



Sustainable Nostalgia to Dystopian Future: Toward a Tropical Transnational Ecocinema in *Mekong 2030*

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Abstract

In recent commercial films and TV series about the Mekong River, depictions of natural landscapes tend to be associated with past stories and settings incorporating tropical aesthetics and poetic countryside. Although likewise presenting a nostalgia for the Mekong, the art-house film anthology *Mekong 2030* (2020) intersects the green past with dystopian futures. A project of the Luang Prabang Film Festival, this anthology brought together five directors representing the Mekong countries of Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand. By analyzing *Mekong 2030* from the perspectives of sustainable nostalgia (ecological nostalgia) and critical memory studies, this paper evaluates the representation of the Mekong River in popular culture. In contrast to mainstream films, in the *Mekong 30* project, the issue of evoking eco-memory (through landscapes, traditions, heritage, etc.) is not to reassure or lull viewers but, on the contrary, to awaken eco-emotions/eco-awareness and contribute to promoting ecological action. From an anthology consistently sharing the same approach from five different personal and national perspectives, this essay identifies the potential of a tropical transnational ecocinema that will contribute to solving the increasingly tense environmental problems of the Mekong during this era of both climatic and environmental impacts and the explosion of global media and visual culture.

Keywords: sustainable nostalgia, ecological nostalgia, dystopian tropical futures, eco-emotion, Mekong countries, tropical transnational ecocinema

Introduction

As the longest river in Southeast Asia, the Mekong profoundly influences the cultural, spiritual, economic, and social life of the countries it passes through. In terms of climate, the Mekong is a “tropical river system” (Vu et al., 2022, p. 721), in large part running through the “tropical monsoon region” (Adamson et al., 2010) of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. It possesses a unique ecological-cultural system that has “a high degree of diversity, both among the region’s ethnic people and its flora and fauna” (Eyler, 2019, p. 21). However, recently, the tropical ecosystems and livelihoods of the Mekong riverine and delta countries have been severely threatened by continuous droughts with an unprecedented loss of biodiversity due to “low river levels caused by extremely low rainfall” and “the lack of forest cover” (p. 87). Due to the vast number of hydroelectric dams that are constructed along the river (Le, 2007), the Mekong has had “devastating effects on migratory fish patterns and the livelihoods of local fisherman” and has been the primary catalyst to “force the resettlement of hundreds of thousands of people” (Eyler, 2019, p. 24). Paradoxically, along with prolonged drought, the Mekong Delta is predicted to suffer from unforeseen, heavy flooding and be submerged by 2050, and thus this most significant rice bowl in tropical Mekong countries like Vietnam and Cambodia will have been engulfed. (Le, 2007, p. 110–116; Denise, 2019).

Nevertheless, conventionally, the image of the Mekong deltaic and riverine countries appearing in commercial films and television dramas—especially those with a tourism promotional slant—seem to reside outside the aforementioned real developments. In recent years, in commercial films or TV series about the Mekong landscape, depictions of the natural scenery tend to be associated with past stories and settings incorporating tropical aesthetics interwoven with poetic countryside. For example, the splendid caves, mountains, and rivers in the animated film *Raya and the Last Dragon* (dirs. Don Hall & Carlos López Estrada, 2021) evoke the rich rice civilizations across Southeast Asia from prehistoric times; the wild forests and vast fields in the historical drama *Song of the South [Đất Rừng Phương Nam]* (dir. Nguyen Quang Dung, 2023) are always linked to life in the lower Mekong in the 1950s; and the idyllic riverscapes of the TV series *Mekong* (dir. Oliver Bever, 2023) aim to recreate the late 1960s in a Mekong riverside village in Thailand. In the context of rapid urbanization in Southeast Asia, beholding these tranquil landscapes of the past is a way for viewers to “escape from the everyday routine,” away from the stressful pace of life and the currently polluted atmosphere (Vagionis, 2011, p. 359).

Not only are Mekong landscapes used as a tranquil backdrop, but these types of films also tend to highlight exotic and traditional local customs, such as “Naga fireballs” and “insects eating” in the semi-documentary styled Thai comedy-drama *Mekhong Full*

Moon Party (dir. Jira Maligool, 2002); or they employ the Mekong as a wild adventure setting, such as in the thriller film *River* (Jamie M. Dagg, 2015) set in Southern Laos, or as the backdrop for a tense secret river crossing between Laos and Thailand by lovers in the adventure drama *Love Is Forever* (dir. Hall Bartlett, 1982); or an epic rescue operation by the Chinese Anti-Narcotics Unit in the Golden Triangle region in the crime action film *Operation Mekong* (dir. Dante Lam, 2016). In such films, the natural spaces of the Mekong become the backdrop for narrative development (mostly love stories and those glorifying cultural-historical traditions). The realities of Mekong landscapes—submerged by river water, impacted by climate change, or disaffected by government policies—are not mentioned or noticed; instead, the Mekong is depicted as beautified, and its landscapes eternalized as if they would last forever.

