



January 2021

The Unseen River

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Recommended Citation

Blizek, William L. (2021) "The Unseen River," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 25 : Iss. 1 , Article 20.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol25/iss1/20>

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The Unseen River

Abstract

This is a review of the short film, *The Unseen River* (2020), directed by Pham Ngoc Lan.

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Author Notes

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The Unseen River (2020), dir. Pham Ngoc Lan

The Unseen River is really two stories. One story focuses on a young boy who is suffering from insomnia. The other story deals with a man and woman who had a relationship 30 years ago and who are now reuniting. The nature of this gentle film is to offer up fascinating ideas, ideas that can be interpreted in more than one way, leaving the viewer to continually ponder, not so much the meaning of the film as a whole, but the meanings available in the film.

A young man is riding a small motorcycle with his girlfriend riding behind him. They are moving downstream, along the Mekong River, when they arrive at a temple where a young monk greets them. The young monk consults with an older monk about treating insomnia. The older monk tells him that you have to believe in sleep and that a good sleep is a privilege. Of course, believing in something that is a privilege can apply to many things, not just sleep, so the older monk opens the door to a way of understanding many things. The monk asks if the young man

has ever bathed in the river. Sinking into a deep sleep is like surrendering yourself to the current of the river. Surrendering to the current cleanses the soul and it only takes a few minutes. We would all like to cleanse our souls, but how do we do this?

Later the young man finds the young monk with a fishing pole, but there is no river. The young man is curious why the monk has a fishing pole but cannot catch a fish. The monk tells him that you can fish for peace of mind rather than actual fish. At the end of the movie, we find the young man with a fishing pole and a hook thrown into the river. It is clear that he is not hoping to hook a fish, but rather to find peace of mind.

A woman travels upstream to meet her lover of thirty years ago. The woman watches a dog. She follows the dog and the dog leads her to a man fishing. This is the man with whom she had a brief relationship thirty years ago. And here they are, together again. What should they do now? Or, “should” they do anything? Clearly, they have been thinking about each other over all of these years. The woman asks the man about his dog. She had given him a dog those many years ago. The man tells her that his dog, Gilmo, is the offspring of the dog that she gave him, indicating a continuing connection. The woman says: “Yes, there are things that only time can mend,” suggesting that they might get together again. The woman also says, “If it doesn’t make us forget, it forces us to understand what is important,” suggesting the importance of self-understanding, self-awareness. What happens next, we do not know, but we do know that both the man and the woman are better prepared to make decisions about the future.

The unseen river is a wonderful metaphor for so many elements of the film—passing time, continual change, deep currents unseen, and introspection.

The Unseen River is part of an anthology film, *Mekong 2030*, produced by the Luang Prabang International Film Festival.