

QUESTIONING FILMIC CONSTRUCTIONS OF REALITY

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## Abstract

This thesis attempts to denaturalize realist filming techniques in order to highlight how these techniques shaped and continue to shape racial and political power imbalances. Through examining how racism pervaded the foundations of the study of anthropology and anthropological filmmaking, I attempt to show how filming techniques produced meanings of race that were nurtured by white male centered ideas of the world. This thesis also demonstrates how realist filming techniques work to challenge racism by analyzing anti-war films about the Vietnam War. The anti-war films present powerful criticism against U.S. centered patriotic views of the Vietnam War and racism against the Vietnamese. While underlining these unique ideological interventions by realist filming techniques, this thesis attempts to suggest that the realist filmmaking techniques employed in these anti-war films function to perpetuate power imbalanced relationships between American and Vietnamese people even as they challenge racism against the Vietnamese. Lastly, this thesis examines some of the experimental films that attempt to disrupt the realist filming techniques that continue to perpetuate racial power imbalances. As a conclusion, this thesis emphasizes the fluidity of meanings created through filmmaking techniques. Even though white male centered ideas of race persists in realist filming techniques, this study shows that there are powerful visual and historical proofs that realist filmmaking techniques do in fact challenge dominant racial ideology. In sum, this thesis aims to unravel the ideological tendency behind realist filming techniques.

## Introduction

This thesis attempts to denaturalize realist filming techniques that continue to be employed in various kinds of films, techniques that perpetuate a racial power imbalance in their representations. The realist filmmaking techniques developed through diverse realist filmmaking movements in Italy, France, England, and the United States. Anthropologists and anthropological filmmakers in the 1960s to 1970s guided one of the most powerful film realist movements in the United States. The anthropologists proposed that they were able to capture and present unmediated reality using filmic devices because of film's ability to produce photorealistic depiction of the world. Yet, as I will demonstrate, they employed diverse filming techniques to express their interpretations of reality. In doing so, the filming techniques functioned to conserve power imbalanced relationships, such as the relationship between observers and their study subjects, which were present in the foundational ideas of anthropology. Using film's indexical relation to reality, the anthropological filmmakers define the Other from white male centered views and naturalize the hierarchical relationships between white men and people of color. Through analyzing some of the most significant anthropological films as well as anti-war films about the Vietnam War, this thesis attempts to demonstrate how pervasively the hierarchical power relationships between study subjects and anthropologists persist as a relationship between filmed subjects and filmmakers in films.

## Chapter Outline

The first chapter, "The Paradox of Anthropological Filmmaking: Anthropological Film and Conceptions of the Real," deals with anthropologists' construction of reality between 1920s and 1970s. The foundational ideas of anthropology, the study of people and their culture, were nurtured in complicit relationship to evolutionism, colonialism, and enlightenment. The reality

they produced as a basis of the study of anthropology was specifically related to white male European ideas of race and gender. Even though the ideas of colonialism and evolutionism that underwrote the history of anthropology were challenged and criticized by anthropologists from the late nineteenth century onward, power imbalanced relationships continued to persist in some of the later study of anthropology as the relationship between observers and their study subjects.

This chapter argues that the myth that filmic device is able to create complete replica of reality functions to preserve the hierarchical power relationships between filmmakers and filmed subjects in anthropological filmmaking. In the United States, film was introduced to the study of anthropology in the early 1920's and institutionalized in the 1920s and 1970s as a subgenre of study in anthropology, called visual anthropology, which includes all cultural anthropological studies using photography, film, and drawing.<sup>1</sup> From the very emergence of the field in American universities, filmmakers believed that film has privileged access to reality and advocated avoiding manual operations. The myth that filming devices allow anthropological filmmakers privileged access to the real led them to carefully control the representations of study subjects using techniques such as editing and framing. At the same time, these films pass off their analysis of filmed subjects as objective. I will analyze what kind of specific filmmaking techniques are mobilized to present anthropologists' interpretations as the truth and how they work to naturalize imbalanced power relationships between anthropological filmmakers and filmed subjects.