Conversely, without the pressure to appease and attract the public, as commercial films must, art-house collective films have their own approach to directly address environmental issues in the Mekong (especially the phenomena of unusual floods, droughts, biodiversity decline due to rising temperatures, hydroelectric dam construction, and deforestation in Mekong tropical countries). In November 2019, the 26th meeting of the Mekong River Commission (MRC) Council was held in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, to discuss solutions to urgent issues in the Mekong sub-region (such as water resource management and finding alternative energy sources to hydropower). Immediately afterward, in 2020, the Luang Prabang Film Festival (LPFF) launched the *Mekong 2030* project—an art-house independent anthology with deep anxieties about the dystopian futures of the Mekong River, made by five directors from five Mekong countries. The anthology comprises *Soul River*, directed by Kulikar Sotho of Cambodia; *The Che Brother*, by director Anysay Keola of Laos; *The Forgotten Voices of the Mekong*, under the direction of Sai Naw Kham for Myanmar; *The Line*, by director Anocha Suwichakornpong of Thailand; and *The Unseen River*, directed by Pham Ngoc Lan representing Vietnam.¹

In general, all five films in the anthology share visions about the ecological vulnerability of the localities due to the overuse of resources and climate change, as well as fears of an impending apocalypse. The unique point here is the reaction of the *Mekong 2030* directors to the “natural nostalgia” filmmaking formula of commercial films and television dramas about the Mekong; instead of romanticized “natural nostalgia,” they

¹ As a generation of young directors who often make independent art films with the potential to spread regional values to the world, these five directors were selected by the curator of LPFF to make five films from their national perspective without being pressured by ticket sales. They were free to experiment with their unique and creative artistic perspectives to more clearly and decisively respond to the increasingly serious environmental problems of the Mekong. The anthology focuses on the problems of the Mekong in Southeast Asian countries (as well as tropical countries downstream). The Mekong section flowing through those five countries has a delta with a warm climate, which distinguishes it from the section flowing from the Tibetan Plateau, where the water originates from snowy mountains, with a cold climate.

employ a “sustainable nostalgia” or “ecological nostalgia” that bears a strong inquiring nature.

If natural nostalgia in commercial films and television dramas is to make viewers forget reality, lull them, and freeze the flow of time (which is also the flow of life), the sustainable nostalgia strongly present in *Mekong 2030* is meant to make viewers see that everything is being lost very quickly, worry about the future, and reveal the potential for restoration. Here, the issue of evoking ecological memory through film is to stir emotions and the responsibility of people towards the ecosystem, to envision a post-apocalyptic future, and to take timely action. According to Uekötter, environmental memories “are not necessarily verbal, as they may be hidden in habits, routines, or iconic images” (Uekötter, 2011, p. 1). These memories are fragmented, multifaceted, and incoherent—because they are scattered in life, throughout visual culture, and in each person’s mind. Hence, if ecocriticism “describes its preferred future in terms of sustainability, as it must, then environmentalism enters into nostalgia, and the characteristics of nostalgic thinking will affect the shape of that future” (Davies, 2010, p. 265). Thus, a “sustainable nostalgia” can “shape that future” of the natural world in the way that it preserves and recreates memories of that world—including through cinematic narrative and presentation. Within nostalgia, there is construction and imagination; it is a fascinating interweaving of human mental existence: “Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s fantasy” (Boym, 2002, p. xiii). Therefore, with *Mekong 2030*, it is not an easy task to separate the nostalgia for the beautiful past of the Mekong River from the imagination of its impending and uncertain future. In other words, through its unique cinematic language, “a cinematic image of nostalgia is a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images—of home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life” (p. xiv)

The mechanism of this “shaping the future,” in our analysis, is first of all through the mechanism of eco-emotion because “fondly remembered, nostalgia does represent a potentially strong ‘motivator’ for environmental policy and governance decisions” (Howell et al., 2019, p. 305) Similarly, while speaking about the role of ecological cinema in environmental activism in general, Anysay Keola (director of *Soul River*) asserts: “Other movements can offer solutions, but when working with the medium of film, I want the audience to feel emotionally motivated.” As the curator of the film anthology for the Luang Prabang Film Festival notes, from ecological emotions, filmmakers hope to “raise awareness among international audiences for the issues addressed in the films” (Mathew, 2019).

Davies aptly explains:

Sustainability describes the search for a form of collective continuity at the level of popular culture and behavior.... The dream of sustainability, I want to argue, is a nostalgia for the future. (Davies, 2010, p. 265)

From a similar perspective, the *Mekong 30* anthology is aimed towards viewers who are also consumers and directly affected by the images/stories in the films—those who coexist with and utilize the environment every day. The value of the anthology is to create a collective memory, a sustainable nostalgia, for the Mekong tropical countries at this time when globalization, technologization, and virtualization are transpiring at a dizzying speed (accompanied by climate change and environmental degradation), sweeping away the depth of their customs, traditions, and cultural identities.

