War in Present Tense: Filming Children of Agent Orange Rehabilitation Villages in Vietnam and the Danger of Misrepresentation

by

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ABSTRACT

We represent the Vietnam War as a concluded event in the past; however, the Agent-Orange-affected population in Vietnam shows that war is contemporary. This population remains relatively unknown to the world – especially to the Western world. We are isolated from the Agent-Orange-affected population because we have grown dependent on curated images of the Vietnam War in popular media that do not include the local population. Here, a challenging duty of a filmmaker is to create new images that convey their experience.

This thesis will examine the filmmaking process of the contemporary population affected by Agent Orange in Vietnam and raise larger questions about the ways in which we capture contemporary war victims’ stories through video. How can film revive engagements with a seemingly concluded war? How do we tell stories of people with visually apparent abnormalities without ostracizing them?

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INTRODUCTION

How do we remember the Vietnam War? As we move farther away in time from 1950, most people do not remember the war through direct memories, but are rather informed about the experience through words and images from the war. These images in particular mimic direct memories and create pseudo-memories in the brains of those who have never experienced the war, and these frozen pseudo-memories of the war that make us register the war as a finished event in the past. Thus, when we think of the war, we conjure memories of low-resolution, black-and-white footages we have seen on history channel, of bombs being dropped over Vietnamese forests and rice patties. Our remembrance ends just as we run out of archival footage to think of, and we label the war in our memory as a pitiful mistake of the past. However, the legacy of the Vietnam War proves this wrong: the current Agent Orange-affected population in Vietnam carries consequences of the war every day, despite their chronological distance from the war.

The Vietnam War was the largest chemical warfare in history. Agent Orange, an herbicide that was accidentally contaminated with dioxin, was sprayed by the U.S. Army over three million hectares of forests in South Vietnam. The intent was to reveal the “enemy” by taking away the greenery that covered the war zone. This action, however, resulted in around three million Vietnamese people’s exposure to dioxin, a toxin that causes genetic damages through multiple generations. The first generation –mostly veterans and their families - that were exposed to dioxin either directly or through contaminated food developed various types of cancer. In addition to cancer, the dioxin

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1 Tran Xuan Thu, *The State of Victims of Agent Orange in Vietnam, the Vietnam Government’s Applicable Policies and Communities’ Assistance* (Hanoi: Vietnamese Association for Victims of Agent Orange/Dioxin, 2009), 11.
also caused genetic damages and these genetic damages were silently carried through the
generations. Furthermore, even the most recent generations - third and fourth - have been
born with birth defects such as physical deformities, type two diabetes, and mental
 disorders. Currently in Vietnam, seventeen nursing and rehabilitation centers have been
built by the government with the help of independent organizations. These rehabilitation
centers are small communities in which the affected people, mostly children of age five
through sixteen, live together. Excluding those with more serious and physical birth
defects who stay at hospitals and receive physical therapy, birth defects of the third and
fourth generations are mostly mental.²

And yet, this population remains relatively unknown to the world – especially to
the Western world. In an age of mega social media industries where social connection is
worshipped and endlessly pursued, we are yet isolated from the Agent Orange-affected
population because we have grown dependent on curated images found in popular media
and the images of the Vietnam War do not include this population. Here, a challenging
duty of a filmmaker is to create new images that convey their experience. New images
will replace these pseudo-memories of Vietnam War that does not only incorrectly
represent the war as a frozen past, but causes isolation of a population that can inform
society about the never-ending consequences of war and technology. This isolation
represents a bigger, problematic cycle of isolation in our society: isolation of those who
develop technology from those who apply technology, and isolation of those who apply
technology to those who suffer from the application.

Creating new images to alleviate the isolation caused by images is a complex task
in which one is prone to fall into the dangers of image making. First, one must understand

² Ibid., 13.
the role and power of images in our heavily documented, hyper-connected society.

Multiple security cameras constantly record our lives without even being noticed; pictures and videos of daily moments can be instantly captured with smartphones and shared through social media. While technology has enabled us to instantly transform people or ideas into permanent, portable forms of photos and videos, we often do not realize the underlying power and dangers of capturing, which can lead to consequences like misrepresentation, stereotyping and victimizing. These consequences are especially common and harmful when one attempts to convey the experience of others through film, a moving image. The very process of capturing and editing serves as the backbone of film. At the same time, our narrative instinct behind this process can become a powerful and a dangerous tool that misrepresents, harms, and dehumanizes individuals or a community. Yet, this thesis does not discourage exposition itself; exposition connects different cultures and provides a larger understanding of the world, and it can also lead to constructive consequences that better the condition of its subjects. We are in an age where films no longer simply exist in tangible forms that stay inside a room; digital technology and social media has amplified accessibility and spread of film. Yet, a filmmaker must acknowledge the power behind his or her camera and realize that conveying the experience of others through film is not a simple task of his or her own narrative instincts, but entails a larger, delicate responsibility.

This thesis will examine the filmmaking process of the contemporary population affected by Agent Orange in Vietnam and raise larger questions about the ways in which we capture stories of war victims through video. How can film revive engagements with a seemingly concluded war? How do we tell stories of people with visually apparent
abnormalities without ostracizing them? How do we reconcile our own background and agenda with their experience? Through an examination and careful use of editing techniques, this thesis seeks to document the layers beyond these people who have been underrepresented and misrepresented as "victims of war" and shed light on the humanness of these "victims" – their daily emotions, struggles, joy, individuality, and conviction.
METHODOLOGY

I. Observations from Vietnam

Using a case study of the author’s experience as a filmmaker in an Agent Orange rehabilitation village, this thesis will identify problems in representing subjects that are particularly prone to misrepresentation. The examples and scenarios are derived from the author’s first-hand experience as a foreign filmmaker, attempting to convey the experience of subjects in an Agent Orange rehabilitation village in Hanoi, Vietnam. These problems will be initially reflected upon in a personal and subjective voice and then contextualized and probed under a wider scope of concepts.

