

# Italian Neorealism in Vietnamese Cinema: A look at Rom (2019)

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**ABSTRACT:** *Neorealism has been employed to describe what is defined as a movement in cinema. Vietnamese films in recent years have produced the neorealist works that describe the human conditions in the context of social environment and of psychological understanding. Using the qualitative research with an example Rom (Tran Thanh Huy, 2019), the paper aims to cover four points: (1) Italian neorealism embedded within Vietnamese cinema, (2) neorealist films' aesthetics of reality in Vietnamese movies, (3) Rom's organizing principles underlying Italian neorealism, and (4) Rom's aesthetic of reality and film contexts. The finding shows that the Vietnamese cinema turns from socialist realism and rural realism to economic realism and urban realism; economic difficulty and poverty, and contemporary issues are the main themes; neorealist films reflect working class people and poor people in economic transformation; and Rom reflects a true neorealist film with non-professional actors, real shooting locations, everyday subject matter and an aesthetic reflection of harsh reality. The research implicates the potential trend in depicting lower classes as protagonists in the regional urban settings in Vietnamese contemporary cinema in post-renovation period.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Italian neorealism, Rom, cinematic realism, contemporary issues, social realism*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Neorealist filmmakers expose poverty through the stories that happen in the present rather than the social malaise in the past (Wagstaff, 2007). They focus on the lives of lower class as workers, the poor, the homeless, and the ordinary people (Kartal, 2013; Bazin, 2004). The issues that neorealist protagonists face in their daily life are conflicts derived mainly from external social conditions (Garofalo, 2020; Lawton, 1979; Butzel, 2009). The scenes in neorealist films are shot mostly in real locations, not well-equipped studios, dub the dialogues and apply the sound effects (Alvise, 2013). Cameraman has more freedom to move the camera and capture events fortuitously as the way images appear in newsreels and documentaries.

Neorealist stories portray poor working-class people, banal events they experience and common social issues in their daily lives. The poor are the weak who are seriously impacted by social evils, illegal occupations and a bad social order. The telling of their lives is more real than that of the rich. Nonprofessional actors are cast thanks to their appearance as ordinary people (Fabe, 2014, chapter 6). Locations for shooting are busy city streets, tenement housing or cramped shelters. The film ending is usually not happy, but painful, inconclusive and characteristically neorealist (Fabe, 2014, chapter 6; Alvise, 2013).

In Vietnamese cinema, history and authenticity are reflected in content, developing a national cinema identity and conventional socialist realism (Charlot, 1991). Socio-historical contexts are adapted and mediated to make the film story more pertinent to screening and political situation with propagandist duty (Kerr, 1980), so the stories may show the political opinion, not the true image of ordinary people. Dang Nhat Minh, a communist artist, was loyal to politics and ideology, using poetry and musical lyrics as the core elements in plots to bring Vietnamese cultural identity, traditions and socialist values to the communist films (Healy, 2020). Later, after the renovation policy, the film industry was seen with the remaining stories of socialist realism when Vietnam began to turn market economy with socialism orientation, but the neorealism is rarely found when filmmakers are instructed to follow the strict censorship policy of the film department. *Cyclo* (Tran Anh Hung, 1995), inspired by stagnating economy depicted working class people struggling to make ends meet though from the bottom of the heart, they did not want to enter the paths of social evils. The film is a rare phenomenon criticized as a neorealist film but banned from screening in Vietnam. The industry was seen with the entry to a world with

economic globalization and anti-colonialist spirit and was seen with cinematic realism as the biggest objective of the art form in the post-communist era (Kristensen, 2013).