Literature and Media Representation

As Tami Banh wrote in “Maps in the making of the Mekong Delta,” although there have been many studies on the ecological transformations associated with the socio-cultural landscape of the Mekong River, “few studies have focused on the role of representation” (Banh, 2022, p. 243). Among these few, the book *Finding the Voice of the River* (Brierley, 2020) can be listed. Brierley draws on diverse perspectives, such as Māori philosophies from New Zealand, to underscore the interconnectedness between humans and rivers. Delving deeper into the legal and ethical aspects of environmental protection, the author explores the intrinsic value of rivers beyond their utilitarian functions, emphasizing their ecological, cultural, and spiritual significance (Brierley, 2020). Similarly, but focusing on the perspective of Mekong literature, Ribó and Calzolari provide an important review of environmental cultures in the upper Mekong basin, aiming to “explore the effects of social and cultural changes on the capacity of human communities to sustain themselves and their environments” (Ribó & Calzolari, 2020, p. 65)

Also making use of literary data but leaning towards “ecopoetics,” the essay titled “Hydropoetics: The rewor(l)ding of rivers” by John Charles Ryan explores the concept of hydropoetics as a framework for understanding human-water relations and the significance of rivers from cultural, social, and spiritual perspectives (Ryan, 2021, p. 65-107). From the perspective of critical cartography, Tami Banh analyzes the history of representing the Mekong Delta landscape and the power relations hidden within it through five ways of mapping nature, these are surveyed nature, engineered nature, militarized nature, and inherited nature (Banh, 2022, p. 47-258). Meanwhile, studies of the Mekong Delta, following the traditional “sword-bearing pioneering” narrative of Vietnamese literature, often emphasize “tolerance of many forms of beliefs and religions simultaneously” and the worship of supernatural forces to overcome the fear of wild nature (Phan A., 2010, tr. 26-31). The above studies have generally applied diverse perspectives of cultural studies and ecocriticism to approach the Mekong River

issue. However, the data is primarily drawn from literature and folklore. Almost no literature focuses on the study of the representation of the Mekong in contemporary visual culture (particularly cinema) from an intertemporal perspective.

By inheriting from, and engaging in dialogue with, existing literature research based on connecting critical memory studies with ecomedia, and through a comparative approach between the five directors and five national cinemas in the *Mekong 2030* anthology, this essay focuses on two seemingly opposing concepts: ecological memory and the imagination of a dystopian future of the Mekong ecosystem and Mekong tropical countries. By evaluating the impact of eco-emotion and eco-consciousness caused by these two concepts on viewers, the authors of this essay appreciate the ability of transnational ecocinema arthouse films to question the limitations of commercial films and television dramas (films that always romanticize and commercialize the local natural landscape on screen and cause long-term harm through misperceptions of environmental issues among the public).

Sustainable Nostalgia and Dystopian Futurism

The first important point in this anthology is that despite having different national approaches, all five directors condense the past and the future into a present, actual state of being while blurring the lines between the three tenses. Simultaneously in imagining a dystopian future² (which, due to the nature of cinematic language, transforms all imaginations and intentions into narratives in the present continuous tense), the filmmakers also undertake a “co-present” journey into the green past. The interesting thing in this anthology is that, through the reversal of time and the “presentification” of every cinematic moment, all five films show a future existing right before our eyes, right-now. At the same time, the past and present are invisible, existing only in dreams, imagination, and nostalgia.

By presenting the imagination/memory layers of tropical Mekong countries in the form of overlapping seen and unseen landscapes, the five films in this anthology paint “multiple modes of documentation and layers of cinematic reality into uneasy rapport.” (Campion, 2020, p. 43). Two seemingly opposite dimensions are tightly bound together in a feeling of “unpicturesque,” deep contrast, “uncanniness,” “uneasiness,” inconspicuousness, and especially, counter-ethnofiction. We can observe this type of “co-presence” through the following table:

² “Today, it often seems that the dystopian future has already arrived; the reality itself evokes dystopian imagination: the global warming and the catastrophes, the monstrous underside of various technologies that would ultimately over-power us – humans.” (Vrbancic, 2022, p.31)

Movies in anthology	Future, in the present tense (seen landscape)	Past (unseen landscape)
<i>Soul River</i> (Cambodia)	No more fish, environmental migration, community disintegration; Tropical forests desolate, withered, unusual floods; People selling cultural heritage; Due to rising temperatures, the climate is hot and stuffy.	Khmer civilization is reflected along the Mekong River in deep forests; Community living by fishing. Living in harmony with nature, and flood seasons, thanks to the tropical forest;
<i>The Che Brother</i> (Laos)	Empty nets, no fish, epidemics spreading. Selling the river's blood to "cure diseases," is a vicious cycle; Family values are disintegrating; the intimate connection between humans and nature is disintegrating; there is moral decay.	Fishing profession, fertile tropical forests, clear blue river; The idea of saving the world, living with nature as a "mother."
<i>The Forgotten Voices of the Mekong</i> (Myanmar)	Corporations mining gold on the river pollute water, harm human and animal health, and block future generations; Peripheral "government" power from above, overwhelming and imposing on Indigenous knowledge, turning them into a minority; Young and old are disconnected, individuals and communities are disconnected, unable to find connection, and have ecophobia.	Lush tropical herbs, the river nurturing the Akha community, creating their unique culture; Green forests and hills surround them; their bodies and souls are healthy. They have nature and God's blessings, giving them peace.
<i>The Line</i> (Thailand)	Suffocating, polluted city, indigenous landscapes touristified, transformed into a simulated world; People are unable to connect with nature and are helpless to preserve it; Sacredness disappears, empty and lost in the modern work society in the city.	Animism, worship of plants, creatures, the river; Pervasive sacredness, people respecting nature, cherishing the river and the forest. People communicate directly with nature and the supernatural (as in Thai tradition), they have spiritual support.
<i>The Unseen River</i> (Vietnam)	Harsh flood season, young people are empty, traumatized, unable to see the future; The dam becomes absolute violence, changing the flow of the river and people's lives; it disintegrates; A dystopian future is a no-future.	The river is family, memories, love, youth, faith, inner peace, dreams, the subconscious and the unconscious. All creatures harmonize and rely on each other, flowing with the currents of nature.