A working list of problems:

a) Portraying through a cultural barrier

b) Portraying faces of children, identity and objectification

c) Filmmaker’s agenda and background

II. Film Analysis

This thesis will analyze relevant films for different approaches to the identified problems. The author will experiment with the application of different approaches and analyze aspects and degrees of misrepresentation in the specific context of the Agent-Orange-affected population.

a) Portraying through a cultural barrier

- Chris Marker, Sans Soleil

- Trinh T. Minh-ha, The Fourth Dimension

b) Portraying faces of children, identity and objectification
- Forough Farrokhzad, *The House is Black*

c) Filmmaker’s agenda and relationship to the subject

- Jon Akomfrah, *The Stuart Hall Project*

- Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Sur Name Viet Given Name Nam*

### III. Conclusion

Finally, compiling lessons from Vietnam and relevant literatures and films, the author will develop a framework of editing techniques and their relationship to the problems identified at the Agent Orange rehabilitation center. The outcome will be a 10-minute documentary portarying children at the rehabilitation center, cut with a focus on humanizing and empowering them.
BACKGROUND

Vietnam War and Agent Orange from 1961 to the present

Agent Orange was one of 15 herbicide mixtures used by the US and Republic of Vietnam forces between 1961 and 1971 as a defoliant and a military tactic for destroying enemy crops and clearing boundaries of military installations. US Air Force operations, under the codename Operation Ranch Trail Dust sprayed 95% of all herbicides over South Vietnam as well as parts of Cambodia and Laos. ORH was organized into missions that consisted of specific targets and went through a combined South Vietnamese and US approval process. After 1963, the approval process was simplified and conducted solely by the US Ambassador to the Republic of Vietnam. Believed to be a “a prototype smart weapon, a benign tactical herbicide that saved many hundreds of thousands of American lives by denying the North Vietnamese army the jungle cover that allowed it ruthlessly to strike and feint” according to US strategists, several US companies began to manufacture 15 different mixtures of herbicides including Agent Orange, whose name comes from their orange-colored 55-gallon storage drums. Although the conventional low-temperature production process of the herbicide was did not cause dioxin contamination, some of the companies, namely Dow and Monsanto, used an accelerated, high-temperature process to accommodate wartime production needs.

Immediately after the war, US veterans started reporting chronic conditions, skin disorders, asthma, cancers, gastrointestinal diseases, and/or was shown through their

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4 Ibid.
children who had been born limbless or with Down's syndrome and spina bifida.\textsuperscript{5} About 65\% of the herbicides had been contaminated with varying levels of dioxin, which is a known human carcinogen alters the transcription of specific genes and disrupts the immune and endocrine systems, causing chloracne, certain cancers, and reproductive and developmental effects (agentorangerecord).\textsuperscript{6} The most detrimental side effect of dioxin on the Vietnamese population has been genetic, as the current 4\textsuperscript{th} generation after the war has been born with genetic defects.

Much controversy and denial surrounds the chain of decisions that has led to tragic consequences upon millions of lives over more than 5 decades and continuing. The deadly consequence of Agent Orange was not unforeseen. The Federation of American Scientists at the time warned against using Vietnam as a laboratory experiment; a petition against “chemical and biological weapons used in Vietnam” was signed by more than 5000 American scientists, including 17 Nobel laureates and 129 members of the Academy of Sciences. But when Congressman Robert Kastenmeier publicly criticized the “chemical warfare” that the president was initiating, William Bundy, a presidential adviser, denied all claims about Agent Orange’s chemical danger, blaming communists propagandists for distorting the facts about the operation.\textsuperscript{7} While US has marked the contamination as an accident, recent investigations and testimony of a former US


\textsuperscript{7} Scott-Clark, “Spectre Orange.” (see footnote 5)
commander suggests that the US government was fully aware of the contamination and the destructive effect of dioxin beforehand, and yet still continued to use Agent Orange in concentrations that exceeded guidelines by 25 times.\(^8\) 80g of dioxin is known to be just enough to kill the entire population in a city the size of New York; US has sprayed 170kg of it over Vietnam, according to research by Dr. Aurthur H. Westing, former director of the UN Environmment Programme. By the end of the war in 1975, 72 million liters of herbicides had been sprayed over more than 10% of Vietnam. And yet, these figures from US military records are vast underestimations, as recent investigations have shown that 260,000 gallons of herbicide in addition to recorded amount had been dumped due to abortion of missions.\(^9\)

But even after the war, Agent Orange and was not a prioritized agenda in the diplomatic discourse between Vietnam and U.S. The relationship between the two countries grew frosty after U.S. presidency shifted to Gerald Ford, who imposed a trade embargo on Vietnam and was not willing to honor reconstruction assistance promised by President Richard Nixon in his “secret letter.”\(^10\) Thus, Vietnamese government’s primary concern was normalizing relations with the U.S. so that trade opportunities would increase. In addition to the trade embargo were other political agenda that kept the two countries preoccupied, such as “the emotional issue of U.S. prisoners of war/missing in action (POW/MIAs), the migration of Vietnam’s so-called “boat people,” Vietnam’s

\(^8\) Ibid.

\(^9\) Ibid.