There is not specific research on Italian neorealism to see this cinematic movement influence on Vietnamese cinemas and filmmakers. Scholars can find easily that one film is a neorealist but whether it shares common characteristics is still a question. In this paper, *Rom* (Tran Thanh Huy, 2020) regarded as a neorealist will be studied to understand the movement of and application of Italian neorealism as well as its realism construction in terms of film contexts and aesthetic values. Defining this application is not an easy task as each director has their own distinctive points of view toward the themes and filming techniques. This research aims to answer the following questions:

*RQ1: How is Italian Neorealism embedded within Vietnamese cinema?*

*RQ2: How have Vietnamese movies achieved Neorealist films' aesthetic of reality?*

*RQ3: How does Rom (2020) remain true to the organizing principles underlying Italian neorealism?*

*RQ4: Through notable filming techniques constructing Rom (2020), how did this conceivably neorealist movie unveil the aesthetic of reality, as regards Vietnamese economic, socio-cultural, and political issues?*

## **II. Italian Neorealism In Contemporary Vietnamese Cinema**

*A quick glance at Contemporary Vietnamese Cinema*

In the period of the First Indochina War (1945-54), Vietnamese cinema produced war-themed and revolution-themed movies. But from 1954-1975, scholars recognized the Vietnamese film industry imbued with propaganda purposes and reinforced with socialist realist nature (Vo, 2010). According to communist artistic theory, the terms proletarian and socialist realism are used to describe reality in different political contexts with other democracy countries. In the movie *Boat People* (1982), director Ann Hui (Hong Kong) used critical realist tool to depict Vietnamese refugees in their journey of escaping from a communist country, their homeland at that time (McGrath, 2016). Since the renovation policy in 1986, the industry has outgrown socialist realism in the film content and artistic conventions, expressing the life of ordinary people, economic changes and social relationships (Dang & Pham, 2003).

There has been a significant impact on the socio-cultural life of Vietnamese people since the economy turned from a socialist to a market-oriented economy. The movie industry also saw the change of the themes from socialist realism to economic realism. Le Hoang, one of the movie directors at this stage produced two commercial films: *Bargirl (Gai Nhay)*, 2003) and *Street Cinderella (Lo Lem He Phu)*, 2004) with the girl motifs and prostitute representation, breaking away from war-themed film making habits with propaganda purposes. The two films concentrated on the real life of the dark underworld of prostitutes and their managers with the exploitation of social evils in this world. Hoang is a pioneering neorealist when he portrayed real sexual business transactions between the male clients and female prostitutes in Ho Chi Minh city (Le, 2003). Prostitution is illegal in Vietnam but with economic growth, there is an increase in prostitution level in many platforms where people seek for sexual pleasure and the films depict money exchange with the sex sales in every corner of the community (Walters, 2004).

Since the 2010s, more films depicting working-class people have been shot from real locations rather than studios with staged scenes. *Bi Don't Be Afraid (Bi Oi Dung So)*, 2010) by Phan Dang Di begins with the image of an ice factory in the middle of summer, sweat stains on the worker's face, transparent, cool rocks hewn, chiseled, and switched back and forth. The film shows the seemingly ordinary life of an ordinary family in the sweltering summer heat of Hanoi. Behind the seemingly normal is the stalemate, loneliness, suppressed desires and hidden memories of each character. Other films of the same director as *When I am 20 (Khi Toi 20)*, Phan Dang Di, 2008) and *Big Father, Small Father and Other Stories (Cha Va Con Va...)*, Phan Dang Di, 2015) have described de-territorialized rural and urban areas. The traits of characters in the films are not distinctively characterized by their rural or urban origin as the gap between two areas has been blurred as they have personality hybridity with both area types (Giang, 2016). *Flapping from the Middle of Nowhere (Dap Canh Giua Khong Trung)*, 2014) by Nguyen Hoang Diep depicts urban realism through the poop of the heroine, a rural girl who goes to the city to attend university and face the harsh reality of urban life. The film is a clever combination between naked realistic images, such as cockfighting schools full of men, train tracks going between crowded markets, close to

shack roofs..., combined with the lyrical and poetic scenes as the background for the gradually blossoming relationship of the two main characters (Tuyet Loan, 2014). These scenes reduce the sufferings and the hardship that the characters face in their daily life, reducing the neorealist elements in the films. Vietnamese cinema has narrated more contemporary issues in both social and economic realism, portraying poor people fighting not to run behind the changes in economy as *The Floating Lives* (Canh Dong Bat Tan, 2010), *The Little Heart* (Trai Tim Be Bong, 2007) and *Rom* (2019) (Nguyen, 2021).