The main plot of *Soul River* (Cambodia) revolves around an Angkor statue picked up in the forest by Klark and Sok (migrating rangers), who fight over it and then take it to sell together. The fierce struggle between the two hot-tempered and aggressive characters, from within the dying forest to the vast muddy Mekong, under the scorching sun of global warming, while on both banks remain the silent Angkor

temples...All evoke a poignant reminder of the glorious Khmer civilization on the banks of the Mekong—the pride of Cambodian communities for generations. Sok himself laments: “800 years ago, a Khmer civilization, stretching all the way to Myanmar, Laos, Thailand.” At that point, the past unfolds as a thriving tropical forest region, where indigenous people have coexisted with the floods for generations by using such tricks as “measuring the color of the gecko’s tail,” by understanding and relying on the jungle, crops, and by fishing. In the past, the connection between people and nature, between people and gods/beliefs/culture (which has been broken in the future) always blended into one, sacred and potent. The indigenous community and the river coexisted peacefully and harmoniously, maintaining stability for each other.

Conversely, the world of 2030 begins with a panoramic shot from above, showing a desolate tropical forest, ancient trees fallen and withered, leaving only sparse young trees under the harsh sunlight. In that sparse, withered forest with a post-apocalyptic hue, the shadow of a man (Klark) searching for food becomes small and weary, as we see no potential in this resource-depleted world. Then, through voiceover, we understand that the change in the laws of nature (floods no longer seasonal but occurring year-round) has caused environmental destruction here. The people in the community, who have lived for generations relying on the forest and the river, hunting and fishing, now have to migrate, becoming scattered everywhere. The forest and river have been encroached upon and exploited in the hope that the country will “develop” more. Nevertheless, development has not yet arrived—as the farmer Klark says—“I do not see it anywhere.” As the film closes, the viewer only sees mourning for the past and despair for the future-present (2030) of the impoverished people on the river.

Similarly, *The Che Brother* (Laos) also begins with a double symbolic image: an image “splitting” the two spaces of Laos: a “future” Laos with a modern city, skyscrapers, high-speed trains, and utterly devoid of nature; a past Laos with the green of vegetation, with rice paddies, countryside, and villages. On that “dividing road,” Xe—a final-year student with the ideals of the Marxist Che Guevara³ (representing the younger generation of socialist Laos)—is traveling from the city to his home village by the Mekong River. In short order, he is shocked to witness the apocalyptic state of the (once) very prosperous and beautiful village: a spreading epidemic, fish in the river depleted, empty nets and a dead fishing profession, and his older brother having coerced their mother into selling her blood to a Western corporation (on the grounds of facilitating vaccine research).

Driven by the spirit of “Let the world change you, or you can change the world,” this young revolutionary enthusiastically saves the situation. However, after helping his

³ Che Guevara (1928-1967) was “a theoretician and tactician of guerrilla warfare, a prominent communist figure in the Cuban Revolution” (Sinclair, 2024)

sister rescue their mother from their greedy brother, Xe is heartbroken to see his mother being further exploited for blood by his sister and her team of blood collectors. Xe cannot resist his sister's argument, "Because our family is poor and I have to support your education, I have to make money this way." Therefore, pursuing a fight till the end, regardless of obstacles like Che Guevara did (through revolutionary violence), is something Xe cannot do. In the final two scenes, when touching his mother and the river, Xe's gestures are almost like those of repentance and helplessness, because he cannot go beyond arguments with his brother and sister, witnessing his mother's blood (or the natural resources of the Mekong) continuing to be drained by corporations.

In terms of *mise-en-scène*, at the end of the film, initially, from a high-angle shot, the film opens up to our imagination of a beautiful past with a vast, warm, and prosperous countryside; the abundant river filled with fish and shrimp that nourish the people; and the immense green forest. However, as the camera gradually lowers, we are immediately returned to the harsh "future" (or present), and the image of the older sister's truck traveling on the winding road, carrying their mother and the blood-collecting team. It seems that nostalgia and imagination are tightly intertwined in every moment, past and future, creating intense contrasting ecological emotions. As such, *The Che Brother* expresses the simultaneous disintegration of family and ecological ethics in the era of globalization.

Addressing the same dilemma as in the two films above, in *The Forgotten Voices of the Mekong* (Myanmar), the co-presence of a bleak, dark future, with a "green past," focuses on the story of intergenerational disconnection in the Akha community along the Mekong River. The conflict revolves around how the old and the young interact with Mother Nature.

In 2030, the Akha community is immersed in a dystopian world after they agreed to exchange their river and forests for the "development" promised by a corporation. It is a place where primeval hills are shaved bare, native plants disappear, the river is biologically polluted, people are desperate, and the community is divided. The tragedy begins when Charles, the new village leader, goes to the city, meets a representative of a gold mining company, and signs a contract for a project by the Mekong River, "making a better life" for the Akha people and "for Myanmar people." Despite fierce opposition from the old woman, who is experienced and carries the wisdom of indigenous knowledge: "That is not how we live, as farmers cultivating crops, we rely on nature, which gives us food.... If the Mekong dies, how will we survive?", Charles still persuades (and directs) the villagers to accept the project. When the project becomes a reality, the river, contaminated with waste from the gold mine, begins to kill people (first and foremost children) and creatures near it. At the end of the film,

during the funeral of a young girl victim, the chanting of prayers echoes mournfully: Even God cannot do anything more to help them in this ecological and cultural crisis.