Chapter Two, "The Construction of the Real: A Case Study of Vietnam War Fiction and Nonfiction Films," will explore how racial power imbalances persist in later films through examining Vietnam War themed fiction and non-fiction films. The 1960s and 70s were marked

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<sup>1</sup> Jay Ruby. "The Professionalization of Visual Anthropology in the United States the 1960s and 1970s," *Visual Anthropology Review*. Vol. 17, no. 25. (2000-2001). 5.

by a growing distrust of the U.S. government by its citizens.<sup>2</sup> Americans witnessed the violent and totalitarian attitudes of the U.S. through media and the media representations ultimately worked to decline public confidence in the U.S. government. In response to the American people's disbelief in the U.S. government's tyrannical attitudes, the multiplicity of meaning that was reflected in media representations came to function as a new quality of "realistic" representation during this time period. Similarly to Italian neorealists who produced films to emphasize ordinary Italian people's varying experiences in protest to the propaganda and oppressions by the Fascist government authority, many anti-war films about the Vietnam War highlight the multiple viewpoints to witness the war. In doing so, they present viewpoints alternative to the official narratives that were presented by the U.S. government and produce persuasive anti-war message in resisting nationalistic and racist views of the war. In contrast to the impulse to speak back to nationalistic ideology, realist filmmaking techniques work to naturalize U.S. centered views of the Vietnam War and racialize the Vietnamese as a faceless and nameless mass of Orientalized people. Even though anti-war films challenge racist views toward the Vietnamese by portraying the violence of the U.S. military and insensitivity of government officials toward ordinary Vietnamese people, the filming techniques as well as narratives urge viewers to identify with the American characters. Therefore, the filming techniques function to racialize the Vietnamese as a mass even as they problematize this way of viewing the Other.

The third chapter will focus on how Trinh T. Minh-ha's films, *Reassemblage* and *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam*, problematize anthropological filming techniques that have been carried over from anthropological films to non-fiction and fiction Vietnam War films.

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel C. Hallin. *Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986) 4-6.

Trinh's films appropriate anthropological and documentary filming techniques to disrupt the filmic construction of reality. By deconstructing the realist filming techniques, Trinh highlights the idea of reality about the Other has been constructed from white male centered viewpoints and representations of the Other have always been contained under the racism. Moreover, Trinh employs unconventional plots to underline filmed subjects' self-representation. In doing so, Trinh's films work to unsettle a concept of reality that has been constructed and privileged in films. Using Trinh's films as a case study, this thesis questions the authority that is given to filmmakers in filming reality and challenges filmic construction of reality.

#### Literature Review:

The genre of documentary film, one of the earliest film realist movements, was devised in reaction to dominant cultural representations, travelogues and Hollywood films. When John Grierson, a pioneering Scottish documentary filmmaker in the 1920s coined the term "documentary," he argued that documentary films and travelogues shared a similar interest in the lives of ordinary people. Nonetheless, Grierson believed that the genre of documentary was superior to the travelogue in its ability to capture the reality of subjects' lives in authentic surroundings.<sup>3</sup> John Grierson states:

[w]e know our England glibly as an industrial country but we do not know it in our everyday observation as such. Our literature is divorced from the actual, practiced in the rarefied atmosphere of country colleges and country retreats. Our gentlemen explore the native haunts and investigate the native customs of Tanganyika and Timbuctoo but do not travel dangerously into the jungles of Middlesbrough and the Clyde.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> John Grierson, "First Principles of Documentary," in *Nonfiction Film Theory and Criticism*, ed. Richard Meran Barsam. (N.Y. Dutton: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1976), 21-23.

<sup>4</sup> John Grierson, "Flaherty" in *Grierson on Documentary*, ed. Forsyth Hardy, (London: Faber, 1979), 32.

In contrast to the travelogue that tends to exoticize customs and culture, Grierson proposed that documentary film portrays ordinary people's lives, society, and culture in their authentic locations without exoticizing them. These depictions are valuable because they let viewers observe the actuality of people's lives. Also, Grierson believed that the subject matter--the lives of ordinary people--was more realistic than the subject matter of Hollywood films that were emerging in the same time period. Although many intellectuals in the early twentieth century despised the camera as mere entertainment, Grierson believed that documentary films depicted reality that "let people know about the world in which they lived."<sup>5</sup> With subject matters that are different from Hollywood films and with the immediate depictions of ordinary people's society and culture, Grierson believed that documentary films were able to approximate people's reality.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, Grierson defined documentary film in reaction to travel writing and Hollywood films and believed that the genre offered viewers privileged access to reality by offering detailed and immediate depictions of daily lives from authentic locations.