#### *Italian Neorealism and the organizing principles*

The key role in films is using the theme of material poverty as deprivation. They depict the lives and the minutiae of working-class people who work in the factories, fields or mine (Bongiorni, 2016). Dependency is reflected from the poor to the rich with the attention of resources flow from the poor to the rich. The character's problems remain unsolved or open at the end of the film just because that is reality as they don't know how to find the way to get out of it and leave them to fate (Kartal, 2013). With camera subjectivity, new-born movie directors want to describe what they see every day on every corner of the street.

Issues of social classes are related to poverty, hunger, prostitution, economic difficulties and lack of government care, being portrayed through individual protagonists as a call to social awakening and actions. The life of the characters is seen as a typical representative of a whole community relating to an issue described in the film. The filmmakers convey these issues or reflect social reality in their films, becoming a primary concern of neorealism (Wilson & Ruberto, 2007). The issues can be controversially defined though this address is not new to the global cinema, but it has become a trend in Vietnamese cinema as the audience can see them happening around their real life. In a jungle of romance, adventure or fantasy movies, a film that dares to highlight ugly social issues really makes a big impression on audiences. With the strict film censorship cycle in Vietnam, it is not easy to produce and display these films, which may be banned from domestic circulation or participate in international awards.

The narratives of the neorealist films can be seen through the location shooting as realistic nature. These films depict the characters that try to make a living with many jobs and try to survive in economic difficulties. The leading characters even do some illegal activities to support themselves and their families rather than suffer from poverty and hunger. Once poverty dominates from urban to rural areas, people tend to work hard regardless of regions, class and education to make ends meet. The *mise-en-scène* plays an important role in describing the location that the characters are dwelled in, with the image of houses, small shops, street markets and food stalls. Daily struggles of working-class people in an unstable society are a concern for neorealist filmmakers (Kartal, 2013) The principle is also expressed via dialogues, character appearance and behaviors and naturalism, making a sense of authenticity and spontaneity. The common theme of the films was the conflict between the characters and the cruel societal forces that become harder for them to determine their existence (Cardullo, 1993).

#### *Italian Neorealism in Vietnamese films*

The renovation policy in Vietnam has brought about strong socio-cultural, economic and political transformation and thus, Vietnamese cinema has increased the image of the working class in the era of economic development rather than remembering the past war (Nguyen, 2021). According to Dang Nhat Minh (Dang & Pham, 2003, p. 200), Vietnamese cinema shapes social reality, and gives a voice to the problems, joys and sufferings of the Vietnamese working class. These themes are consistent with Vietnam's history through many years of war, the struggle to earn a living, and emphasis on the values of family culture. Featured films are *When the Tenth Month Comes* (Bao Gio Cho Den Thang Muoi, Dang Nhat Minh, 1987), *The Retired General* (Tuong Ve HUU, Nguyen Khac Loi, 1988), and *Wharf of Widows* (Ben Khong Chong, Luu Trong Ninh, 2000). Since the 2000s, Vietnamese cinema has also mentioned the gap between rich and poor, social evils and labor movement between urban and rural areas. Some examples include *The Floating Lives* (Canh Dong Bat Tan, Nguyen Phan Quang Binh, 2010), *The Little Heart* (Trai Tim Be Bong, Nguyen Thanh Van, 2007) and *Rom* (Rom, Tran Thanh Huy, 2019).