The most paradoxical point here is that, with the help of some long shots, through scenes of still water and idyllic riverbanks, the entire desolate situation makes the characters reminisce even more strongly about a peaceful past of living in reliance on the Mekong. One of the most “healing” and gentle shots in this film full of conflicts and tragedies is when the granddaughter escorts her grandmother for a walk by the river beside the green hill, listening to her tell stories about her deceased husband while persuading her to “reconcile” and understand the village leader’s good intentions. The Mekong, then, is not merely a place for survival; it is also the source of love, family, and community connection and a place that forms the unique cultural identity of the Akha people.

It can be said that the collage-like structure and the co-presence of past, present, and future create a sense of disturbance, separation, and helplessness, like a stark warning to the younger generation of the Akha community (as well as Myanmar) as Mother River is dying.

Continuing this theme, in *The Line* (Thailand), director Anocha sketches a future where the digital environment strongly challenges the ecological knowledge and Indigenous beliefs of the Thai Mekong people. The film emphasizes the decline of Indigenous cultural identity and the crisis of existence, where the world no longer exists in and of itself, but has become a simulated entity molded by social media powers.

The film begins with a video art piece about the Mekong River in 2030, structured like a tour introduction (in Chinese), in which the image of the river is estranged in an inverted manner, with a couple turning their backs to the viewer and moving through the space like characters experiencing a role-playing game. On the surface, this simulated tour seems to have found a relatively modern, impressive, and timely way to connect the nature of the tropical Mekong with the public—through digital media and visual art. However, the layering of images (especially with the brilliant sunset, the magical riverbank, and the splendid water patterns spilling onto the screen) and the melodious voiceover (in Chinese) evoke a sense of the popular tours for Chinese tourists currently widespread in Southeast Asia.

In the latter part of the film, interspersed with the story of two tired women (the gallery managers where the Mekong ecology exhibition is taking place) are images of a dusty, crowded, cramped Bangkok immersed in a stifling atmosphere, where human senses are hardened, and instincts and intuition are diminished (“My body is a wreck. I do not get to sleep”). Physical contact—direct interactions between humans and nature—is

minimized in this film, giving way to visualizations, imaginations, and recreations through images, symbols, and abstract, conventional spaces.

In that future devoid of and distant from nature, the director tries to lead viewers back to the tradition of object-oriented ontology and animism⁴ of the indigenous Thai people through Henri Bergson's concept of timelessness (1910). Nostalgia for the worship of plants, Thai animism, vast green shores, and dense forests find almost no connection to the image of the metropolis of Bangkok. The nostalgia for the sacred connection between ecology and beliefs/religion becomes increasingly poignant as the film closes, and the future human stands bewildered in front of a blank wall and an emotionless room.

In the final film of the anthology, and consistent with the four films above, *The Unseen River* (Vietnam), directed by Pham Ngoc Lan, chooses a "double time travel," both retrospective and futuristic about Vietnam, by connecting people in different dimensions with the soul of the Mekong.

On the Mekong, two pairs of characters journey: an older couple travels downstream, seeking to rediscover lost memories of love near a massive hydroelectric dam. In comparison, a younger couple travels upstream, searching for advice and a cure for insomnia.

In the future world (2030), industry, modernity, and urbanity cast a large shadow over the river (represented by the constant movement of large and small ships), creating noise and the sparkling of lights day and night (through the echoes of the city across the river). The river never really rests, and the local landscape truly becomes scenery to "glide past," to be purchased for entertainment, as a backdrop for life far away (cities), rather than for "dwelling," for living, for connection. Here, capital and industrial development always accompany the continuous reshaping and transformation of the landscape in the direction of socialism of the Vietnamese state. "Along with the flowing river, images of dikes, large dams, and cargo ships all represent national power" (Thanh, 2024, author's translation). Furthermore, the construction of the hydroelectric projects, in a sense, represents the process of landscape restructuring and the imposition of violence upon nature in the name of economic and communal benefits. This violence, in turn, oppresses and deprives each individual's livelihood, just as it created unusual floods and took the lives of residents, snatched the youth of an older woman and the peaceful sleep of a young man.

On the contrary, in the traditional and past-oriented direction, the film takes viewers into an old dream, with a temple and a towering Buddha statue, calmly witnessing life's ups and downs around the raging river. From a national perspective, Buddhism in the

⁴ In Thai folk belief, "nature is strongly linked to spirit belief: all natural beings have a soul, a spirit, and can thus connect to the human world." (Boehler, 2011, p. 301).

film is linked to the Vietnamese people's simplicity and harmony, where the monk is a "life teacher" (played by Mac Can, a Vietnamese comedian) and the novice. This man lost his wife and children to the flood and seeks refuge in the pagoda. Director Pham delves into the river's ontological ecological memory: the generous flow that nourishes fish and humans; the creatures that find a peaceful, safe life by the river (like the little dog); and the vast, endless tropical forests.

From the reverse direction of the past and the future on the same ecological entity of the Mekong, we can see the "short circuit" in spatial awareness, the discontinuity of sensory perception, when the characters begin to awaken and search for the precious, sacred things they are losing. Inherently forever beset by rules, laws, rationality, and practicality, they need to be awakened to the ability to experience the magical, invisible, metaphysical world, which once helped their souls to be balanced and healed.