Later non-fiction filmmakers widely employed documentary filming techniques as well as realist filmmaking techniques that were inspired by Italian neorealist filmmakers as stylistic conventions to satisfy the expectations that films should replicate reality. According to Louise Spence and Vincius Navaro, one technique that is frequently used by contemporary documentary filmmakers is shooting on location and the use of imbalanced light.<sup>7</sup> Documentary filmmakers also employ hand-held cameras, rapid panning, changing and blurred focus, uneven lighting, and

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<sup>5</sup> Anna Grimshaw, *The Ethnographer's Eye: Ways of Seeing in Anthropology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 62.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>7</sup> Louise Spence and Vincius Navaro, *Crafting Truth: Documentary Form and Meaning* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 15.

muddy sounds.<sup>8</sup> These filming techniques are employed to enhance the sense of immediacy and authenticity in capturing the moments on location as Grierson advocated at the birth of the documentary films as a genre.

Hollywood filmmakers developed filmmaking techniques in pursuit of realism especially in their representations of war experiences. According to Patricia Zimmerman, the conditions of World War II led Hollywood filmmakers to pursue realism in two directions: by using the camera to depict immediate reactions of the battle and by moving to shooting at an authentic location using natural light.<sup>9</sup> As 16mm film was used for military purposes to study the enemy and also to train American soldiers, some of the reactions that were captured by the filmic device started to be embraced by Hollywood filmmakers as the “realistic” depiction of experience. The light, hand-held cameras that were brought to the war “bounced, shook, and quivered during turbulence, antiaircraft fire, or fierce combat.”<sup>10</sup> While Hollywood filmmakers share some of the documentary filmmaking techniques such as location shooting, these representations of the war also created a new type of realism for use by Hollywood technicians.<sup>11</sup>

Trinh T. Minh-ha considers realist filming techniques function as a powerful ideological weapon to privilege white male centered ideas of the world and maintain racial power imbalanced relationships between people from former colonial countries and the Other from former colonized countries.<sup>12</sup> Trinh demonstrates in her various writings that racial and political power imbalance continues from the time of colonialism and realist filmmaking does not challenge the power imbalance in a society. Therefore, Trinh warns that realist filmmaking

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<sup>8</sup> Spence and Navaro, *Crafting Truth*, 28-32.

<sup>9</sup> Patricia R. Zimmerman, “Cameras and Guns 1941-1945,” in *Reel Families* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 96-105.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 105.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 96.

<sup>12</sup> Minh-ha, Trinh T, “Documentary Is/Not a Name,” *October*, 52 (Spring, 1990), 89-92.

techniques function as a way to strengthen dominant ideas of race by merely producing more stylistically persuasive reality than the other previous realist filming techniques without questioning the sovereignty of the dominant ideology.<sup>13</sup> Trinh considers that because of the racial power imbalance, people from former colonized countries are not allowed to speak for themselves in dominant filmic representations. Trinh mentions in *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics* (1991) that:

[m]aking a film on/about the “others” consists of allowing them paternalistically “to speak for themselves” and, since this proves insufficient in most cases, of completing their speech with insertion of a commentary that will objectively describe/interpret the images according to a scientific-humanistic rationale.... [P]eople from remote parts of the world are made accessible through dubbing/subtitling, transformed into English-speaking elements and brought into conformity with a definite mentality.<sup>14</sup>

Trinh suggests that the representation of the Other is under the control of Western discourse. Therefore, even if viewers see the “other” speaking on the screen, the Other is made to speak only to justify the righteous authority of power. Instead of the Other speaking and explaining about themselves in their own terms, the “other” is turned into an understandable form for dominant audiences. Importantly, these voices of the “other” are turned into and ruled by the English language, the master’s tool. These, in a way, mold what the “other” is for the dominant audience. Moreover, by calling them “objective” or “scientific,” these representations conceal the manipulation of the image of the “other” and complete the self-complacency of their representation.