Vietnamese cinema was born decades ago but is still slower than the rest of the world and matures slowly. The period that Vietnamese cinema had many achievements is from 1975 to early 1990s when the national cinema did not have a propaganda function but switched to depicting the lives of the poor or voiceless people (Le, 2019). Since 1986, Vietnam's transition from a subsidized economy to a market economy, cinema has reflected

changes in economic, cultural and social life with of the people making a living in the period. Cinema went beyond Soviet blocks and achieved awards such as *The Scent of Green Papaya* (Mui Du Du Xanh, Tran Anh Hung, 1993), *Three Seasons* (Ba Mua, Tony Bui, 1999), in which the working-class women were depicted and encountered under a very different social and economic condition (Gordon, 2018). Some banned films such as *Cyclo* (Xich Lo, Tran Anh Hung, 1995) or *Cholon's Gangsters* (Bui Doi Cho Lon, Charlie Nguyen, 2013) are said to have many violent scenes that do not reflect a real Vietnam and the people in the film suffer too much (Bui, 2019). Even *Rom* was banned at first and the neorealist director had to cut out some scenes to please the censorship department and get permission to release it.

Neorealist filmmakers in Vietnam face film censorship and this is inevitable in a controversial country. In addition to *Rom*, recently there have been *Taste* (Vi, Le Bao, 2021) and *The Third Wife* (Nguoi Vo Ba, Ash Mayfair, 2018) with scenes that are censored because of unsuitable scenes for Vietnamese customs (NikkeiAsia, 2021). Censorship sparks debates about artistic freedom in screening out inappropriate, uncultured or harmful content (Vietnam Law & Legal Forum, 2021). The cutscenes are said to be inaccurate depictions of the economic, political and social situation in Vietnam. Therefore, censorship continued to be enforced but restrained domestic cinema and created many opportunities for foreign films to enter the domestic market and illegally transmitted films. Movies from Hollywood filled with violence and crime scenes such as *John Wick* (2019), *Suicide Squad* (2021) and *Joker* (2019) with a high level of violence but are licensed for release (Tuoi Tre News, 2019). This restricts young and independent filmmakers from presenting realistic images of working-class life and restrained neorealism.

#### *How the Aesthetic of Reality is Presented in Vietnamese Neorealist Films*

There is a tension between realistic cinema and escapist cinema, whereby few filmmakers pursue the neorealism elements because they do not want the film to be banned from screening while many filmmakers invest heavily in the escapist genre, allowing them to reach the mass audiences and box office revenue. Films follow the audience's tastes, or are remakes, or are based on the best-selling novels of Nguyen Nhat Anh rather than have a close association with cinematic realism. *Rom* is a rare film that portrays the dark side of a society in the process of change, bringing a new atmosphere to cinema and becoming a breakthrough that excites other independent filmmakers. Many scenes in the film were cut to meet the censor's request, so the authenticity of the film is less true and its realism contains a big lie. Although the film tries to realistically depict the main character's extreme life, a life with no way out, it still has to try to "go to the right" in order to reduce the character's painful nature.

Neorealism has a great influence on an element in the film, humanist vision, that is subjectively addressed by the director with his camera subjectivity. The relation between the perceived subject and the perceived issue creates a subjective story. Movie content is subjectivized and represented by an author's point of view. Neorealist films have political elements, social conscience and especially humanist vision. The themes in the films are mainly unemployment after the war, the gap between rich and poor, and the transformation of the economy that cause many people to be eliminated, making neorealism a realist cinema with the real story and unprofessional actors. The success factor of neorealism is bringing the lives of ordinary people to the screen played by unknown actors, giving the audience the feeling of being the character or being a part of the character.

Vietnam's film industry during the cold war period was considered an effective and ideal propaganda tool ordered by the state and this required the filmmaker to reconcile his personal ideas with the communist party's demands for socialist realism allowed to be shown in the film. *When the Tenth Month Comes* (Dang Nhat Minh, 1984) is a good example of the reconciliation between filmmaker and state censorship in which the director can exhibit his creative autonomy in a highly politicized cultural environment (Healy, 2020). In Dang Nhat Minh's films in particular and Vietnamese cinema in general, the lyrical substance mitigates the propaganda element about reality created by social realism, allowing the director to bring his artistic ideas to life into vivid realistic images on film. The lyrical nature is reflected in the idyllic life in the countryside, harmony with nature, family relationships and the attachment of people in different regions. The poverty factor of the farmer is reduced because these lyrical properties make the film's story less burdensome, both satisfying the criteria of censorship and satisfying the director's passion. Vietnamese cinema thus becomes a channel of political art and at the same time evokes melancholy, nostalgia, sympathy and grief with war loss and alleviates the material suffering of the present.

