

Nguyen H. Thi-tho

Independent Researcher

thitho010518@gmail.com

Independent Researcher whose primary interests lie at the intersections of feminism, film, and literature. Her research engages with questions of gender, representation, and gendered discourse in cinematic and literary texts. She has published in the proceedings of the National Conference Literature and Contemporary Life (“*From ‘Flame’ to ‘Ashes’: Gender and Symbolism in Contemporary Women’s Short Fiction. The Case of Glorious Ashes by Nguyễn Ngọc Tư and Ashes by Phong Điệp*”) and has forthcoming publications in international conference proceedings.

Believing the Unreal: Virtuality and Collective Imagination in Vietnamese Women's Cinema through Việt Linh's *Travelling Circus* and *Devil's Mark*

Abstract: Virtuality, in its broadest sense, is neither reducible to nor necessarily always closely tied to digital technology. Looking at Vietnamese women's cinema, one can find a different approach to the concept of the virtual world, in which alternative articulations of virtuality emerge that foreground collective imagination. To clarify this argument, the article examines the two works *Travelling Circus* (*Gánh xiếc rong*) and *Devil's Mark* (*Dấu ấn của quỷ*) by female director Việt Linh. In *Travelling Circus*, Việt Linh constructs a virtual world that is explicitly introduced as one that desperately needs fictional/unreal stories. The world in the movie is connected to the illusion of magic performed by a travelling circus, whose deceptions are offered to an ethnic minority village suffering from material deprivation. Here, collective imagination functions as a shared desire for escape from poverty, drawing the community into a temporary virtuality around hope and expectation. In *Devil's Mark*, Việt Linh creates an entirely fictional land governed by a closed system of mythic imagination. In this world, collective imagination operates through superstition. Here, the mark of the devil, merely a birthmark, becomes a virtual construct with tangible social consequences, condemning a woman and later her child to death. Both works revolve around the act of believing the unreal solely through the collective imagination; they articulate different regimes of virtuality. In *Travelling Circus*, the virtuality is fragile and provisional, ultimately collapsing when the illusion is exposed by the villagers who awaken after a prolonged state of delusion. In contrast, in *Devil's Mark*, the virtuality is stable and self-reinforcing, capable of reproducing itself through bloodline and inheritance. Overall, Việt Linh's films foreground a mode of believing the unreal sustained by collective imagination, not only as a process of embracing virtuality but also as a mechanism for legitimizing and, more importantly, reproducing it. Virtuality, therefore, is not opposed to reality; on the contrary, it functions as a social force that produces social reality without the need for any technological mediation.

Keywords: Unreal, Virtuality, Collective Imagination, Vietnamese Cinema, Việt Linh

Résumé: La virtualité, dans son acception la plus large, ne se réduit pas aux technologies numériques et n'y est pas nécessairement étroitement liée. En se tournant vers le cinéma vietnamien réalisé par des femmes, il est possible d'identifier une approche différente du concept de monde virtuel, où émergent d'autres formes de virtualité mettant au premier plan l'imaginaire collectif. Afin d'étayer cette hypothèse, cet article analyse deux œuvres de la réalisatrice Việt Linh : *Travelling Circus* (*Gánh xiếc rong*) et *Devil's Mark* (*Dấu ấn của quỷ*). Dans *Travelling Circus*, Việt Linh construit un monde virtuel explicitement présenté comme ayant désespérément besoin de récits fictionnels et irréels. L'univers du film est lié à l'illusion de la magie mise en scène par un cirque ambulant, dont les artifices sont offerts à un village d'une minorité ethnique confronté à une profonde précarité matérielle. Ici, l'imaginaire collectif fonctionne comme un désir partagé d'échapper à la pauvreté, entraînant la communauté dans une virtualité temporaire fondée sur l'espoir et l'attente. Dans *Devil's Mark*, Việt Linh crée un territoire entièrement fictif régi par un système clos d'imaginaire mythique. Dans cet univers, l'imaginaire collectif s'exprime à travers la superstition. Une simple tache de naissance, interprétée comme la marque du diable, devient ainsi une construction virtuelle aux conséquences sociales bien réelles, condamnant une femme, puis son enfant, à la mort. Les deux films reposent sur l'acte de croire à l'irréel par la seule force de l'imaginaire collectif et mettent en scène deux régimes distincts de virtualité. Dans *Travelling Circus*, la virtualité est fragile et provisoire, avant de s'effondrer lorsque les villageois démasquent l'illusion et s'éveillent d'un long état de fascination. À l'inverse, dans *Devil's Mark*, la virtualité est stable et autorenforcée, capable de se reproduire par la filiation et l'héritage. Dans l'ensemble, les films de Việt Linh mettent en lumière une manière de croire à l'irréel soutenue par l'imaginaire collectif, non seulement comme un processus d'adhésion à la virtualité, mais aussi comme un mécanisme de légitimation et, plus encore, de reproduction de celle-ci. La virtualité ne s'oppose donc pas à la réalité; au contraire, elle agit comme une force sociale qui produit la réalité sociale sans nécessiter aucune médiation technologique.

Mots-clés: Irréel, Virtualité, Imaginaire collectif, Cinéma vietnamien, Việt Linh.

1. Introduction

Virtuality (or the virtual) is a term often seen in close, inseparable connection to the field of digital technology or computer-generated spaces and environments. According to the *Cambridge Dictionary*, there are three definitions of virtuality, the first two of which relate to computer technology¹. It cannot be denied that virtuality is closely linked with simulation in the technical sense but seems distinct from the imagined or fictive. Yet, in its non-technological sense, virtuality must be understood in relation to the faculty of the imagination and to *phantasy*². This means that, alongside the discourse that virtuality is intrinsically linked to technology, there are still many studies demonstrating that this concept has a much broader history, for instance sociologist Rob Shields, who argues that the virtual has long been significant as a cultural category, as part of the human mental toolkit³. Similarly, researchers Frankel and Krebs also argue that the concept of the virtual has a long history in philosophy, as well as crucial significations for psychoanalysis⁴. Marie-Laure Ryan also points out that virtual is not a neologism; it existed before the development of computers.⁵ It seems that the struggle over whether virtuality should *belong to* any single field is never-ending; on the contrary, it is likely to become even more intense as society develops⁶.

Given the discourses on virtuality mentioned above, as well as the various discussions about this term in the contemporary context, this article aims to participate in the dialogue on virtuality from a perspective beyond the field of digital technology, specifically cinema. Clearly, cinema and technology are closely related, and it is even more noteworthy that in recent years, numerous AI films have been produced and released to the public at an unprecedented frequency on platforms like YouTube and Facebook, thanks to continuously

¹ The first definition is “the fact of happening or being done using computer technology over the internet, and not involving people physically going somewhere”, the second definition is “the fact of happening or being done using computer technology over the internet, and not involving people physically going somewhere” and the third definition is “the fact of existing, but not in a way that is physically real, or a thing that is imagined or considered rather than being real”.

² Antony Bryant and Griselda Pollock, ‘Editors’ Introduction’, in *Digital and Other Virtualities: Renegotiating the Image*, eds. Antony Bryant and Griselda Pollock (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 14.

³ Rob Shields, *The Virtual* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 4.

⁴ Richard Frankel and Victor J. Krebs, *Human Virtuality and Digital Life: Philosophical and Psychoanalytic Investigations* (London and New York: Routledge, 2022), 3.