Yet, the realist filmmaking movements do not necessarily only pursue stylistic development in depicting reality and people’s life accurately, but the depiction of ordinary people’s lives and experiences also function as a powerful ideological tool against the political

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<sup>13</sup> Trinh, “Documentary Is/Not a Name,” 89.

<sup>14</sup> Trinh-T. Minh-Ha. *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 60.

authority of a society. Millicent Marcus discusses Italian neorealist films, which emerged at the end of World War II, share a similar tendency to embrace the experiences of ordinary Italian people in reaction to fascist ideology. Marcus argues:

[i]ndeed, for many critics, neorealism is first and foremost a moral sentiment... whose purpose was to promote a true objectivity—one that would force viewers to abandon the limitations of a strictly personal perspective and to embrace the reality of the “others,” be they persons or things, with all the ethical responsibility that such a vision entail.<sup>15</sup>

Although there are filming techniques that are loosely shared by Italian filmmakers such as location shooting, minimum editing, natural lighting, open ended plot, working class and nonprofessional casts, and dialogue in vernacular, Marcus states what binds these filmmakers together is their focus on the tragedy of warfare that affects common people. Peter Bondanella also agrees with this view and demonstrates that Italian neorealism gradually emerged after the Second World War partly in response to the call for Italian national cinema due to the decreased importation of Hollywood films during the fascist period.<sup>16</sup> This demand for Italian cinema was taken up by group of journalists and filmmakers with anti-fascist attitudes. An anti-fascist journalist, Leo Longanesi was one of the patrons who repeatedly called for Italian national cinema as well as a cinema of realism in the 1930s. In response to these calls, a group of young filmmakers who were interested in the conditions of the working class “sought an alternative to the cliché and falsehoods of the Fascist film industry.”<sup>17</sup> Due to the censorship of films, prominent Italian neorealist filmmakers such as Roberto Rossellini, Vittorio De Sica, and

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<sup>15</sup> Millicent Marcus. *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism*. (Princeton: New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1986), 23.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Bondanella, *Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present*, (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1983), 24.

<sup>17</sup> Marcus. *Italian Film in the Light of Neorealism*, 19.

Luchino Visconti appeared after the fall of the Fascist regime and their notable films similarly emphasized the tragic and bitter experiences of the ordinary under Fascism.<sup>18</sup>

In *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, Laura U. Marks demonstrates that representations of the Other in visual culture are constructed by Western centered views of the Other. Therefore, non-Western filmmakers who express an inter-cultural experience need to use alternative ways of representing themselves to avoid racist views of the Other that are naturalized in the visual representations of the Other. Marks investigates how the derogatory representation of the “other” attained “objective” cultural representation historically. Marks points out that there is a historically constructed complicity between visual knowledge and official discourse. She argues:

ethnographic photography and film have objectified non-Western cultures and made a spectacle of them; they have reduced cultures to their visual appearance; and they have used vision as part of a general will to knowledge of the other as a means to power.<sup>19</sup>

Marks points out that the Western production of knowledge relied on visual difference from Western culture or whiteness to represent the “other.” Therefore, visual knowledge, which was inspired and developed by the superior power’s articulation of the visual differences of the “other,” became their claim for knowledge about the “other.” Thus, visual knowledge historically functioned as the master’s tool to define the “other” as exotic from Western centered viewpoints. Marks calls this visual knowledge “optic visibility.” Thus, Marks denies dominant filmmaking techniques and visual representations because they are constructed in relation to dominant ideologies of racialized differences. She proposes alternative ways of

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<sup>18</sup> Bondanella, *Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present*, 16.

<sup>19</sup> Laura U. Marks. *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 133.

filmmaking which evoke personal and cultural memories through an appeal to nonvisual knowledge in order to avoid Western centered views of the Other.

This thesis explores how realist and anthropological filmmaking techniques function as visual knowledge which privilege Euro-centered views of the world and undermine the experiences of the Other as Marks discusses. In discussing anthropological filmmaking and Vietnam War themed fiction and non-fiction films, I attempt to show how filming techniques are mobilized as a way of preserving the racial power hierarchy between people from former colonial countries and the Other and how the filming techniques function as a way to perpetuate the power imbalance. This thesis also attempts to show how alternative filming techniques can be mobilized to disrupt dominant visual representations and how they function through the case study of Trinh T. Minh-ha's films.