### III. A Closer Look Into Rom (2019) By Tran Thanh Huy

*Rom stays true as a neorealist film*

The three characters Rom, Phuc and Big Brother are all played by actors Tran Anh Khoa, Anh Tu Wilson and rapper Wowy. The actors are all first-time appearances, inexperienced, but can show facial expressions of the characters built on the script. Khoa's natural acting makes Rom's character real from the way he shows his face, voice, walk, to the continuous chase phase, fighting in the mud and on the roof. Phuc, a dusty child who grew up on the street, is a character who is both a companion and a formidable opponent of Rom with a small, dark skin image and the actor has no acting experience. Playing the role of Phuc, Anh Tu can move quickly and skillfully as he himself is passionate about the extreme sport of parkour. Rapper Wowy, who doesn't know acting at all, was chosen to play Big Brother, and is also the composer for the song *Chay* (Run) which is goofy but realistic and close.

All the nooks and crannies, small alleys, wastelands, tiled roofs on old apartments, markets, floating hamlets on the river create the backdrop of the film scattered all over Saigon and shown very realistically onto the screen. Cinematographers must make the best use of natural light by choosing to shoot at the right time and in the right location to get the right shots. This is a kind of "guerrilla" cinema: filming anywhere, anytime. Most of the scenes were shot in very small alleys that were difficult to manipulate and forced to fix the camera on the motorbike. Setting the scene for each scene, especially in the context of Thanh Da apartment building, the crew had to clean up a lot of garbage, paint the walls, and filter out the old items left behind. Rom makes a strong visual impression from the very first scenes, when the frame falls from above and captures the living quarters of the poor working-class area. In addition, the typical images and sounds of working life in Saigon are described through the sound of street vendors, the sound of scissors from makeshift barbershops, radio and lottery programs.

Following social realism, Rom chooses a rougher approach, bearing the kitchen sink realism originating in the 1950s in England. The film depicts the daily life of the poor in modern society, but looks directly at the difficult reality, in stark contrast to "escape from the present". The familiar model of the reality of the kitchen sink: an angry young man struggling to make a living, being irritable and having difficult dreams. Rom is built according to that model to represent resistance to the situation, regardless of whether the outcome is positive or not. Through this character, the film shows the current state of poverty, physical and mental pain, and unfulfilled dreams in a naked, violent way. The character's suffering is extreme but natural, not refined, not romantic or impoverished. The film enters the slice of life genre and treats it as a prism to see various identities portrayed as realistically as possible.

The film revolves around poor working people and street children clinging to their dreams of changing their lives through a game of chance called "số đề". This game is familiar to the poor working class in Vietnam but have never become the main subject of a movie. The images of the poor are the experiences and witnesses from the childhood of the director, who was born in a working family, whose father was a vehicle repairman, and whose mother was a vendor and who lived close to the local street kids. The characters in Rom are street teenagers without families, but they don't cool down their dreams. Despite facing cruel reality, there are still children who do their best to make their wishes come true. Rom tries to run as fast as possible to reach your dreams. *Số đề* is a part of the Vietnamese working people's life. Most of the working poor know this game of chance. In order to get the numbers to score, they believe in extremely irrational things. The numbers can come from animals, events, dreams or even people go to Ouija board to ask for numbers. In fact, the game of numbers has soaked into the blood of many Vietnamese people since some see it as a fun game, but many bet their fortune on this game of chance.

*Rom works as an aesthetic reflection of harsh reality*

Dutch angle or Dutch tilt is a technique that involves tilting the camera to the side, resulting in an uneven frame. This angle provides the audience with a side view, the desired effect as if the viewer is tilting their head to the side. It basically allows the camera to roll on its axis so that the horizon is not parallel to the bottom of the frame. The angle can be used to dramatic effect and helps portray insecurity, disorientation, frantic or desperate action. Rom is used with almost 99% Dutch angle. This is the first film a tilt angle has been used for the whole film in Vietnam to describe the life of the precarious, uneven, and uneasy working people. The intensity of Dutch angle usage in the film is very dense, creating a feeling of suffocation, frustration, discomfort with the ongoing story and feeling the anxiety of the character.