⁵ Marie-Laure Ryan, ‘Virtuality’, in *Critical Terms in Futures Studies*, ed. Heike Paul (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 335.

⁶ A vast body of literature has explored virtuality, ranging from initial questions like: “What Is Virtuality?” (Richard Norton), “Virtual Reality: Digital or Fictional?” (Neil McDonnell and Nathan Wildman) to statements such as “The Virtual isn’t Real” (Marc Champagne), “The Virtual as the Digital” (David J. Chalmers)... These studies have contributed to lively debates and broadened the definition of this term.

improving AI-powered video-generation tools such as Seedance and Google Veo. Prior to this, there have also been many studies discussing Virtual Reality Cinema (cine-VR) as an emerging cinematic form. Even more significantly, some researchers have considered cinema itself to be a form of virtuality. However, the focus of this article is to examine virtuality in a completely opposite context, that is, at a time when cinema was not, or rather did not, place technology at the center of filmmaking. Instead, these films construct virtuality as a state, a form of existence, a mechanism that influences the functioning of society as a whole. Cinema presents worlds, objects, and situations within which:

Virtual suggests something that is effective, operating in parallel to, but at a distance from the concrete, actual, material, or lived reality. There is similarity with the actual thing; but it is not the thing itself. It is not the real; yet it is not false⁷.

Virtuality, in general, *in, through, and by* cinema is constructed from many elements, which can be entirely non-human, human, or a combination of both. This article focuses on examining cinematic works where virtuality is formed only when humans consent to it, allowing it to exist, that is, when the virtual has the potential of becoming the actual⁸. Through the belief and imagination of an entire group, community, or society, people transform what Bryant and Pollock describe as *unreal* as potential actuality⁹ into something *real* that, in turn, impacts reality, becoming or creating social reality, even though its basis is virtual, unreal, or imaginary. To clarify this further, the article analyzes two Vietnamese films by female director Việt Linh: *Travelling Circus* (1988) and *Devil's Mark* (1992). Both works were produced at a time when technology was not yet widely applied in Vietnamese cinema. However, they still created their own *virtual worlds*, and these virtual worlds were born and nurtured by the spirit of believing the unreal, in other words, virtuality constructed through collective imagination. However, the two forms of virtuality in the two films are different: while the virtuality in *Travelling Circus* is temporary, fragile, and can ultimately collapse once demystified, namely *de-virtuality*, the virtuality in *Devil's Mark* is a stable, self-contained form with the potential for recurrence.

From this perspective, the article contributes to discussions demonstrating that virtuality is thus not merely a new dimension of our worlds shaped by new media

⁷ Bryant and Pollock, 'Editors' Introduction', 14.

⁸ Ryan, 'Virtuality', 338.

⁹ Bryant and Pollock, 'Editors' Introduction', 15.

technologies¹⁰. This term clearly had already existed before digital technology became as widespread and advanced as it is today. Virtuality, therefore, can be read as a state not opposed to reality; on the contrary, it coexists with reality, and in some cases, *virtuality can even be reality itself*.

2. Temporary Virtuality in *Travelling Circus*: Performance, Collective Desire, and the Possibility of De-virtuality

Travelling Circus is a film about a travelling circus (consisting of three men and a woman named Lan) that travels to a village in a mountainous area to perform. Seeing that the villagers are extremely poor, that the land is infertile soil and difficult to cultivate, and that some people are emaciated, but knowing the area contains gold, the circus owner asks the Shaman and the village elder to let them stay and perform in exchange for gold. Initially, the circus's act does not appeal to the villagers, who are facing extreme hardship. However, after the circus owner changes the act, the villagers gradually come to believe in the performances and regard them as magic. But when the curtain falls, the villagers discover it was all a lie, a staged act driven by the circus owner's greed. This enrages the villagers, and at the end of the film, they chase after the travelling circus as they flee into the night. The film concludes with the villagers continuing their nomadic life, moving on to another place, thus ending a spatio-temporal interval that resembles what Goffman describes as a situation in which:

may momentarily appear to be what is really going on, in fact what is actually happening is plainly a joke, or a dream, or an accident, or a mistake, or a misunderstanding, or a deception, or a theatrical performance, and so forth¹¹.

¹⁰ Bryant and Pollock, 'Editors' Introduction', 15.

¹¹ Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986), 10

2.1. The Travelling Circus as an Apparatus of Illusion that Creates a Virtual World

From the very opening scene, female director Việt Linh establishes the film's aesthetic and ideological orientation by having Lan's voice-over heard as the travelling circus members ride their horses into the mountainous area where the villagers live. Lan says, "The story I'm about to tell is just a dream, because fairy tales are necessary even though they aren't real, so I want to tell this dream like a fairy tale of a thousand years." These words act as a key to unlocking the entire virtual world, affirming the film's virtual nature: it's impossible to clearly distinguish between truth and falsehood, reality and illusion, real life and fairy tale, or real life and dream. At the same time, through Lan's words, the film also reveals the importance of the virtual in life, demonstrated by Lan's assertion that *fairy tales are necessary* in the real world—but what exactly are fairy tales?

In his work, Hedley notes that Tolkien's major point is that even fairy stories are not exclusively for children, nor can they be dismissed as infantile escapism or consolation for adults because they see stories as answering to genuine and legitimate human needs. According to this interpretation, fairy tales are not separate from society and reality; they are an essential part of human social and spiritual life, even if written with art, fairy tales offer fantasy, recovery, escape and consolation, which adults probably need more than children though they speak of peril, sorrow and the shadow of death¹². From this, it can be concluded that Lan's statement does not deny or ignore the reality of poverty experienced by the villagers; instead, it further highlights why collective imagination is necessary at that moment. The virtuality in the film, perhaps, is a Secondary World¹³ of hope that temporarily saves human beings.

In a world where virtuality has been signaled as a guiding principle of film form and content, the travelling circus is no longer merely a touring troupe that travels far and wide, it now settles in a remote mountain village. Instead, the travelling circus in Việt Linh's film operates like a theatrical apparatus in which theatre is possible only because people engage

¹² Douglas Hedley, *Living Forms of the Imagination* (London and New York: T&T Clark International, 2008), 178-179.

¹³ Hedley, *Living Forms of the Imagination*, 178-179.

their imagination¹⁴, an apparatus of illusion, an *as if*, opposed to a world that really is¹⁵. From the opening moments when the circus enters the secluded and isolated lives of the mountain villagers, the director skillfully reveals a meaningful contrast: on one side, the wild, silent mountain landscape, the deprived living conditions with houses resembling bird nests, and people with emaciated, starving faces—most notably the image of the two brothers, Đác and his younger sister, shirtless, guarding their mother’s grave; on the other side, the moving circus, carrying sound, stories, acts, and a stage, with well-dressed people, bodies that appear healthy, clearly well-fed individuals. This, to some extent, reveals the position of the two groups in co-creating the virtuality through collective imagination: on one side, the circus troupe resembles what Goffman describes as the agents of deception: those who engineer the deception can be called the operatives, fabricators, deceivers. Those intendedly taken in can be said to be contained -contained in a construction or fabrication. They can be called the dupes, marks, pigeons, suckers, butts, victims, gulls¹⁶. However, the villagers in *Travelling Circus* are a much more complex case. They are deceived, but not entirely; instead, they also have a tacit participation in sustaining the deception.