1978 invasion of Cambodia (known at that time as Democratic Kampuchea), and Vietnam’s border conflict with China.” An issue that would affect millions of lives for decades was pushed aside. Until Clinton’s presidency, U.S. maintained opposition against any form of repayment for Agent Orange or even admitting its biological implications. Reagan Administration expressed a skepticism about U.S. veterans who claimed to have Agent-Orange-related medical problems. Bush Administration announced drastic plans for reopening post-war discourses and approved assistance for Agent-Orange-related medical problems, but the assistance was strictly limited to U.S. veterans. President Clinton finally ended U.S. opposition to recognize their fault in Agent Orange use in Vietnam and took actions toward repayment. The first post-war ambassador to Vietnam was appointed in 1996, and after Clinton’s five-day trip to Vietnam in 2002, an official research study on the effects of Agent Orange and dioxin was established as well as a Joint Advisory Committee. After having pushed aside the topic for more than three decades after the war, the U.S. government finally started establishing tangible means to address the Agent Orange issue during the Clinton Administration.

A study of the timeline of U.S.-Vietnam relations and diplomatic actions shows one thing: a decision made by a government consists of various underlying motives directed toward an advantage or profit for itself. For example, U.S. government probably would have used a safer, low-temperature process for production of the herbicides had it been intended for use on home soil, but such decision to undervalue of human lives of a certain population has led to additional violation of millions of lives over several decades.

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11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.
Also, the Vietnamese government could have sought for financial support and research collaboration for Agent Orange victims earlier on in the post-war reconstruction period, but it chose not to jeopardize restoration of trade opportunities with the U.S. that would benefit Vietnam’s economy. Agent Orange contamination, like every other byproduct of political struggle and aggression, is not the fabrication of a single party, nor is it a one-time mistake. It is a consequence of a string of decisions driven by profit-oriented motivations; it is the visible and tangible form of ongoing systematic injustice in society where profit is prioritized over human lives.

**Disparities between memory and reality**

As shown, many complexities and intentions lie behind individual decisions made during and after the Vietnam War that have led collectively to the cause and neglect of the Agent Orange affected population. The bits and pieces of decisions and processes that constitute the war each reveal problems of society, and how these problems can lead to vast consequences. But what happens to all of this information when a war is over? What are the legacies of Vietnam War that are relayed to the subsequent generations? The way we remember the war is heavily dependent on the narrated information and archival material in books and broadcast media.

How truthful is the archival material from the media? In his article “The Vietnam War in High School American History,” James W. Loewen examines coverage of the Vietnam War in twelve high school textbooks. He particularly studied visual images

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supplied in these textbooks, and for a comparison, he asks adults who have lived through the war and compiles a list of five most common images conjured from their memory:

- the little girl running naked down Highway One, fleeing a napalm attack
- a Buddhist monk sitting at a Saigon intersection immolating himself to protest the South Vietnamese government
- the national police chief executing a man suspected of being in the Viet Cong, with a pistol shot to the side of his head
- the bodies in the ditch after the My Lai massacre
- Americans evacuating the U.S. embassy by helicopter, while desperate Vietnamese try to climb aboard

He finds one image of the police execution in one textbook, and none in the other eleven textbooks. This study proves that our dependence on archival material means subjugating to higher authorities’ narration of history. But after all, there are no other ways other than archival information with which to construct our image of a war. The primary definition of a war according to the Oxford Dictionaries is “a state of armed conflict between different nations or states of different groups within a nation or state.” Thus, we think of a war as a state lasting over a particular period of time, and when it is finished, we regard it as an event in the past. Because it is an event in the past, we memorialize the war with historical material and construct the official narratives and memories of the war, which often times is censored by third parties who want to avoid

\[15\] Ibid.

certain responsibilities. The phenomenon—re-writing and regulated narration of history under the disguise of memorialization—also explains why the Agent-Orange-affected population is hidden from the rest of the world. We only look to the past when we remember the war, where the images accessible to us are limited and controlled, leading us to believe a simple narrative without further questioning.

But through linear narration and archival of war, a clean façade is constructed, presenting the war as an accidental occurrence and hiding the perpetuating lava of problems. Linear narration and archival of war simplifies for the benefit of many parties; the public is led to remember an utterly simple narrative of the war and not questions further; underlying, problems from which the war erupted continue, invisible to the public. Here, the case of the Friendship Village, or rather the entire legacy of Agent Orange poses an interesting contradiction.

Today in Vietnam, Agent Orange is not an historical artifact. It is a present and continuously living problem that affects lives of people who have no physical relationship or experience with the Vietnam War as the genetic damage circulates in the population. Why are these people so unknown? Therefore, our tendency to create a linear narrative around war and archive war has resulted in isolation of millions of people, who are misfits under our categorization of the Vietnam War that only remembers and memorializes veterans.
OBSERVATIONS

Filming the Friendship Village: Problems of Misrepresentation

The Friendship Village, under the official name “The Vietnam Friendship Village Project USA,” is an Agent Orange rehabilitation center located in Hanoi, Vietnam. The village was founded by an American war veteran George Mizo as a gesture of “peace, friendship and reconciliation” following the Vietnam War (FV). The village provides therapy and schooling for 100-120 children with varying mental and physical conditions. The children are divided into classes according to their mental ability, where they receive basic school education and technical education such as embroidery, sewing, and computer software. The village also provides physical therapy and treatment to about 40 Vietnam War veterans at a time. This village is physically and conceptually a very strange concoction of the past and the present, and thus there are many layers of identities that are easily misrepresented.