In general, from the deep regret of the green and indigenous past (and sometimes national heritage) about the Mekong, all five films simultaneously remind people to quickly seek solutions to restore those memories to repair the dystopian present and future. From there, people will desire to revive, hold on to, and represent what has been lost in many different ways, through the mind, dreams, stories, movies, art, etc.

Thus, the anthology itself forms a holistic logic, moving from rational awareness, to ecological emotions, to aesthetic solutions for the Mekong's eco-issues; from brutal realism to romanticism and surrealism – the entire anthology is a way of visualizing the Mekong issue as a whole entity. *Soul River* evokes the disintegration of the relationship between nature and culture surrounding the Mekong, as a foretold loss of the soul of the sacred river, the Mother River; *Che Brother* suggests the primary cause: the overexploitation by the Mekong's people of the life-giving river that nurtures them (selling the Mother River's blood); *Forgotten Voice* suggests a more specific cause: the brutal intervention of capitalist corporations into the river, causing severe pollution of water/soil resources, disrupting the balance and sustainable development of the indigenous community and the Mekong's natural resources. *The Line* presents a fantastical solution, using art to contain all the beauty, vitality, and cultural depth within contemporary art's frames and multi-dimensional spaces, listening to the inherent spirit of all things as one listens to the polyphony of life in minimalist aesthetic expressions. Finally, *The Unseen River* observes everything with the omniscient eye of God, of the Buddha from above, placing humanity in its smallness, including its powerlessness, beside the river as an eternal, infinite symbol of time. Through this, humans become lighter and humbler, knowing who they are beside Mother Nature, respecting this eternity and serenity to continue their journey in their destiny. The river connects indigenous narratives horizontally, connecting the timeline vertically, from which the story of the past is always part of the story of the future. It is a cinematic

representation of nostalgia, which is “a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life.” (Boym, p. xiv)

Thus, the purpose and nature of environmental narratives are to create emotions directed towards the more-than-human⁵ world (which we call eco-emotions)—in this case, the ecosystems of the Mekong tropical countries—which are being severely affected by global warming, as well as the impacts of industrialization, urbanization, and globalization. This so-called eco-affection brings us back to the impact mechanism on audiences that Aristotle outlined in *Poetics: catharsis*—“the purification or purgation of the emotions” (Chauhan, 2024). According to Berndtson, the theory of catharsis “has a disarming affinity with the expressional theory, since it emphasizes emotion, asserts a change in emotion as a result of aesthetic operations” (Berndtson, 1975, p. 235). The narrativization, the retelling, or the mimesis of the dire present or the prediction of the bleak future of environmental disaster can create feelings of fear, pity, and even awakening of the very children of the river (humans), who have depended on it and exploited it for thousands of years. All five films in the anthology engage with this “catharsis” technique in different ways, in particular, by sketching a dystopian world (with a loss of faith and connection to the sacredness of life and rejection and alienation from nature) and by taking a reverse psychological journey—returning to the green memories of the generous and benevolent Mother Mekong.

Transnational Ecocinema: Collective Memory of Mekong Countries

To mention, nostalgia refers to identity. However, from an ecological perspective, the five aforementioned nations’ diverse yet unified cultural identity stems from one Mother River: the Mekong. Therefore, the interconnected narrative of the five countries and five directors, forming a collective memory and a common thinking/imagination of one future, is a critical connection to ecological action to protect the Mekong.

Concerning ecological aesthetics, which is also “nostalgia” for the landscape and environment of the Mekong River, the sustainable nostalgia in *Mekong 2030* contrasts with the romanticized and beautified nature nostalgia in commercial films of the same period in Asia, which we mentioned in section 2. The filmmakers of *Mekong 2030* are very aware of this. When answering about the purpose of making *Che Brother* within the *Mekong 2030* project, Lao director Anysay Keola shared that he “is interested in bringing this film to city-dwellers like himself who are only indirectly affected by the river’s irreversible changes, who treat the Mekong ‘like a scenery.’” For city dwellers, tourists, film viewers, and the general public of mass media, *Mekong 2030* knowingly

⁵ The term more-than-human (also beyond-human) gives a better sense of the interrelations of humans, nature, and spiritual worlds, than the more common term non-human. See Chao and Enari (2021).

goes against the formula of whirling all-natural landscapes into “sceneries” as in popular culture.

Overall, through *Mekong 2030*, the very method of green memory co-present in that dystopian future, unlike the aforementioned commercial and “touristic” films, creates ecological nostalgia not to “lull,” to make one forget, distract, comfort, and soothe, but to purify, and to induce fear and compassion. It is nostalgia for the (dystopian) future, aiming to return and repair the “present” (which is also that visible future). In other words, in *Mekong 2030*, ecological nostalgia is not one-dimensional but reconstructive, critical, subversive, questioning, and awakening to the viewer—as Arendt emphasized ecological ethics and our accountability for everything we have done to nature, even though it seems to belong to the past: “We can no longer afford to take that which was good in the past and simply call it our heritage, to discard the bad and simply think of it as a dead load which by itself time will bury in oblivion.” (Arendt, 1958, p. ix)