The contrasting images of the circus and the villagers at the beginning of the film create the conditions for *another reality* to be allowed to form and exist—a place where magic appears, where performing was the mode of achieving “real results”¹⁷, where the impossible and the unreal *become believable*, where deception is allowed to exist and *become real*. The circus creates a parallel world that coexists with reality, encroaching on the space and boundaries of reality, overshadowing reality. This parallel world is virtuality; it opens up another possibility for the villagers’ extremely bleak lives and is therefore recognized as real by this community. Virtuality in *Travelling Circus*, from this perspective, does not lie in technology, nor does it require so-called digital technologies, VR, or AR in order to exist. Instead, it is activated through a medium: performance. And when performance is combined with human participation and environmental conditions, it transforms virtuality—something

¹⁴ Tania Zittoun and Adeline Rosenstein, ‘Theater and Imagination to (Re)Discover Reality’, in *Handbook of Imagination and Culture*, eds. Tania Zittoun and Vlad Petre Glăveanu (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 230.

¹⁵ Ulrich Gehmann, ‘The Frame Context’, in *Real Virtuality: About the Destruction and Multiplication of World*, eds. Ulrich Gehmann and Martin Reiche (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2014), 22.

¹⁶ Goffman, *Frame Analysis*, 83.

¹⁷ Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory*, rev. and expanded ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 129.

unreliable and non-existent—into something believable, something that does exist, even though people still call it magic.

Magic, in Simon During's terminology, is secular magic because it is the technically produced magic of conjuring shows and special effects¹⁸, operating in the film to create the attraction—that “as if by magic” sensation¹⁹ that makes the villagers invest their belief in the travelling circus. To transform tricks into magic, props such as the cloth, the basket, the magic wand, and the circus stage are indispensable, since they are the focus of the whole activity²⁰. Generally, these props do not possess the inherent power to produce virtuality. Instead, they are ‘generators of fictional truths, things which, by virtue of their nature or existence, make propositions fictional’²¹. That is, they become magic *only and only* when placed within a performance with all the human and non-human conditions: the insatiable greed of the owner; the personal desires of the character Lan; the barren land that is no longer suitable for farming (growing rice and corn) for the villagers, and the crucial factor remains the collective desire of the mountain villagers, exemplified by the boy Đác. Without the simultaneous combination of all these elements, most importantly the collective desire of the villagers, a basket would remain just a basket, even if it were filled to the brim with rice after an elaborate performance. This aligns with the observation that: secular magic is a form of fantasy, that is, it exists to fulfill desires created by lack of faith and reined in by necessity²². The travelling circus, indeed, only stages the performance; it is the collective imagination that transforms these acts into virtuality that has effects on real life. Performances alone cannot directly transform material reality; they cannot immediately eradicate poverty, fertilize the land, or improve the lives of the entire mountain community. However, the function of the magic performances in creating a temporary sensory reality, interrupting the perception of harsh reality, and transforming the impossible in real life into the possible in the virtuality of magic performances, is further emphasized.

¹⁸ Simon During, *Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2002), 1.

¹⁹ During, *Modern Enchantments*, 103.

²⁰ Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 11.

²¹ Hedley, *Living Forms of the Imagination*, 176.

²² During, *Modern Enchantments*, 63.

2.2. Collective Imagination and the Desire to Escape Poverty: The Social Conditions that Make the Unreal Believable

In the previous section, the article pointed out that the circus performances would not be recognized as miracles if they were simply seen as acts skillfully and swiftly performed by people like the owner and Lan. That is, the miracle only becomes effective when it appears before the villagers, allowing them to escape the boundaries of the “here and now” of their actual lived situation²³ through collective imagination, a form of imagination that creates powerful emotions (and these support imagination)²⁴. For this reason, the circus performances continue in the village, while the villagers continue to experience a disconnection from the real²⁵. But why would the villagers want to escape reality?

In the film, the act of transforming an empty basket into one full of rice is performed four times. This is an elaborately staged magic trick, but from a social perspective, it taps into the most basic human need: food. The circus’s first performance did not attract much attention from the villagers, but the situation changed when the circus owner chose to perform the act of producing rice in the second performance. At this, each villager was given a handful of rice. Though small, the handful of rice carried a clear symbolic meaning because it represented the tangible result of the travelling circus’s magic, thus allowing the illusion to touch real life and giving the villagers the feeling that they could reap rewards without hard labor. Most of the villagers in *Travelling Circus* witnessed that the virtual exudes wonderment by ‘correcting’ defects in the real²⁶, specifically a basket full of rice, but they didn’t see the deception, the inherent fakeness of the virtual²⁷ and the greed behind it; or rather, what mattered was “not a seeing but a believing”²⁸. By displaying and making villagers believe in virtuality, the circus sold them hope and temporary escape; in Frankel and Krebs’s terms, it sold them the drive to perfect what is lacking in the world, which ends up over taking the real and leaving it behind²⁹. Because of this, the villagers no longer worked diligently. Adults no longer went in groups to the other side of the mountain to cultivate fields. They abandoned their fields, the work that

²³ Tania Zittoun and Vlad Petre Glăveanu, ‘Imagination at the Frontiers of Psychology’, in *Handbook of Imagination and Culture*, eds. Tania Zittoun and Vlad Petre Glăveanu (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 2.

²⁴ Zittoun and Rosenstein, ‘Theater and Imagination’, 226.

²⁵ Zittoun and Glăveanu, ‘Imagination at the Frontiers of Psychology’, 10.

²⁶ Frankel and Krebs, *Human Virtuality and Digital Life*, 71

²⁷ Frankel and Krebs, *Human Virtuality and Digital Life*, 63.

²⁸ During, *Modern Enchantments*, 48.

²⁹ Frankel and Krebs, *Human Virtuality and Digital Life*, 75

had previously been essential to their daily survival, and village meetings. They went in groups to pan for gold and watch the circus. The children believed they could have rice to eat without working. Some even gathered at Đác's house, imitating the circus performers' movements, hoping they too could conjure rice. Đác himself dreamt of being trusted and revered for his ability to produce large quantities of rice for the villagers. Under the influence of virtuality, most villagers gradually drifted away from their old way of life. Virtuality brought labor to a standstill, leaving reality behind. It replaced reality; virtuality at this point corresponds to Frankel and Krebs's formulation that, overcoming lack and inadequacy, virtuality substantiates a world of repletion and fullness. It offers, in religious terms, redemption from a fallen world³⁰. From this perspective, it is clear that the mountain community is not a passive collective but rather individuals placed in a situation that forces them to yearn for a different possibility, a different reality, in order to survive in hardship. Collective imagination in *Travelling Circus* should therefore be read as a clear necessity³¹, a sociocultural process³² rather than a misinterpretation or misunderstanding. Collective imagination here is the community's shared reaction to prolonged deprivation, an imaginative attempt to find an alternative escape, and the thread that keeps people clinging to life. In other words, collective imagination is the crucial factor that legitimizes, constructs, and nurtures virtuality.

In the film, two characters should be considered typical examples of those who compromise and accept living in virtuality: the boy Đác and the circus assistant, Lan. Đác believes in magic because it allows him and his younger sister to escape their hardship and their constantly drunk father, so he tries to follow Lan and asks to learn magic from her. Lan, on the other hand, is drawn to the dream of performing on a bigger, more dazzling stage, as her boss promised, "after this trip, you'll be in major theater troupes," to showcase her talent, to be seen and admired by others. Even knowing her boss is deceiving the villagers, she continues to be his accomplice. Individual desire and collective desire, therefore, engage in a silent exchange where their individual and collective aspirations become the energy that fuels virtuality.