1. Portraying culture through a barrier

The first type of barrier a filmmaker encounters in the case of Agent-Orange-affected population in Vietnam comes from cultural differences, or the fact that the filmmaker is a foreigner. While the initial cultural distance for the foreign filmmaker is inevitable, one can choose to immerse oneself deeper into the culture, which takes time and human interactions with the insiders of the culture. How should a filmmaker handle cultural barrier – should one embrace it or attempt to overcome it?

The problem of cultural difference was immediately felt on my first day at the Friendship Village, when I was observing in a classroom. I observed that the teachers handle students quite physically (i.e., yanking objects out of hands, pushing, smacking the rear) which was not something I was used to seeing in American classrooms. Having grown up in an Eastern Asian country, I knew that to a native Vietnamese or Eastern Asian bystanders including myself, such physical interactions would not stand out as abnormal or violent because of the difference in cultural norms and codes of mannerisms. But I could imagine that to someone who is not familiar with the culture would react very differently to the physical interactions in the classroom. Thus, it would also be easy for a Western filmmaker, misinterpreting the intentions of the teacher, could construct her own narrative of the situation, capture the scene with certain framing, and edit according to her own misinterpretation. Taken out of its cultural context and shown elsewhere, the footage would cause certain sentiments that are not actually present in the original scene. Thus, attempting to capture and edit without an understanding of the subject’s culture, one runs into the danger of misrepresenting the experience of an individual, or an entire population.

As a filmmaker and a foreigner without familiarity with specifics of the Vietnamese culture such as mannerisms, interactions amongst the subjects could be misinterpreted. This misinterpretation could lead the filmmaker to frame her subjects in a certain way with the subjectivity that is specific to the filmmaker’s own culture. Then, is cultural difference something that is inherently harmful? With the assumption that cultural distance is a variable that a filmmaker must get rid of, I attempted to immerse myself into the culture as much as possible. First, the most instinctive way to gain
cultural knowledge was by building relationships with insiders of the culture and experiencing the culture over time. Even a sightseeing experience became a vast cultural lesson when accompanied by my friend and translator, who felt comfortable enough with me to share more than the scripted information for tourists, pointing to “the school that teaches too much confidence” or “the area where rich Koreans come to golf.” And yet, even though I tried my best to familiarize myself with Vietnamese culture this way, I realized that gaining access into a society or a culture is at times beyond one’s control, especially in cultures with certain political barriers. In the case of Friendship Village, the Vietnamese government (ruled by the Communist Party of Vietnam) provides main sponsorship and funding for the village. I found out when interviewing teachers of the village that some teachers gave packaged answers and some teachers refuse to be interviewed. My ambition, like that of many documentary filmmakers, had been to find answers to questions that may uncover injustice in the system and ultimately better the community. But I realized that as an outsider, there will always be a limit on my access into cultural insight, and my attempt to speak for another culture will inevitably lead to some degree of misrepresentation. I also realized that in carrying out my ambitions I might unintentionally create harm for the teachers, who may be fired or punished according to the politics of the environment. While a lack of cultural knowledge can cause a filmmaker to misrepresent the subjects, attempting to close the cultural distance without understanding the limits can create an even greater harm to the subjects. Thus, a cultural boundary is a delicate membrane that must be broken by a filmmaker with caution and an understanding of the consequences.
Misrepresentation can exist both ways: there exists a fine line between misrepresentation from lack of cultural familiarity, and misrepresentation from violation of culture boundaries. Because a cultural barrier is inevitable, representing a foreign culture will always lead to some degree of misrepresentation. Then, can one film a foreign culture without representing? On the other hand, cultural distance is an inescapable factor that can perhaps be seen as an advantage. Cultural distance can place the filmmaker at a unique perspective and insight into a culture-specific phenomenon, granting certain objectivity and sensitivity to an observing filmmaker.

Cultural distance directly changes the focus point of a filmmaker like the focal length of a camera lens. How should an outsider approach culture, and how does cultural knowledge or cultural distance affect the filmmaker’s observation and the film’s meaning?

2. Portraying faces of children, identity and objectification

Aesthetics is the only layer of information accessible to everyone and thus an overpowering layer, unless the subject is concealed and invisible. Photographs and videos, after all, capture only aesthetics; viewers paint meaning onto this aesthetic layer. Whereas in photography the visual layer is the sole medium, video gives viewers access to layers beyond the aesthetic, by extending the image over time and allowing for movement and audio. The human emotion can be overwhelmingly sensitive to visuals. For instance, compare a written description of a violent scene to a single photograph of the scene: whereas the written medium requires a time-delayed process of reading and interpretation that acts as a buffer, the photograph directly simulates a real-life experience and immediately triggers an physical reaction that can be as severe as nausea and fainting.
This makes aesthetics a powerful tool and delegates a lot of responsibility to the person behind the camera. This also makes filming people with physical deformities a complicated and delicate task for the filmmaker.

At the Friendship Village, a majority of the inhabitants have apparently abnormal facial or bodily features. When approaching these subjects, the danger of the aesthetics applies to both the filmmaker and the audience, but the ultimate power and responsibility lies in the filmmaker. When I saw a girl with bulging eyes and mental disability, my instinct was to capture her on camera so that I could show the rest of the world shocking effects of Agent Orange. I was compelled to film because of impact of the visuals, the same way we are compelled to take pictures of rare spectacles. But as I faced the girl with my camera, I sensed that something was off; I felt like I was in a position of too much power, and that she was being violated. In particular because she was mentally not capable of understanding my intentions or speaking for herself, I felt as if I was in full control of her identity.