When disassembling the stories, each short film evokes a distinct, indigenous problem of each tropical Mekong locality. However, by deliberately assembling the five films in the established order: *Soul River* (Cambodia), *Che Brother* (Laos), *The Forgotten Voices of the Mekong* (Myanmar), *The Line* (Thailand), and *The Unseen River* (Vietnam), we can discern a unified narrative about the river’s past and future. With the meaning of a special place, the ecological memory of Mekong through five films all “encapsulates the human ability to connect with both the built and natural environments that are entwined in the cultural landscape...help citizens define their public pasts: places trigger memories for insiders, who have shared a common past” (Hayden, 1995, p. 46). Moving from the visible future to the invisible past, *Mekong 2030* ultimately asserts that the solutions to Mekong’s problems lie at the heart of thought, spirituality, and culture—a fascinating perspective of this anthology. This is the critical basis for the profound spirit of “transnational ecocinema” that the film creates.

Another important aspect of the spirit of transnational ecocinema in *Mekong 2030* is that directors from many cultures, with many different styles, have connected the memory of humanity, nations, Indigenous communities, families, and individuals with the eco-memory of the Mekong. This is important because a sustainable memory cannot exist without understanding, interaction, creation, regeneration, and convergence between the individual/micro and the community/macro. This anthology defines *sustainable development* as that which occurs when nature is documented from the Indigenous perspective to tell their stories, problems, and heritage using necessary, optimal, and environmentally respectful means. The form of expression is merely a choice of medium; the important thing is the content they wish to express. The filmmakers of five different nationalities have employed various genres: action

film, art-house independent film, documentary, and experimental film. All five short films emphasize the discourse of the Mekong as a Mother River, prioritize Indigenous knowledge, and find connections between narratives: culture and nature, past and future (present), me and us, one and all. The purpose of this collaborative filmmaking goes beyond regional film production or conventional collaboration. It is also about dialogue, connection, exchange, and finding solutions in the Mekong's specific situation, despite political, social, economic, and cultural differences. For example, the Mandarin Chinese voiceover in a Thai-language film (*The Line*), or the mix of English, Spanish, and Lao in *Che Brother*, also function as a kind of soundscape, evoking a unique sense of diverse "nationalities," blended ethnicities, and the transboundary nature of this river. Notably, the unity of the imagined future also lies in depicting the river's beauty and the distinct local areas, contrasting with the portrayals in Hollywood-style popular culture (as in the Disney animation *Raya and the Last Dragon*). Aesthetically, *Mekong 2030* reveals the ruggedness, rawness, risks, freshness, vibrancy, and diversity, like the diverse identities of local areas. Though the styles and approaches of the short films vary, they focus on green nostalgia and dystopian future as the films' aesthetic and philosophical foundation.

In terms of characters and perspective, all five films blend humans with nature/animals, empowering more-than-human beings to voice their perspectives and feelings. The films also shift the camera's perspective from the character or narrator to the river, forest, or other ecological entities. For instance, the low-angle shots filmed from below, in *Soul River* and *Che Brother*, are like the judgmental gaze of the river deity or the river itself upon humans. *Soul River* has six characters: Klark (the husband), Ladet (the wife), and Sok (the migrating guard), in addition to the forest, the river, and the statue; all are crucial characters contributing to the story. Similarly, in *The Unseen River*, the river itself is a unique character with its own identity, history, and story. The river has feelings, experiences pain, and possesses its own perspective on the world: stern, compassionate, restless, and patient.

These films raise a crucial issue: the environmental impacts and damage caused by socio-political factors (industry, production, urban management, environmental policies, etc.) are gradual and not immediately visible. What remains "bare," what persists, is the bewilderment, alienation, and powerlessness of people in the flow of time, as nature, as the river that nurtured them, as the atmosphere they breathe, gradually diminishes, until they feel suffocated and dying (as in *The Forgotten Voice* and *The Unseen River*). The role of the film medium is to make visible the very form of violence—seemingly slow and invisible violence⁶—but the leading cause of environmental and Indigenous identity crises, traumatizing people and causing division and fractures within (vulnerable) communities. At a deeper level, the films also

⁶ On slow violence and environmentalism, see Rob Nixon (2011).

question the inherent violence of the medium itself, bathing the images in a post-apocalyptic, liminal, melancholic sensibility, replacing romanticism with surrealism in contemplative, experimental, or documentary-style cinematography. The filmmakers consciously detect and critique the invisibility of these environmental and social changes, and social agents of change: the state of the factory, the flow of water, the electric poles, the cargo handling at the port, the city where the young man lives and suffers from insomnia every night amidst skyscrapers and glittering lights. Through cinema, these invisible things suddenly appear at the last minute when the characters look deep into their suffering—not a random pain “falling from the sky,” seemingly caused by nature, by the landscape, but in reality, not so.