In short, in *Travelling Circus*, virtuality is sustained by collective imagination, grounded in the deep desire to escape the reality of prolonged poverty. Therefore, the virtuality

³⁰ Frankel and Krebs, *Human Virtuality and Digital Life*, 71.

³¹ Vlad Petre Glăveanu, Maciej Karwowski, Dorota M. Jankowska, and Constance de Saint-Laurent, 'Creative Imagination', in *Handbook of Imagination and Culture*, eds. Tania Zittoun and Vlad Petre Glăveanu (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 75.

³² Zittoun and Glăveanu, 'Imagination at the Frontiers of Psychology', 11.

that the circus painstakingly constructed exists only when the villagers have the need to enter that virtuality. The magic, ultimately, *is artificial*, but the need for that magic *is real*. The blurred line between the artificiality of the performance and the reality of deprivation is what gives virtuality its power in the film. This shows that virtuality is not separate from life or merely a technical phenomenon; rather, it is something that emerges and manifests itself in moments when people feel most trapped, in other words as a way of cultivating collective imagination beyond crisis³³.

2.3. De-virtuality: Virtuality as a Fragile and Collapsible Structure

The virtuality in *Travelling Circus* is not an autonomous system; it cannot exist or stand on its own if any of its constituent elements, especially collective imagination, is absent. Therefore, the virtuality in *Travelling Circus* ultimately crumbles when the villagers refuse to invest belief in it and refuse to continue imagining it into being. However, it is important to consider that Việt Linh's film does not represent the collapse of virtuality as a reversal between reality and illusion, reality and fantasy, belief and disbelief, hope and despair. Instead, the director portrays the process of de-virtuality as a gradual process of rupture, much like how she depicted the virtuality's gradual infiltration into the lives and consciousness of the mountain community. Initially, the magic is truly effective, but because the virtuality lacked a deep-rooted foundation within the community, it was forced to constantly conceal its production mechanism. Once that mechanism is exposed, meaning performance loses its power, and the collective gaze is no longer captivated, it also means the magic loses its effectiveness, resulting in the collapse of the virtual world. At this point, the props once believed to possess magic revert to ordinary objects with ordinary uses: the basket is no longer the place from which rice is produced, the cloth is no longer a veil concealing the appearance of miracles, the magic wand is no longer a symbol of power. Everything returns to its bare, unadorned nature.

To return everything to the real, to *what it originally is*, Việt Linh constructs the detail of Đắc's younger sister (PouPon) mistakenly drinks a bottle of soapy water out of hunger and dies. This is seen as a powerful blow to the cracks in the fragile, rootless structure of virtuality. The bottle of soapy water itself possesses the properties and weight of a medium, a special transition when Đắc obtains it from the thin man in the circus troupe by exchanging his bow

³³ Read more about this work by Rose Cairns.

for it, hoping to use it to blow bubbles to make his sister forget her hunger. Initially, it does help Đác's sister temporarily forget her hunger, stop crying, and fall asleep. But later, while Đác was away, PouPon was hungry, and before drinking the soapy water and dying, PouPon performed the action of covering the empty basket with a piece of cloth and using a long stick like the wand-like prop Lan uses in her performance, to replicate Lan's action. As a result, the basket full of rice did not appear. Therefore, this bottle of soapy water is the direct link between fun and death, or more accurately, between performance/virtuality and reality. If Lan's words are the key to unlocking the world of virtuality at the beginning of the film, then the bottle of soapy water functions as the door that closes the community's days living in virtuality near the end of the film. Soap bubbles, set in the context of *Travelling Circus*, are an almost perfect image of the nature of virtuality in the film: they are beautiful, sparkling, but also fragile and, most importantly, disappear very quickly, and worse, leave consequences in real life.

Đác, arguably, is where the ability to constitute virtuality and to bring about de-virtuality is most strongly demonstrated. He is the most fervent believer in magic; he once wanted to learn magic, and he once rushed onto the stage to grab a handful of rice and run around among the villagers sitting below the stage, shouting, "Rice... rice... real rice!" This shows that he once harbored hope for a brighter future and therefore placed his complete faith in Lan in particular and the travelling circus in general. However, upon realizing the truth, what Đác lost was not only his belief in the performance but also another reality, a miraculous escape from the overwhelming poverty. Initially, Đác questioned Lan, "My eyes saw it, my hands held it, Lan, tell me the truth, do you know how to do magic?" After learning that there was no magic, Đác stood up during the circus's final performance and denounced them for lying and declared that there was no magic. These words acted as a trigger, igniting the villagers' questioning, prompting them to rush onto the stage and ask if miracles existed. Đác's anger, therefore, was not only directed at the fraudsters in the travelling circus, but also the reaction of an ordinary person to a shattered virtual world—a world he had wholeheartedly believed in and simultaneously built with all his aspirations. Đác, generally speaking, is typical of the situation Goffman describes, in which an individual discovers that he has misframed events and is lodged into cognition and action on false assumptions, he is quite likely to flood out, breaking from the unsupportable frame he had been sustaining³⁴ within the community. The scene of Đác running to the circus tent at night after dreaming of being kicked out of the house

³⁴ Goffman, *Frame Analysis*, 357.

by his father and burned alive is the moment he strips away the layer of virtuality he had long believed to be real. Therefore, his hurried search for the truth is, in essence, his desire to reclaim, or rather, cling to, his shattered dream and virtual reality. However, in response to his hopes, the entire circus fled in a panic that very night. They left behind only an empty basket and a monkey named Sao. The empty basket and the monkey can be seen as a detail indicating that everything has returned to its original state, marking the moment when the curtain falls, the spectator ‘returns to reality’—that is, to the paramount reality of everyday life. But the stark reality is no longer the original reality, just as the village elder said, “The villagers’ stomachs are hungry; don’t let their hearts ache any more.” They seethe with anger because what the circus took away was their faith, hope, and the desire for escape that they had witnessed and experienced. This de-virtuality, therefore, plunges the entire village into a far more painful and brutal reality than before.

Compared to everyone else in the community, the village elder is the most lucid figure. Through this character, it can be concluded that the virtuality in the film, even at the moment when it seems most powerful, *is never complete or absolute*. The elder is not mesmerized by the trick of producing rice and does not believe in magic; he diligently goes to the fields and gives food to the hungry villagers he encounters. He is an anchor of communal memory, a site where doubt persists, thereby exposing the possibility of the virtuality being demystified. Initially, when he saw the circus owner arrive and talk about the performance, the elder immediately asked, “What do you need here?” and then spoke about the villagers’ situation, “The villagers are hungry and want to fill their stomachs, not merely to be entertained. And we don’t have any gold readily available; the gold is in the mountains.” After discovering that Đác had stolen, the village elder beat him in front of the villagers. When Lan ran to the elder, he chased the circus away, saying, “The villagers are honest, you have taken advantage of them... go away... go away so we can have peace.” And when PouPon died, the village elder went to the circus, met the owner, and said, “The gods will punish you. The villagers will punish you.” It can be seen that if we view the travelling circus as an apparatus that creates a virtual world by directing the community’s gaze towards the stage, the village elder is the one trying to pull that gaze back to reality. This character reminds the boy Đác: “If you want to eat, you have to work with your hands; you have to endure the rain and sun. There are no miracles.” This reminder also serves as a warning to the entire community about the potential disappearance of magic in the future. However, the fact that the village elder, despite being the one to expose the flawed structure of the virtuality, fails to take any concrete action strong enough to stop the

deception from continuing reveals that this individual alone cannot overcome the beliefs and imaginations of an entire community. This symbolizes the cruel reality (the truth) being overshadowed, obscured, and taken over by the frivolous yet redemptive illusion. Therefore, Việt Linh's *Travelling Circus* does not create a simple contrast between the lucidity of an individual and the enchantment of the crowd. De-virtuality, thus, is not a simple, rational act that can be performed immediately and all at once. On the contrary, it is a painful process that only occurs when the illusion has left such profound and obvious consequences and damage in real life that it is irreparable (death).