There is something about the face that makes it an especially powerful medium of signals. We are so attracted to faces; when we evaluate a person’s emotional state or identity, our eyes automatically fixate on their face. Because we regularly use our faces communicate signals about our state to others, this somewhat automatic and subconscious process of and reaction to one’s face has become normalized. In fact, the face does emanate a lot of information. Facial proportions, bone structure, shape and color of eyes, skin tone, and facial expressions (which already is a complex synthesis of movement of 43 facial muscles) all combine to give us visual signals that we interpret in order to compose an impression or a judgment of a person. These judgments simply based on the
face can cover a vast range of categories, such as one’s age, ethnicity, gender, emotional state, socioeconomic status, and even personality. But we eventually get past our initial impressions composed based on the face as we become more familiar with them. But in film, the audience is given only the visual images in a finite number of frames; therefore, the impressions, become a false identity that we attach to the subjects. Therefore, the girl’s distorted face, along with its socially constructed implications and emotional triggers, overtook her identity. Without knowing much about her, I was using her face as a tool for my own purpose and consequently her face became a symbol that represents not her, but something larger that I imposed upon her without permission. Capturing alone is not a harmful practice by nature, and a necessary one especially in this case, where the intention is to expose them to ultimately help better their conditions. But because of the strong impact of the visuals in the footage of the subjects with deformities, the visuals can mask the subjects’ identities and dehumanize them. The subjects are then reduced to spectacles for the curious eyes, and labeled as victims of the Vietnam War.

It is true that any subjects captured on a visual medium are dehumanized to a certain degree, since visuals can never convey fully one’s identity. An image or a video is ultimately an aesthetic and the filmmaker’s device. Then should the physically deformed children of Friendship Village, who are the most vulnerable subjects of misrepresentation, be left unexposed altogether? Yet, avoiding exposure in order to avoid misrepresentation only worsens the problem of their alienation from the rest of the world. This problem of misrepresentation as a result of well-intentioned labeling is prevalent outside this example; almost every non-profit organization that helps raise funds or awareness about poverty in other parts of the world uses faces of children in their campaigns (film stills).
But this problem should not be considered as the dilemma of choosing between two types of harm. Rather, the more fundamental problem of labeling and objectifying a subject must be prioritized in any situation. How do we inform others about an injustice without victimizing and dehumanizing the involved subjects?
3. Filmmaker’s agenda and relationship to the subject

Even if a filmmaker’s intention is to convey someone else’s experience, the filmmaker’s subjectivity ultimately drives the editing process. Thus, a film is ultimately a filmmaker’s construction, and is distinguished from an actual experience. Carried out as a film experiment by the Russian psychologist during the 1920s’ “pure cinema” movement, the Kuleshov Effect demonstrates how editing alone can insert new meaning into footage. When an identical shot of a man’s expressionless gaze was shown in sequence with three different shots, the man’s facial expression was linked with three different emotions.\(^8\)

![The Kuleshov Experiment](Figure 2. The Kuleshov Experiment\(^9\))

Thus, a filmmaker makes the decisions to cut and assemble shots, constructing a new version of the experience with added meaning driven by his or her subjectivity. Then how

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should a filmmaker’s reconcile his or her personal agenda with representing someone else?

I too as a filmmaker had an agenda: even before going to Vietnam, I had a indefinite desire to uncover some sort of injustice in the system and raise awareness about the Agent-Orange-affected population. In other words, I viewed the people at the Friendship Village as victims of Agent Orange and legacies of the Vietnam War even prior to arriving at the village, and had in mind preconceived ways to frame them. I also examined my relationship with the Vietnam War: I was neither Vietnamese nor American, and I was not nearly old enough to remember the war or experience any remnants of the war. I was a young person going to an institute of technology in the United States. Because of this somewhat distant relationship to the war, I could not possibly be aware of the sentiments of the war and could not personally associate with it. But my interest in the consequences of Agent Orange had been from exposure to an environment where technology is endlessly developed and worshipped, seemingly without questioning. I did not have complete access to wartime sentiments or cultural ambiance surrounding the war, but my set of knowledge and perspective seemed valuable in that I studied and lived at a place where world’s leading science research too place. In addition to a college-level education and knowledge in science and engineering, I had many friends who studied chemical engineering and either worked at laboratories at MIT or went into chemical or oil companies, where they contributed to optimizing mass production of chemical products. But even every day, the conversations that took around me were vastly different from those in Vietnam, or from most settings in the world.
Whatever I captured, no matter how “unbiased” I attempted to be, would never be the pure experience itself; it would always be a version of the experience that has been filtered through my lens, my agenda and my background. Thus, in some ways, painting a photorealistic picture and hiding the brushstrokes can be a deceptive act. How can I reconcile my own background and position? What gets left out in the filmmaker’s agenda-driven construction?
FILM ANALYSIS

1. Chris Marker’s *Sans Soleil* and Trinh T. Minh-ha’s *The Third Dimension:

Reading Japanese culture beyond the façade

*How is foreign culture portrayed? How do Marker and Minh-ha delve beyond the façade of a foreign culture? What are their resulting achievements?*

The camera is a passive medium that only captures what is visible. A filmmaker attempts to delve beyond the visible by directing the camera and editing the footage. Thus, a filmmaker’s eye is different from the camera lens – it not only perceives the visible, but through the visible, tries to get a sense of the invisible – the undercurrent, the motives and factors – that lies underneath the tip of the iceberg. Then how does the filmmaker see through the façade of a foreign culture, in relation to which he or she is an outsider? Particularly in the case of Japan, a heavily urbanized and industrialized society where culture has become another consumed commodity, the visible façade of the culture is so easy to absorb and difficult to get past. Filmmakers Chris Marker and Trinh T. Minh-ha react to their visual experience as foreigners in Japan, in their films *Sans Soleil* and *The Third Dimension* respectively.2021

