film *Parasite* (2019), for example, depicts the plight of South Korea's underclass. The 2018 film *Roma* is also a good example of a cinematic representation of this theme for its portrayal of the modern industrial world's domestic laborers in the Colonia Roma neighborhood of Mexico City.<sup>1</sup> *Ròm* stands in conversation with these films by employing storytelling motifs that encourage the audience to experience Ròm's emotional and physical pain.

The Vietnamese term *ròm* translates to "skinny boy." The term is typically used to refer to men that appear to be boney and thin—meaning, undernourished—in comparison to other, seemingly healthier, young men of the same age. Thus, the term *ròm* can be used generically to refer to any young, thin man. It is telling that the main character is identified by a name that is generic; Ròm's struggles, living without family and earthly possessions, are as universal and commonplace as his name.

Ròm lives in a state that might be categorized as bare life.<sup>2</sup> He has no material possessions except for the clothes on his back, the slippers on his feet, a stash of cash that he keeps tucked away, and his body. Ròm's frail body is his most valuable earthly entity because it allows him to labor to earn a living. Early in the film, Ròm narrates the story of his life. He recounts how his parents abandoned him at a bus stop when their home was demolished, never returning to claim him. Ròm lives in what appears to be the upper attic of an apartment complex. In the evenings when neighbors eat dinner with their families, Ròm sits on the tin roof that covers his room. He passes the time by shooting a slingshot at tin cans adorned with playing cards. With nothing to sell but his labor, he works as a bookie for the *số đề* [lottery] operational ring. *Số đề* is an unofficial lottery system that operates in parallel with, or sometimes in the shadow of, the

state's lottery drawings. The audience is left to assume that Ròm will use his savings to find his parents—viewers are taken on Ròm's routine journey throughout the city, regularly visiting the bus stop where his parents abandoned him in hope that they will eventually return.

Ròm holds a unique position in the apartment complex because he is the link between the residents and the gambling-ring operators. Ròm and other young boys collect bets from residents and bring them directly to the gambling-ring operators. The film focuses on the neighborhood's peculiar and intimate relationship, perhaps even obsession, with *số đê*. It represents *số đê* as invading the neighborhood, pervading the thoughts and experiences of residents and their social worlds. They see numbers in cigarette butts or in random stories they hear on the radio. In the film, as well as in the social realities of Hồ Chí Minh City urbanites, *số đê* represents a chance to stir excitement in one's life. The film captures the drawing of lottery numbers as an exciting interruption of urban monotony. On evenings when the regional lottery announces results, the shadow lottery prepares its own drawings. *Số đê* draws participation from all sectors of society, from the petty merchant to the established shop owner. When the national lottery reveals its results, the *số đê* operational rings run a lottery drawing parallel to the numbers of the national lottery system—yet within *số đê*, players must guess only the last two digits of the winning lottery ticket number to claim its prize.

The language and movement of the film demonstrate an intimate understanding and experience with the everyday lives of Vietnamese urbanites. The film conveys that *số đê* is not just an unofficial betting ring, but that the scheme itself persists because it provides people with the hope of transforming their lives. Characters within the film time and again articulate what they would do with the winnings if they could land it big—“trúng một con số lớn”—just one time. The film also visually illustrates the characters' devotion and obsession with *số đê* as a complicated web of social engagements that span time and space, as well as the worlds of the living and the spirits. Pivotal scenes within the film focus on the rituals performed to retrieve the winning numbers, demonstrating an exercise of agency in a social context where material wealth and social mobility has been constrained. For example, characters in the film attempt to retrieve their

desired numbers by speaking to the dead, indicating their depth of devotion as well as their desperation in the face of material scarcity.

The film's editing and intentionally framed camera movements provoke the audience to inhabit the world from Ròm's perspective. From the cramped corners of his attic space to Hồ Chí Minh City's garbage-laden backstreets, the camera captures the lack, fear, and neglect that define Ròm's daily life. The camera serves as a vehicle for the audience to care about Ròm and to intervene in the obstacles that afflict his life, such as his exhausting, competitive relationship with another young male bookie, Phúc. The duo's fraught relationship spans the entire film, demonstrating the vicious cycle of opportunistic competition to make a living. The audience is taken on a journey with the two boys as they battle to win the trust and bets of the neighborhood.

The tension between Ròm and Phúc represent the grueling labor that the underclass must endure to survive in the city. To represent the desperation of the rivalry between the two boys, the camera chases them across Hồ Chí Minh City's vertical, chaotic urban infrastructure. From apartment complexes to the long, crowded, and narrow walkways of Bến Thành Market, the camera runs alongside the boys, framing their thin bodies jostling with each other to either capture bets from the neighborhood or be the first to bring a bet and money to the ring operator. In quieter scenes, the two boys are seen catching a ride atop a bus while sharing stories of what they would do if they won *số đề*. Yet in more climactic scenes, the violence ignited between the two boys unapologetically displays the dimensions of the human psyche and physical power unleashed when the dispossessed are stripped bare of their dignity.

(Note that the following paragraph contains spoilers.) Although the film may lead viewers to believe that the protagonist will find his redemption, Ròm does not resolve the story. The final scene is framed by an exasperating duel between Ròm and Phúc. Yet again, the audience is left with a sense of hopelessness in the cycle of Ròm's life. Instead of resolution, the final scene captures Phúc and Ròm desperately running, seemingly indefinitely, chasing each other on opposite sides of a speeding train and then onto the opposite sides of Hồ Chí Minh City's encroaching urban highways. They are heading toward a future that will forever leave them behind.

*Ròm* is a significant accomplishment in Vietnamese-language film for its visceral portrayal of the deeply layered lives of Hồ Chí Minh City's underclass, particularly its abandoned children. The film is an important contribution to cinema studies and Vietnamese studies for its portrayal of this community and as a contemporary cinematic intervention that serves as a tool to criticize as well as provoke reflection, contemplation, and potentially action around socioeconomic disparities in urban Vietnam.

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### Notes

1. See Carla Marcantonio, "Roma: Silence, Language, and the Ambiguous Power of Affect," *Film Quarterly* 72, no. 4 (2019): 38–45.
2. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).