In his work, Goffman points out that when the contained party discovers what is up, what was real for him a moment ago is now seen as a deception and is totally destroyed. It collapses³⁵. If we consider the travelling circus performances as the space where the virtuality is most directly manifested, then this very potential space is difficult to sustain and very vulnerable to collapse³⁶. The moment when the villagers realize that (secular) magic is only a trick, that it is so unreal³⁷, and that it is all in the mind³⁸ is also the moment when virtuality completely collapses. The mountain villagers may participate in the creation and maintenance of virtuality; they may direct their gaze and use their desires and beliefs to nourish it, but in doing so, they also possess the ability to refuse to continue sustaining its life. In other words, they also have agency over virtuality without being completely controlled by it. This is also a crucial difference between the virtuality in *Travelling Circus* and the virtuality in *Devil's Mark*. In *Travelling Circus*, the virtual, in general, lacks the ability to exist or produce itself. It is captivating but lacks a solid intrinsic foundation; it can create belief, but that belief is only fragile and temporary. Even so, virtuality in *Travelling Circus* is not opposed to reality, because it was once effective when it existed alongside reality, temporarily becoming real in the eyes of the community until reality returned, heavier, more brutal, and no longer veiled by magic.

³⁵ Goffman, *Frame Analysis*, 84-85.

³⁶ Frankel and Krebs, *Human Virtuality and Digital Life*, 141-142.

³⁷ During, *Modern Enchantments*, 63.

³⁸ During, *Modern Enchantments*, 44.

3. Stable Virtuality in *Devil's Mark*: Myth, the Female Body, and the Reproduction of the Unreal

Devil's Mark tells the tragic story of a girl with a distinctive mark on her body. Because of this, she is ostracized by her community, seen as the embodiment of evil, reflecting Goffman's claim that people believe the person with a stigma is not quite human³⁹. They drive her out of the community, attempting to sacrifice her. However, she does not die but is rescued and raised by a man suffering from leprosy. As an adult, she meets and falls in love with a young prisoner and becomes pregnant. Their life seems to become happy, but then the prisoner is captured by the villagers, and the young girl suffers immensely. Soon after, she gives birth, and the child also bears the same unusual bodily mark. The virtuality in this work, generally speaking, is constructed from a form of mythic belief deeply ingrained in the community's consciousness, without the need for external elements such as performance or a circus troupe. Instead, the virtuality in *Devil's Mark* has become deeply embedded in societal thought, becoming a kind of truth. Therefore, it is more stable, even self-produced through the logic of heredity, turning women and their descendants into sites to be read, interpreted, and condemned by collective imagination.

3.1. The Fictional Land as an Isolated Space that Excludes Women

The setting of *Devil's Mark* is a fictional land where human belief is the only truth, not logic that needs verification or any scientifically based explanation. Considering Anna Ichino's research on superstitious-magical imaginings, it becomes clear that what governs the community in *Devil's Mark* can be seen as 'superstitious-magical actions', which Ichino uses to refer to imagination's motivating power based on a class of actions⁴⁰. Ichino also mentions the origin of these actions to superstitious-magical thinking, that is, the peculiar thinking that they seem to presuppose: a kind of thinking that tends to exaggerate the meaningfulness and purposefulness of the world, seeing mindedness, agency and causal connectedness where in fact there is none⁴¹. Therefore, the birthmark on Young Girl's body, Old Man's leprosy, death,

³⁹ Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 5

⁴⁰ Anna Ichino, 'Superstitious-magical imaginings', *Analysis*, Vol. 85, No. 1 (2025): 68.

⁴¹ Anna Ichino, 'Superstitious-magical imaginings', 69.

and the calamities the village has experienced in the past are all intertwined into a mythical chain of cause and effect within the community's belief system, in which:

Common sense tells us that to perceive an item in the world is to encounter reality and to form the appropriate belief that *p*. To remember *p* is to recall a truly existing item as opposed to a fantastical object like Pegasus. To imagine *p*, unlike perceiving or remembering *p*, the mind represents the non-actual, the unreal ⁴².

In *Devil's Mark*, Việt Linh can be said to have pushed virtuality into a more difficult-to-define space: a mythic world. Significantly, this mythic world is not ruled by gods but by humans; however, the film's female protagonist is not perceived as human from the community's perspective, but rather as an embodiment of the devil. Why is this? Because without the direct intervention and regulation of divine forces, the power of myth or more accurately, the power to perceive, judge, and interpret everything that happens in that world—naturally rests in the hands of humans, specifically the community. Therefore, the body of the Young Girl, and even that of the Old Man, becomes almost a medium, on which power operates and through which it functions⁴³. Clearly, the community in *Devil's Mark* always lives within an order where mythical virtuality is recognized as real, in a logic in which sacred things and places are to be protected from defilement. Holiness and impurity are at opposite poles⁴⁴. From this perspective, what the community in this film believes to be true is seen through a mythic lens, where curses and omens are involved in the functioning of life and generate fear within the community.

In *Devil's Mark*, the space, from the community's imposed perspective, is divided into periphery and centre. The centre is where the community lives, where they go about their normal lives, hold markets, and conduct business. The periphery, on the other hand, is a wild, desolate place of mountains, caves, forests, sand, and the sea, that is, a space containing those excluded by the community. These are persons in a marginal state, people who are somehow left out in the patterning of society though they may be doing nothing morally wrong.⁴⁵ They become examples of the idea that bodies are not fixed, inert, purely genetically or biologically

⁴² Hedley, *Living Forms of the Imagination*, 47.

⁴³ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1994), 146.

⁴⁴ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 7.

⁴⁵ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 96.

programmed entities⁴⁶. This division clearly reflects what Sibley calls a necessary part of distanciation⁴⁷, as well as the disparity in power: on one side, the community has the power to decide who counts as human and who is marked as demonic, who is normal and who is abnormal, what is real and what is virtual and which individuals are accepted and which are considered dangerous, unclean elements deserving of exclusion from the community and society. On the other side are individuals subjected to the community's superstitious and extreme interpretations, ultimately having their fate determined by the community. The most striking example is the girl with the birthmark, considered the embodiment of the devil; her body is a historicized cultural text that is shaped and understood⁴⁸ through social meanings. The opening scene clearly illustrates this division throughout the film: the area where the girl lives and the area where the villagers live are separated by a river. While the villagers are washing clothes and carrying out daily activities by the river, the girl can only stand on the other side, looking towards the villagers and howling. Upon hearing her howl, the villagers begin shouting, "That's her! The Devil!" and frantically flee. It is in this scene that Young Girl appears on screen, but instead of appearing as a distinct figure, director Việt Linh presents Young Girl standing still, vaguely resembling a ghost or demon on the other side of the river. Then, after everyone returns home and slams the door shut, the film's title appears, foreshadowing the girl's fate of exclusion throughout *Devil's Mark*.