In Chris Marker’s *Sans Soleil*, Marker is able to lead viewers beyond the visible layer by maintaining a particular distance from Japanese culture. His gaze is that of a curious foreigner – at times an obsessive one – throughout his footages taken in Japan, Africa, Iceland, and San Francisco. He is particularly fascinated by the proliferation of images and popular media occupying the streets of Tokyo. Marker examines the façade


of Japanese culture – the layer that is presented and accessible to a foreigner with a camera. He regards the metropolis experience similar to a cinematic experience; he takes in what is shown and what is visible from a passive spectator’s perspective, behind the screen’s barrier. He only gazes very intently, without ever interrupting or inquiring his subjects, and at times this careful and steady distance Marker keeps from his subjects is even frustrating as strange street rituals are shown without explanation, and women are filmed with stalkerish intensity, to the extent where viewers are left feeling curious and voyeuristic, wanting more information. He is more engaged and searching than a tourist; he not only films at accessible public sites, such as museums and subways, but also inserts himself into rare scenes of intensity, struggle and strong cultural specificity. But with such intense and provocative footage, however, Marker does not interpret or explain further than what he captures in the footage, and narrates in a matter-of-fact way. Perhaps the ambiguous, multi-meaning nature of his edits represents his personal stance and his active refusal to dictate meaning over footage.

However, whereas Marker has kept a rather passive and objective position in capturing, he occupies a distinctly personal presence in editing. For viewers, a physical and coherent visual experience becomes interrupted when Marker abruptly cuts to seemingly arbitrary footage. For instance, he inserts footage of a giraffe with a somewhat connecting stream of thought- the idea of murder – without much effort to rationalize to viewers – as viewers, we feel as if we are sitting in Marker’s own head uninvited. Marker moves in and out of his personal and impersonal spheres, articulating his intentions at times but leaving the viewers in the dark at other times. Thus, it is through his editing that we can see that he is physically present but not entirely – he sees from a space in between
the very physical realm, which is accessible to everyone, and his remote, personal realm. Watching Marker’s film weakens viewers’ automatic seeing-interpreting mechanism, as we fall into a somewhat subconscious, dream-like state of seeing without complete interpretation. As he presents a weave of the conscious and the subconscious, the personal and the impersonal, he does not aim for a profound insight into Japanese culture past the fetishized layer. Perhaps Marker realizes that the fetishized layer is the only layer accessible to an outsider; he does not attempt to represent or speak for the culture. Rather, using the fetishized Japanese culture as a medium but departing from its cultural specificity, he constructs a layer of meaning that is metaphysical and deeply personal at the same time, constantly jumping between different parts of the world with a logical thread that is distinctly Marker’s own and at times difficult to comprehend. Thus, although San Soleil at a glance appears as a portrait of Japanese culture, Marker’s careful distance creates a sense of alienation and perpetual homelessness. The film actually serves as Marker’s self-portrait and deeply personal outlook on the world better than anyone else’s.

Trinh T. Minh-ha also approaches Japanese culture from the façade that is presented to an outsider. While Minh-ha, like Marker, observes the visible layer presented to an outsider – traditional and contemporary cultural arts and rituals – her process of observation and interpretation is comparable. Both filmmakers observe from a perspective that is distinctly an outsider’s: the curious, probing gazes present in their respective footages feel strikingly similar. They both do not present much cultural context that would require connection with a cultural insider, but stay within the
perspective of an uninformed yet observant outsider.

Figure 3. Some shots in Sunless are left personal and unexplained, as shown by Marker's recurring fascination with cats.  

However, whereas Marker's focus never delves into the culture itself but maintains a sense of transcendence of space and time, Minh-ha stares into the visible culture, seeking another dimension within what is visible. For example, by probing the juxtaposition of seemingly alien traditional rituals and aesthetic conformity visible on the streets of Japan, she discovers a valued notion that is distinctly Japanese: the intraordinary, which she defines as a trance-like state of uniform identity found in the repetition of rituals in Japan and creates another dimension that defies quantized and

mechanized time, namely the "fourth dimension." Minh-ha’s attempt to discover an aspect of Japanese culture by examining the public spectacles visible to an outsider leads her to an interesting and rare insight: she is able to capture and understand an aspect of Japanese culture that is elusive, even more so to a native Japanese who is immersed in the system.

Figure 4. Minh-ha discovers an intraordinary dimension from hyper-probing only what is visible to her, like a woman sleeping on a subway.

The different effects and insights achieved in Marker and Minh-ha’s films lead to several interesting conclusions about a filmmaker’s method of seeing and presenting a foreign culture. Marker’s method is a juxtaposition of a detached, impersonal voice in individual footages and a deeply personal threading logic of such footages. In other

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23 Trinh T. Minh-ha, The Fourth Dimension (British Film Institute, 2001).

words, Marker does not delve deeply into the visible façade – he acknowledges the limitations of the commoditized façade of Japanese culture and uses this aspect of the culture as a medium to construct a nonsensical dream-like experience where viewers are not fully informed about the specific culture, dragged through arbitrary footage and perpetually somewhat confused, but are subconsciously led to a more metaphysical insight into human nature that is very personal to Marker. On the other hand, Minh-ha’s hyper-probing of the visual façade of Japanese culture leads to a cultural insight that is distinctly Japanese – the notion of the fourth dimension – but perhaps only visible to an outsider. These filmmakers both attempt to transcend the visible, but in diverging ways: Marker intends to transcend the visible by floating above it and constructing a metaphysical narrative, while Minh-ha does so by delving deep into the visible to discover a hidden cultural insight. Ultimately, Marker and Min-ha’s films both demonstrate a way to draw an insight out of a culture without breaking the cultural boundaries, or representing beyond one’s access.