From there, all five films highlight human eco-emotions, when facing the strangely “uncomfortable” experiences between green memories and post-apocalyptic fantasies about the Mekong tropical countries: *Soul River* emphasizes the Indigenous people’s confusion, anxiety, and extreme fear as they abandon the devastated forest and sell a Khmer statue for survival; *Che Brother* emphasizes despair, helplessness, and self-mockery at being unable to save the mother (river) or family before saving the world (the global village); *The Forgotten Voice* emphasizes the powerlessness and suffering from the loss of status, the “lost voice” of the elders, the soul of nature, the anchor of the river’s traditional ecological and cultural values; *The Line* is the feeling of helplessness and hopelessness at being unable to utilize the medium effectively to express what one wants to convey about the river, about one’s roots, while feeling precarious and weary in the cold urban reality; *The Unseen River* conveys the feeling of loneliness, helplessness, nostalgia, and anxiety when contemplating both the past and the future, as the river holds the answers for everyone. Following the apocalyptic feeling, imagining the future of the tropical countries along the Mekong always comes with a “melancholy ecological state.” This is the sadness of a gaze that cannot control or master the landscape. “The melancholy gaze on the landscape mourns its failure to master it” (Cubitt, 2016, p.3). Here, the viewer witnesses the profound sadness of humans as the landscape swallows their memories and future (*The Forgotten Voice*, *The Unseen River*). Humans are tiny and seem non-existent amidst the landscape, even completely vanishing (*Soul River*, *Che Brother*, *The Line*).

Regarding the role of technical arts such as cinema, Cubitt comments:

If nature’s being-in-itself, even as a memory or a portent of being-in-itself, is intrinsically incommunicable, the relation that technical arts can have with it is not to reproduce its appearing (as natural beauty) but to mediate what cannot be communicated. (2016, p.12)

Delving into the cinematic language of all five films in the anthology, we see even more clearly the rupture, the disruption of balance, and harmony in the relationship between nature, humans, and beyond to spiritual realms. In *Soul River*, in terms of mise-en-

scène, the director often places characters alongside scorching heat, desolate and decaying grey landscapes, barren land, and dying tropical forests. The filmmaker frequently uses close-ups, or medium close-ups, with a narrow horizontal frame, creating a feeling of suffocation, breathlessness, heat, and no escape. *The Forgotten Voices* opens and closes with scenes shot from a flying camera, revealing bare hills with very little green vegetation in between. Throughout *Che Brother*, the image of unfinished, empty buildings by the river symbolizes the “loss of meaning” of family and the decay of ecological and moral values. The smooth, gliding shots from low to high in *The Unseen River* reveal an attitude of observation and a search for sacred, invisible things from the universe of life. The Line’s contrasting mise-en-scène (tiny humans before vast nature) reveals humans’ helplessness and awakening before the loss of Mother Nature. Although fictional, all five films avoid beautifying lighting techniques, leaning towards a documentary style. All five directors focus on exploring the primal feeling of nature in the tropical Mekong world—a world reaching exhaustion, struggling to revive, and returning to its original state before being damaged by industrialization, urbanization, and globalization. Therefore, their films simultaneously exist to challenge the conventional cinematic boundaries as we enter a new era.

Conclusion

The *Mekong 2030* anthology is the evocation of sustainable nostalgia that exposes the conflicting issues of the present (emptiness and the loss of the environment), leading to imagining the future and urging people to act. In this sense, ecological nostalgia and imagining a dystopian future through film can be considered a form of environmental activism, which has “a more important impact on improving social and political conditions in the present as ideals, not as fairy tales come true (Boym, 2002, p. 355)

In all five films, the ecological crisis of the Mekong tropical countries in the future is linked to the loss of faith, reverence for the sacredness of the natural and supernatural world, and Indigenous religions of the past. The Buddha in *Soul River* and *The Unseen River*, the revolutionary leader Che Guevara in *Che Brother*, God in *The Forgotten Voices*, and the animistic beliefs and ancestral spirits in *The Line*, have all “departed,” leaving the people with a dangerous and insecure future—as they are positioned face-to-face with environmental degradation and climate change.

The idea of each country contributing a film on the same theme speaks to the intention of connecting the Mekong River basin countries culturally and visually, thus transcending nationalism. The interesting thing in this anthology is that the cohesive discourse in its short films is the constructed memories—both diverse and unified—of a single Mekong, both a flow of memories and of the future. Moreover, it can be said that the past and future of the tropical countries in the Mekong River basin in the film belong to the unseen: heritage, spiritual values, identity, the soul of creation, etc. Here,

a seemingly limited medium (cinema) can open doors to reveal the boundless potential of media with natural landscapes. The river is the wounded subject, and the camera is a tool to observe, “diagnose,” and find ways to heal it. That tool in *Mekong 2030* has a dual function: to clarify the unique, mystical beauty of the river and to show its visible (and invisible) wounds. In other words, in *Mekong 2030*, through visual media, the Mekong River landscapes that form the basin of these tropical riparian countries are not merely the background of the story; the riverine landscape has become an object of contemplation and reflection; the landscape shows us the divinity and complexity of human existence and the natural world. It tells us that there is always another world beside, outside, beyond what we see and are shown. This requires respect and unwavering protection for the ecological values and ethics of the Mekong and the world. As Davies emphasizes:

Sustainability offers us a nostalgia for the future, but this is not the most obvious connection between nostalgia and environmentalism. Nostalgic appeals to what we have lost can be one of the most potent rhetorical tools for green politics. (Davies, 2010, p. 265)

In other words, critical memory studies point out that looking back at the past, mourning what has passed, what is distant, or what is lost, is not for the sake of wrapping it up and reassuring people in the present, but for finding a way, a solution for the future and our future generations. Mourning urges us to act to preserve, to hold on to the past, or to find alternative ways to achieve futures. In representing landscape/ecological reminiscence, we also deeply consider our “accountability” in the present, which determines our actions for the future.

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