Besides depicting a divided space, the female director also uses sound to emphasize the exclusion enacted by the community. Therefore, whenever the villagers hear Young Girl scream or shout, even without seeing her, they immediately panic. Some grab their children and hide inside, closing doors; others make gestures of exorcism over their children. Besides Young Girl, there is another character whose sound alone, even from afar, makes the community keep away: Old Man. While Young Girl is ostracized because of a birthmark, Old Man is driven out because he suffers from leprosy, which is read as a mark of imperfection and carries the threat of contagion⁴⁹. This man is forced by the community to carry an object that makes noise when moved, so that "Everyone runs off when they hear this noise maker". Both individuals carry biological issues (a birthmark and a disease), yet each body is acted upon,

⁴⁶ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 190.

⁴⁷ David Sibley, *Geographies of Exclusion: Society and Difference in the West* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 25.

⁴⁸ Jennifer-Scott Mobley, *Female Bodies on the American Stage: Enter Fat Actress* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 12.

⁴⁹ Sibley, *Geographies of Exclusion*, 24.

inscribed, peered into; information is extracted from it, and disciplinary regimes are imposed on it⁵⁰ under the community's gaze and interpretation. Each body, therefore, becomes a product of and material to be further inscribed and reinscribed by social norms, practices, and values⁵¹; here, these norms belong to a society so strongly shaped by mythic belief that it produces collective imagination. The division stems from mythic belief and thus forms the strongest basis for the perception that the fictional land in *Devil's Mark* is a place, a space where order is regulated, organized, and operated by virtuality.

There is a dialogue in the film that deserves careful consideration: when the girl meets the young prisoner and they talk, upon hearing him answer the question "what's a prisoner?" with "people who are locked up and can't meet anybody," she replies "same with me" and adds, "I don't know. They say I'm a devil. Well... I haven't done anything." This shows that the girl isn't entirely unaware of her situation; she experiences the sense of not knowing what the others present are "really" thinking about her⁵². Indeed, she does not know why she is considered a devil, but she is clearly aware of the discrimination, hatred, and exclusion she faces from the community. Therefore, she tries to adapt to it, most notably through her ability to call out a few times and have the monkeys come to her (she calls them "friends"), or her inability to stop screaming. This detail further complicates the character of the Young Girl; she is no longer simply a victim but someone forced to adapt to her victimized condition while simultaneously yearning to escape it. Her condition as a stigmatized and excluded figure transforms her very ordinary desires, such as wanting to drink coconut water, into something extremely dangerous in the eyes of the community. The detail of Prisoner being caught by the villagers after being discovered stealing coconuts shows that Young Girl's desire is not just "I want to try it just once," meaning she longs to drink coconut water once, but also to experience love and be loved, to live a normal life, and to be treated like everyone else in the community. However, according to the community's interpretation, it is a craving for *forbidden fruit*, an act of crossing boundaries, an intrusion by an outsider into the space and order that belonged exclusively to the central community. Therefore, it was her desire and longing for a life of freedom that led to the most severe punishment, a punishment that is fatal⁵³.

⁵⁰ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 146.

⁵¹ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 138.

⁵² Goffman, *Stigma*, 14.

⁵³ Sibley, *Geographies of Exclusion*, 32.

Although the entire community is influenced by collective imagination, within the community there exists an individual unafraid of Young Girl and Old Man: Young Boy, a cowherd. In the opening scene, when children run away crying after hearing Young Girl's howl, only Young Boy, curious, hides behind a tree and looks towards the girl standing on the other side of the river. Later in the film, it is revealed that Young Boy was the one who gave Old Man bananas. When he learned Old Man was sad, he even brought his family's dog to give him so he could keep it as a pet. He told Old Man, "I'm not afraid of you. Or the devil either." He also cared deeply for Young Girl, saying, "I want to know why people call her a devil. She is not a devil." He took Young Girl to the market, but when she holds a bracelet and people discover it, someone shouts, "It's the devil's bracelet" causing everyone to scatter in panic. Afterwards, his mother tied him up and performed a ritual to ward off evil spirits, even though he cried and begged, "Mommy! Let me go!" But all he received in return was the quiet night. Through Young Boy's actions and words, it is clear that this character is an individual not fully contained by mythic belief. This recalls Shildrick's observation that, time and again, the monstrous cannot be confined to the place of the other; it is not simply alien, but arouses always the contradictory responses of denial *and* recognition, disgust *and* empathy, exclusion *and* identification⁵⁴. However, an individual cannot defeat a community (similar to the village elder in *Travelling Circus*). Young Boy is quickly targeted by the community, who seek to suppress his individual sympathy; more accurately, he is punished for daring to have a perspective and interpretation contrary to the community's.

Similar to Young Boy, Prisoner is also an individual not fully contained by mythic belief and collective imagination. This character is also incapable of saving the Young Girl from the tragedy of her life. Prisoner only teaches Young Girl how to address others, allowing her to experience love – something she did not know before but their love is not strong enough to overcome the community, or rather, to bring about the de-virtuality of the collective imagination and ultimately eliminate mythic belief. The wedding scene between Young Girl and Prisoner, presided over and witnessed by Old Man, can be seen as a moment of acknowledgment that a woman labelled as the embodiment of the devil can also love, have a family, and bear a child. However, this acknowledgment only comes from individuals on the periphery, and therefore lacks the power to affect the central community. The wedding is both a desperate attempt to cling to happiness in the face of one powerless individual's tragic life,

⁵⁴ Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (London, Thousand Oaks, and New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2002), 17.

and a testament to the enduring nature of mythic belief, which dominates the space and nourishes virtuality. From this, it can be concluded that in *Devil's Mark*, neither the individual, love, nor the alternative community on the periphery has the ability or power to dispel a mythic virtuality deeply ingrained in the community's belief.

3.2. The Female Body as the Site Where the Virtual Is Inscribed: The Birthmark as Virtual Evidence

While the central element of virtuality in *Travelling Circus* is the performance of transforming an empty basket into one full of rice, the central element of *Devil's Mark* is the birthmark on the woman's body. From a biological standpoint, this is a skin feature with no supernatural significance. However, the community shaped by collective imagination interprets the birthmark from the perspective of mythic belief. They determine the female character's fate by assigning meaning to this biological characteristic. They transform the birthmark into irrefutable evidence of what they call dangerous demonic nature for humans, thereby confirming the claim that female bodies continue to serve as a lightning rod for cultural fears and prejudices⁵⁵. It is precisely in this shift from a physical feature to a supernatural mark that virtuality operates most powerfully. Therefore, although this supernatural meaning is not real, it has the power to determine a woman's life, placing the female protagonist in a state of exclusion and condemnation and subjecting her to unwarranted punishment and violence from the community. It can be said that the birthmark in *Devil's Mark* is a typical example of *virtual evidence* produced by collective imagination.

Through the Old Man's memories and narration, viewers gain a clearer understanding of the Young Girl's life: "One morning... a villager found a baby girl floating in the ocean. She seemed like a baby from a rich family. Everyone felt sorry for her, but, when a strange mark was found on her chest. Everyone was afraid of her and became worried. This beautiful baby can't get thrown out without any reason. The mark is an ominous sign. After all, a childless couple picked up the baby and raised her. Soon, for no reason, a calamity descended upon the village. An epidemic swept the village. People died one after another. A sad and depressing atmosphere surrounded the village. They thought the baby was the cause of the trouble, and she was offered as a sacrifice for the gods."