These two examples are relevant yet diverging methods in relation to portrayal of the Friendship Village. Although Marker’s method works around cultural boundaries and abide to the accessible layer, some degree of misrepresentation is inevitable, especially when applied to the Friendship village. For example, if I were to keep a distant from the culture of Vietnam and the village and just use the footage of the children as a medium to compose a more metaphysical message, the children become objectified. This objectification is less visible in Marker’s film than it would be in the Friendship Village, where the children, because of their condition and relation to the war, are especially prone to being victimized and stereotyped. Also, Marker’s footprint in the film is so
strong that the film, even though most of it features Japan, is not about Japan but more about his own universe of subconscious thoughts that are also metaphysical at the same time – the very opposite of culture-specific – whereas my aim is to portray the culture beyond the visible layer. On the other hand, Minh-ha’s achievement – using the limited amount of access allotted to a foreign filmmaker and discovering a cultural insight that is perhaps visible from her unique perspective – aligns better with my goal. The ultimate takeaway from a study of the two films in relation to cultural boundaries is that even with footage with limited amount of cultural access, editing completely changes the culture-specificity of the message.

2. Faces of the leper colony in Forough Farrokhzad’s House is Black

In this film, Farrokhzad has taken up a highly challenging task: portraying a leper colony in Iran. She conveys the human beauty and sentiments that exist beyond the deformed faces. *How does she break through the impact of the face to convey her message?*

The film is structured around different physical locations and the rituals that take place. From the beginning sequence, she does not hide anything: the frame slowly zooms closer and closer into a severely deformed face of a woman who is looking at her own reflection in the mirror. Although the aesthetics have an unsettling effect on the viewer initially, the elongated duration of the shot leads to an intimate study of her expressions, as if we are looking at our own face in the mirror. In the next sequence, children with varying degrees of deformation are shown in a classroom. However, the faces of the children are not passive subjects; the children are actively engaged in the class, as they
each take turn to read lines of a reading that starts with “Oh God, thank you for creating me…” In other parts of the film, she overlays footages of walking men with leprosy with poems read in her own voice: “I will sing your name, o exalted one; I will sing your name with the ten-stringed lute; Because I have been made in a strange and frightening shape.” After guiding the viewers through intimate scenes of the everyday life at the village she shows a brief montage of medical treatments, and then suddenly gives factual information about the leprosy:

Leprosy is chronic and contagious. Leprosy is not hereditary. Leprosy can be anywhere or everywhere. Leprosy goes with poverty. Upon attacking the body, it deepens and enlarges wrinkles, eats away the tissues, covers the nerves with a dry shield, dulls sensitivity to heat and touch, causes blindness, destroys the nasal septum, it finds its way to the liver and bone marrow, withers the fingers, it clears the way for other diseases. Leprosy is not incurable. Taking care of lepers stops the disease from spreading. Wherever lepers have been adequately cared for, the disease has vanished. When the leper is cared for early he can be treated completely. Leprosy is not incurable.

This is the first time she speaks directly about the condition that labels the subjects as “lepers” and causes their ostracization from society.

At a first glance, Farrokhzad’s deliberate and unconcealed display of the unsettling physical deformities seem unfair and violating of the people’s privacy. However, she does not label their identities herself; she lets the subjects speak for

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26 Ibid.
themselves, as they engage in their daily activities and are juxtaposed with poems that reveal certain sentiments beyond the aesthetic. In fact, she does not mention leprosy until the climax of the film, only after having built an intimate relationship between the viewers and the people. Despite her transparent use of deformed faces that can easily cause stereotyping and victimization of the subjects, her careful use of poetic and factual texts sheds light on the humanness of people with leprosy.

Figure 5. A boy with leprosy is not a passive face, but an active subject. 27

Whereas previously I had perceived the face as a visual medium that is too powerful and violating for subjects with deformities, Farrokhzad’s film shows that showing their autonomous presence as unlabeled subjects can allow viewers to see a human layer of information beyond the unsettling visuals. Thus, the faces of the children

are not something that should be hidden; they can be shown, only with careful editing that does not impose my notions upon them and is respectful of their autonomous identity.

3. Filmmaker’s agenda and relationship to the subject: Stuart Hall Project vs.
Surname Viet Given Name Nam

A filmmaker’s background and motive always form a particular relationship with the subject, and inevitably play an important role in the way he or she captures and edits. While a filmmaker’s specific relationship to a subject can be seen as a limitation to his or her views, what are different ways and degrees of acknowledging and reconciling the filmmaker’s relationship to the subject?

John Akomfrah’s documentary The Stuart Hall Project is dedicated to the life and legacies of Stuart Hall. Interestingly, most of the footages of Stuart Hall are from his various appearances on broadcast media, especially television. Because he strictly uses archival footage from broadcast media, individual shots are highly impersonal; viewers are constantly shown a frame within a frame. Also, the film isn’t structured around Stuart Hall’s life, but around historical events and movements occurring around Stuart Hall. As he weaves through different historical events like the nuclear threat of the ’50s, the cold war, the youth culture of the ’60s, the age of Thatcher, and the multiculturalism of today, he shapes a constantly evolving, hybrid identity of Stuart Hall solely through broadcast material.