*Run* is the main song in the film, which is read in rap style with the accompaniment of drums. The rap contains inspirational content, encouraging the spirit to always move forward despite the thorny road. The chorus *run (chay)* is repeated in the lyrics, emphasizing the livelihood. The song has been made as a music video using many segments in the movie that correspond to the song's content, such as the scene where Rom speeds up to record the numbers in time or to escape from the pursuit of the gangsters. The way the music beats fast is like something racing after sleeping for so long. In his subsistence, Rom is chased by a group of young gamblers, competing for guests with Phuc, a rival in the profession.

The film was corrected with Davinci Resolve Studio which helps maintain the visual style and rough feel of the slums of Ho Chi Minh City while still creating separate looks for the character Rom and other children. The colors are also seamlessly adjusted between the dark and violent feel of the street, revealing the hope within Rom. There is a different use of color in the images of the city and the crowd as well as different images of each character. Rom is a member of a small community in the movie, so for the most part, he looks like everyone else, but his actions set him apart from others. Only when Rom is alone, the color of this character is adjusted in a different way. Sometimes, he sits alone on the roof, far from where he lives, the scenes are adjusted with strong colors such as red orange during the day, blue and pink at dawn to enhance the mood, loneliness of the character, creating feelings of youth and hope. These looks are created with curve in DaVinci Resolve to selectively control saturation and gradation.

Rom wears a red shirt with the number 7 considered a lucky number in gambling. In the Jackpot game, if players spin three 7s at the same time, they will win the top prize. The old shirt number 7 has faded, proving the character's luck has passed. The film revolves around the theme of "numbers" that appear all have some meaning. The character's clock shows 23:23 three times to warn him to have a grudge or someone to mess up, and the one who interrupts him throughout the movie is Phuc. Character Ba, whom Rom helped to buy the numbers for, has a book titled *The Whole World in the Pocket* like her identity: living clinging to numbers for luck in the hope of keeping the house. She has poured all her fortune into the final number and the title of the book seems to be telling her fate and hopes she bets on gambling. The character's name Rom is also a rustic word with an easy-to-remember pronunciation that is envisioned to an underdog who acts stealthily, and this is in line with the character's typical act of handing over tickets.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Vietnamese cinema shapes social reality and raises a voice to certain social issues, happiness and sufferings of the poor people in their everyday lives. Since Vietnam's transition from a subsidized economy to a market economy in 1986, cinema has reflected changes in economic and social-cultural life. With the influence of neorealism, directors' camera subjectivity addresses humanist vision in the film. Cinema in Vietnam has become a means to political art and simultaneously evoked melancholy, nostalgia, sympathy and grief with war loss and alleviated the material suffering of the present. *Rom* is as a picture portraying the dark side of a society, bringing a new atmosphere to cinema and becoming a breakthrough that excites other independent filmmakers. The film explores the poor working class and illegal gambling based on lottery numbers through the two main characters with physical and mental pain and unfulfilled dreams in a violent way.

The research is limited in one film *Rom* and needs more studies of more films in the future to see how Italian neorealism is used to portray the images of working class in Vietnamese society, especially in urban area. *Rom* is a representation of this movement when the film shows the context of social crisis, realistic style, basic technology, marginalized characters and dramatic story. The film was awarded the New Currents award, equivalent to the best film and the most important award at the 2019 Busan International Film Festival (BIFF). Tran Thanh Huy is a new neorealist director who attempts to break all the ties with the previous generations of directors. This young filmmaker expects to build a meaningful relationship with the film viewers in a direct way without any authority. More filmmakers will be inspired by this movement and more neorealist films can be produced seeking the sympathy of audiences and encouragement of critics around the country.

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