⁵⁵ Mobley, *Female Bodies on the American Stage*, 9.

These narratives reveal why a biological feature on a human body is considered a mark of the devil. Faced with unexpected calamities that leave people helpless, they shift the blame to a third party, a subject not yet recognized as a member of their community. Through this, they recreate the past along the lines of fiction⁵⁶, to the point of myth. The story of Young Girl's life is evidence of the process Creed emphasizes that abjection does not reside in an object but in a process in which identity and order are disturbed or undermined⁵⁷. So, in this land where virtuality operates, the birthmark on Young Girl's body is transformed into virtual evidence in the community's perception and interpretation of events. It demonstrates the power and operation of mythic belief. This very belief holds the power to determine what, or more precisely, which body, is real or false, human or devil, safe or dangerous, accepted or excluded, as Judith Butler observes, the body, then, is not a prediscursive reality, but rather a locus of production, the site of contested meaning, and as such fluid and unstable, never given and fixed⁵⁸. From this, it can be seen that the virtuality in Devil's Mark is not opposed to reality; moreover, it produces reality. This virtuality lies in the way the community interprets the birthmark without the need for any temporary stage, thus making it an even more stable form and less likely to undergo de-virtuality, as clearly demonstrated by Prisoner's words when he sees the Young Girl wanting to burn her birthmark: "I see... You're a devil 'cause of the mark. But... even if you can erase it, the devil's mark... in people's minds will never be erased." This means that even if the birthmark on Young Girl's body disappears, it cannot erase the devil's mark from the collective mind of the community. Clearly, in Việt Linh's work, the mark *does not* simply refer to Young Girl's unusual physical feature or virtual evidence—evidence formed by linking a biological characteristic to an abnormal, supernatural one— but also to mythic belief itself, an imprint deeply ingrained in the community's mind and forming part of its collective imagination.

From a feminist film theory perspective, what makes the virtual evidence in *Devil's Mark* particularly dangerous is that it only appears on female bodies (Young Girl and her daughter), turning the marked female body into an anomaly⁵⁹ and an example of Creed's conception of the monstrous- feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying,

⁵⁶ Jeffrey Andrew Barash, 'Articulations of Memory: Reflections on Imagination and the Scope of Collective Memory in the Public Sphere', *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (2012): 188.

⁵⁷ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2024), 190.

⁵⁸ Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster*, 10.

⁵⁹ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 38.

horrific, abject⁶⁰; she can also be read through what Kristeva terms ‘abjection’, as a means of separating out the human from the nonhuman and the fully constituted subject from the partially formed subject⁶¹. The virtuality in *Devil’s Mark* operates as a gendered mechanism of power, even gendered violence. Therefore, the female body no longer belongs to the woman herself, but becomes a semiotic surface on which the community imposes superstitious meanings and blind beliefs. In other words, instead of being a person with human rights, the girl in the film is reduced to the body as a cultural text⁶², appropriated by the community and read according to its own will. The woman then completely loses her subjectivity, her right to define and determine her own destiny. Through everything the community sees in her and decides about her, she is reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one⁶³; that is, she undergoes objectification in Martha Nussbaum’s (1995) sense; from a feminist perspective, to be objectified means to be made into and treated as an object that can be used, manipulated, controlled, and known through its physical properties⁶⁴. The meaning of her existence is therefore produced by virtuality stemming from the community’s mythic belief; the Young Girl is completely confined within a supernatural meaning that she did not create. Therefore, Young Girl’s desire and actions to erase this mark on herself and her daughter carry a clear doubleness meaning: on the one hand, they demonstrate a yearning for a normal life, a desire for acceptance and love, but on the other hand, they are proof that virtuality truly exists and impacts human life.

The violence that the Young Girl endures does not begin with the act of marginalizing the female character. In fact, the violence begins with the interpretation of a biological feature on another individual’s body from the perspective of a community’s mythic belief. This is similar to the claim that to animalize or de-humanize a minority group in this way, of course, legitimates persecution⁶⁵. Virtuality becomes a tool to punish female existence, legitimizing the exclusion of women from the community. It legitimizes and enables violence against women by making it necessary and even justifiable. This is understandable because if the birthmark is seen as the mark of the devil, then violence is no longer perceived as violence but

⁶⁰ Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 3.

⁶¹ Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 10.

⁶² Mobley, *Female Bodies on the American Stage*, 9.

⁶³ Goffman, *Stigma*, 3.

⁶⁴ Rachel M. Calogero, Stacey Tantleff-Dunn, and J. Kevin Thompson, ‘Objectification Theory: An Introduction’, in *Self-Objectification in Women: Causes, Consequences, and Counteractions*, eds. Rachel M. Calogero, Stacey Tantleff-Dunn, and J. Kevin Thompson (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2011), 5.

⁶⁵ Sibley, *Geographies of Exclusion*, 10.

becomes a solid basis for the community's act of protecting its members from an ominous sign, a danger. Old Man's ramblings further clarify the logic of this violence: "Leprosy is a devil. The devil is leprosy. Leprosy and the devil. The devil and leprosy. Human beings are devils. The devil is a human being." The words leprosy, devil, and human appear and replace each other, blurring the lines between disease, demonic nature, and the human. However, this does not mean that leprosy, the birthmark, or the human are illusory in the sense that they do not exist; rather, virtuality lies in the way the community interprets these terms.

3.3. Bloodline and the Reproduction of Virtuality

While Đác's younger sister functions as the trigger that causes the virtuality in *Travelling Circus* to collapse, meaning it is demystified, the detail that the child born to the Young Girl in *Devil's Mark* still bears the same birthmark as her mother is what prolongs the existence of the virtuality within the community. The birthmark is no longer simply proof of the mother-child relationship; through the community's interpretation and perspective, the child's birthmark becomes solid evidence of the inheritance and transmission of demonic nature. In Grosz's language, the child's body is marked by the history and specificity of its existence⁶⁶, in this case, by the mother's marked body. However, it needs to be clarified that the birthmark itself does not reproduce demonic nature; what is reproduced is the community's interpretation of the birthmark as a sign of demonic nature transmitted through bloodline, allowing the community's stigma to continue to fall upon the child. Discussing stigma, Goffman points out three types:

First there are abominations of the body-the various physical deformities. Next there are blemishes of individual character perceived [...] Finally there are the tribal stigma of race, nation, and religion, these being stigma that can be transmitted through lineages and equally contaminate all members of a family.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 142.

⁶⁷ Goffman, *Stigma*, 4.

The child, consequently, is a body stigmatized due to its connection to the mother's lineages and family. This means that the collective imagination in the film continues to be extended, and mythic beliefs continue to be repeated.