Akomfrah does not directly reveal his position or relationship to the subject at all; in fact, Akomfrah’s voice seems invisible in the film because of the impersonal quality of the broadcast material. As a result, we are only exposed to the media image of Stuart
Hall. But perhaps this accurately describes Akomfrah’s relationship with and access to Stuart Hall; he was a prominent media figure, to whose personal life Akomfrah did not have enough access to represent. Thus, without trying to impose his own view of Hall’s identity, Akomfrah uses components that surrounded Hall during different points of his lifetime – global events, social changes, everyday going ons, and even the music of Miles Davis which Hall was fond of – and creates a collage of Hall’s ever-shifting identity.

Figure 6. Akomfrah only shows framed images of Stuart Hall.28

In contrast with Akomfrah’s intentionally impersonal relationship with Hall’s identity, Trinh T. Min-ha’s representation of Vietnamese women in postwar Vietnam in her film Surname Viet Given Name Nam is a deeply personal endeavor. She interviews different Vietnamese women about the difficult position of being Vietnamese women

during Vietnam’s corrupt political era.

Figure 7. The writing speaks for Vietnamese women and articulates the oppression they faced in society, but in their presentation also seem mask the interviewee.\textsuperscript{29}

Minh-ha’s personal identity as a Vietnamese woman who has emigrated to the U.S. at a young age is a driving force for the editing of the film. In some of the interviews, the frame shifts from the interviewee’s face and fidgets, as if Minh-ha feels somewhat detached from the interviewee’s words. In several shots, descriptions of Vietnamese women are written out across the screen in a rigid font; while these descriptions seem to reveal a hidden, genuine insight into Vietnamese women, the stiffness and overwhelming nature of the caption also seems to reflect a binding and

limiting role of the definition in relation to Minh-ha’s own hybrid Vietnamese identity. At times, the voice of the interviewee, who speaks in a heavy-accented Vietnamese, is played simultaneously with a translator’s voice. This makes the words difficult to comprehend, and yet creates a strange tug of war of the two voices that fight for our attention. Again, Minh-ha’s manipulation of the original interview material reflects her own position as a mediator of the two worlds.

Akomfrah’s inevitably impersonal relationship with Stuart Hall is invested in the choice of broadcast material and impersonal edits, while Minh-ha’s personal yet complicated relationship with the Vietnamese female heritage is shown in her impressionistic, layered and at times incomprehensible edits. While the outcome of the two filmmakers is contrasting, Akomfrah and Minh-ha both acknowledge their respective relationships to the subjects and are do not attempt to exceed or withdraw from the relative positions in the editing practice. Thus, we cannot decide whether being personal or impersonal in a film is better; being transparent about the actual relationship to the subjects and incorporating them in the edits can lead to a genuine portrayal of the subject.

In relation to my project, these films show that examining my own agenda and background is not just beneficial but necessary. While it is true that my agenda as a Korean filmmaker from MIT confines and specifies my message to a certain degree, attempting to reach beyond my given relative position to the subjects will lead to misrepresentation. At the same time, probing further my identity and its somewhat distant relationship to the Vietnam War and Agent Orange can lead to a unique perspective available only to me.
CONCLUSION

Cultural boundaries can be used to achieve a unique cultural insight

The filmmaker’s position as an outsider can be a limitation and a vulnerable position for misrepresentation. However, if the filmmaker does not attempt to speak for a culture and thereby respects the cultural boundaries, he or she can achieve a metaphysical or culture-specific insight that is unique to the filmmaker’s perspective as an outsider.

Allure of aesthetics – especially the face – is a shortcut to misrepresentation, but editing can point to layers beyond

The face is a powerful and vulnerable tool that can easily be misused for a filmmaker’s own purpose. It can also serve as a distraction that masks other layers of information. And yet, rather than limiting information, shedding light on their human layers through careful editing can empower them to be autonomous subjects rather than the filmmaker’s device.

Hiding a filmmaker’s agenda and background can lead to seduction

A filmmaker’s agenda and background is an inevitably layer of filter, and a failure to examine these elements can lead to seduction, which is a form of deception. Acknowledging and being transparent about the role of a filmmaker’s agenda and background will not only avoid misrepresentation, but will also lead to a more profound and unique relationship between the subjects and the filmmaker.
Editing the film is not much different from editing a war narrative

The practice of editing exists not just in film, but it is a systematic practice that has existed for as long as the idea of representation have existed. Along the same lines, problems of editing has only become enlarged in scale as technology has enabled for a world that is more globalized than ever and sources of images more distant than ever, increasing the power and spread of edited media, while technology itself never became evenly distributed. Therefore, if editing is manipulation of perception, the power of manipulation has only been enlarged and unevenly allocated due to development of technology. Because of this skewed power dynamic behind editing, a war has been edited into a frozen narrative of the past, from which the current Agent-Orange-affected population has been edited out for the benefit of the editor. The very same mechanism of editing that has limited the way we perceive a war as a concluded event in the past and has unrepresented millions of Vietnamese people can be used to change our perception. However, this task must be done along with a careful examination of possible misrepresentation. The problems identified at the Friendship Village ultimately reveal the paradoxical nature of conveying others’ experience through film, which is a filmmaker’s construction, and the consequent problems that arise. From this, the practice of editing seems like an endless imbalance of power that will perpetuate misrepresentation, because film can never equate an actual experience but will always remain as the filmmaker/editor’s construction. However, through study of several films in relation to the problems, we learn that a delicate balance does exist between respecting cultural boundaries, understanding the impact of editing and being transparent about the filmmaker’s agenda. And when this balance is achieved, editing no longer becomes a
limiting construction upon experience, but an extension to the physical limits of experience.
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