After seeing her daughter still bearing the birthmark, the Young Girl uses a burning piece of wood to burn away the mark. This act by Young Girl should be seen as an outburst after prolonged repression and oppression, a desperate reaction from a mother who has lived a tragic life. The child's birthmark clearly has the potential to reactivate pre-existing superstitious beliefs, recalling the claim that there is also the important role of the imagination in executive functions of the mind: drawing upon past experiences as a basis for future decisions⁶⁸. The child, therefore, not only inherits the same birthmark as her mother but also risks suffering the same fate in the future: violence and discrimination, fear and exclusion, blind belief, and the powerful influence of collective imagination and communal power. The virtuality of demonic nature in *Devil's Mark*, instead of being dispelled, is extended through generations, from one space-time to another, transforming from a single, individual punishment into a larger, inherited, reproduced, and continuing form of punishment. The film ends with Young Girl being placed on a raft and set adrift at sea, just as the sea brought her to the village. This ending may be a release from the Young Girl's tragic life, but it is only temporary – short-term – for one person. Meanwhile, the enduring – long-term – cycle for many people, or rather many women, begins on another girl, another body, but still with the same birthmark, the same mark, the same old mechanism of operation. Bloodline is no longer a family connection but is seen by the community as the basis of evil and misfortune. In other words, bloodlines do not create virtuality on their own; it is the collective imagination of the community that transforms biological repetition into demonic repetition. This is the most important turning point demonstrating that virtuality in *Devil's Mark* is no longer a single, temporary event as in *Travelling Circus*, but rather a self-reproducing structure.

In *Travelling Circus*, virtuality is constructed and operates through performance, poverty, individual desires, and the desires of an entire community, thus showing collective imagination as a gateway through which the community temporarily enters another reality. In *Devil's Mark*, however, it originates from mythic belief, operating through community interpretation and, notably, it can be reproduced through the logic of bloodline. Therefore, when compared to the virtuality in *Travelling Circus*, the virtuality in *Devil's Mark* is clearly

⁶⁸ Hedley, *Living Forms of the Imagination*, 42.

more stable and more durable existence. In *Travelling Circus*, virtuality collapses as the community withdraws its enchanted gaze or rather, as they gradually escape the enchanted state. But in *Devil's Mark*, virtuality is internalized; it permeates and completely occupies collective memory and community thought, thereby powerfully influencing how people perceive and interpret everything around them. Overall, *Devil's Mark* not only shows a stable virtuality, but through the child bearing the same birthmark as the mother, it also indicates that the body is not outside of history, for it is produced through and in history⁶⁹, meaning that the virtuality has the ability to repeat and reproduce itself.

4. Conclusion

Through the analysis of two films by Vietnamese director Việt Linh, *Travelling Circus* and *Devil's Mark*, this article concludes that virtuality does not only exist in the context of digital technology. Instead, virtuality existed even before the development of digital technology as we know it today. Furthermore, from an analytical perspective, comparing the two works by director Việt Linh reveals that virtuality takes many forms with different characteristics: temporary or stable, fragile or enduring, incapable of self-reproduction or capable of self-reproduction.

In *Travelling Circus*, virtuality becomes a temporary reality co-constructed by many elements, from human elements (villagers, circus performers) to non-human elements (performances, living conditions). Therefore, the virtuality in this film cannot exist independently without the community's gaze, the performance that transforms an empty basket into one full of rice, a cruel reality that the villagers cannot overcome, and especially collective imagination. At the end of *Travelling Circus*, the de-virtuality proves its power to enchant and affect society, but its long-term viability remains fragile. In contrast, the virtuality in *Devil's Mark* is far more enduring, operating according to a completely different logic. It does not require the combination of external apparatuses and internal desires; it is deeply ingrained in communal consciousness, the order and functioning of society, and its social functioning. Consequently, the community in the film does not live according to truth but according to a closed system of mythic and superstitious belief, influencing how they perceive, interpret, and understand the world. Therefore, the birthmark on the female body, under the collective gaze,

⁶⁹ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 148.

becomes a mark of the devil, even though it is merely a biological characteristic. Most notably, the virtuality in *Devil's Mark* does not remain confined to one individual and other spatio-temporal contexts; it can reproduce and continue its life in other individuals and spatio-temporal contexts through bloodline.

From this perspective, the article concludes that Việt Linh's two films offer a broader understanding of virtuality, transcending digital technology. Virtuality is not, in fact, opposed to reality; rather, it is one of the mechanisms that create reality, sometimes becoming either a temporary form of reality or a more enduring and lasting one. In *Travelling Circus*, the unreal represents hope for a brighter future, a way for the community to temporarily escape the reality of poverty. In *Devil's Mark*, although the unreal creates virtual evidence, the force of that evidence is real; it is also the root cause of violence in society. Clearly, the unreal remains unreal, but its impact becomes real once it is believed in by the community and given the power to shape social order. Thus, virtuality is not only, and does not necessarily have to be, a virtual space or an effect necessarily tied to digital technology, but virtuality can also be a psychological mechanism that exists in the consciousness of an individual or a particular community.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barash, Jeffrey Andrew, 'Articulations of Memory: Reflections on Imagination and the Scope of Collective Memory in the Public Sphere', *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (2012): 183–195.

Bryant, Antony, and Griselda Pollock, 'Editors' Introduction', in *Digital and Other Virtualities: Renegotiating the Image*, edited by Antony Bryant and Griselda Pollock, 1–21, London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010.

Calogero, Rachel M., Stacey Tantleff-Dunn, and J. Kevin Thompson, 'Objectification Theory: An Introduction', in *Self-Objectification in Women: Causes, Consequences, and Counteractions*, edited by Rachel M. Calogero, Stacey Tantleff-Dunn, and J. Kevin Thompson, 3–21, Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2011.

Creed, Barbara, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, 2nd ed. London and New York: Routledge, 2024.

Douglas, Mary, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London and New York: Routledge, 2001.

During, Simon, *Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2002.

Frankel, Richard, and Victor J. Krebs, *Human Virtuality and Digital Life: Philosophical and Psychoanalytic Investigations*, London and New York: Routledge, 2022.

Gehmann, Ulrich, 'The Frame Context', in *Real Virtuality: About the Destruction and Multiplication of World*, edited by Ulrich Gehmann and Martin Reiche, 21–43, Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2014.

Glăveanu, Vlad Petre, Maciej Karwowski, Dorota M. Jankowska, and Constance de Saint-Laurent, 'Creative Imagination', in *Handbook of Imagination and Culture*, edited by Tania Zittoun and Vlad Petre Glăveanu, 61–86, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

Goffman, Erving, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986.

Goffman, Erving, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963.

Grosz, Elizabeth, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1994.

Hedley, Douglas, *Living Forms of the Imagination*, London and New York: T&T Clark International, 2008.

Ichino, Anna, 'Superstitious–magical imaginings', *Analysis*, Vol. 85, No. 1 (2025): 68–78.

Mobley, Jennifer-Scott, *Female Bodies on the American Stage: Enter Fat Actress*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Ryan, Marie-Laure, 'Virtuality', in *Critical Terms in Futures Studies*, edited by Heike Paul, 335–341, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

Schechner, Richard, *Performance Theory*, rev. and expanded ed., London and New York: Routledge, 2003.

Shields, Rob, *The Virtual*, London and New York: Routledge, 2003.

Shildrick, Margrit, *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self*, London, Thousand Oaks, and New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2002.

Sibley, David, *Geographies of Exclusion: Society and Difference in the West*, London and New York: Routledge, 2003.

Zittoun, Tania, and Adeline Rosenstein, 'Theater and Imagination to (Re)Discover Reality', in *Handbook of Imagination and Culture*, edited by Tania Zittoun and Vlad Petre Glăveanu, 223–242, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

Zittoun, Tania, and Vlad Petre Glăveanu, 'Imagination at the Frontiers of Psychology', in *Handbook of Imagination and Culture*, edited by Tania Zittoun and Vlad Petre Glăveanu, 1–15, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.