## Chapter 1: The Paradox of Anthropological Filmmaking: Anthropological Film and Conceptions of the Real

This chapter demonstrates how film's indexical relationship to reality functions as a way for anthropologists to present their views as the truth and preserve the hierarchical relationships between themselves and their study subjects. The foundational ideas of anthropology, the study of people and their culture, were nurtured by European colonialists, geographers, scientists and philosophers during the eighteenth century in complicit relationship to evolutionism, colonialism, and the Enlightenment. The reality they produced as a basis of the study of anthropology was specifically related to male European centered ideas of race and gender. By representing, classifying, and analyzing the world from their own perspectives, European scholars shaped and naturalized hierarchical power relationships between white male Europeans and non-Europeans in their studies. Even though the colonialism and evolutionism that underwrote the history of anthropology was challenged and criticized in late nineteenth century, imbalanced power relationships persisted in later studies of anthropology as relationships between observers and their study subjects. Anthropological films function as a way to legitimately perpetuate hierarchical power relationships between anthropological filmmakers and filmed subjects using film's indexical relation to reality. Because films are able to produce photorealistic representations of reality, the anthropologists claim that films are adequately able to capture reality. Yet, they employ framing, editing, and camerawork as a way to offer their interpretations of study subjects and naturalize anthropologists' authority as the subject of observation by privileging their views of them as the truth.

This thesis draws upon *Nanook of the North: A Story Of Life: Love In the Actual Arctic* (1922) directed by Robert J. Flaherty, *Karba's First Years: A Study of Balinese Childhood* (1952) by Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson, and *Ax Fight* (1975) by American

anthropologists Timothy Asch and Napoleon Chagnon, to highlight how filming techniques are employed to construct anthropologists' views of the world as unmediated truth. These films are some of the most significant anthropological films for this thesis because these films employ realist filming techniques in quite an obvious manner. Through analyzing these films, this chapter aims to denaturalize their construction of reality.

### Anthropology and Anthropological Films

Race is not biologically given, or fixed. The idea of race continuously transforms sociologically, historically, and politically. As Michael Omi and Howard Winant argue:

[A]lthough the concept of race invokes biologically based human characters (so called “phenotypes”), selection of these particular human features for purposes of racial signification is always necessarily a social and historical process. In contrast to the other major distinction of this type, that of gender, there is no biological basis for distinguishing among human groups along the lines of race.<sup>20</sup>

Omi and Winant highlight that the meaning of race is socially constructed and representations of race are always determined in relation to a society. They call the process whereby certain ideas of race are maintained within societies “racial formation.”<sup>21</sup> Although racial formation influences the racial hegemony of society, the ideas of race are fluid and are always being formed by specific social and political power relationships.<sup>22</sup>

The foundational ideas of anthropology were nurtured under a process of racialization in relation to evolutionism and the intellectual context of the Enlightenment. The discipline of anthropology does not completely emerge until the nineteenth century with figures such as Lewis Henry Morgan, E.B. Taylor, James Frazer, and Franz Boas, but writings of earlier colonialists,

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<sup>20</sup> Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: United States from the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 55.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

geographers, scientists, and philosophers about foreign culture during the eighteenth century shaped the basis of anthropology.<sup>23</sup> According to Mary Louise Pratt, 1735 was a historical turning point for Europeans' study of culture. In that year, a French explorer, Charles Marie de La Condamine conducted the first major international scientific expedition to Panama and Manta in Ecuador. This coincided with the publication of *The System of Nature* by the Swedish naturalist Carl Linne. Pratt notes that this experience of travel and mono-directional communication with foreign culture made European elites aware of their culture in relation to others.<sup>24</sup> Importantly, natural history was one of the primary sciences of the eighteenth century.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, when the idea of civilization, originally defined in terms of economic progress, was redefined as the self-confident cultural identity of Europeans as superior to other forms of culture around the world, Europeans believed that these ideas of racial hierarchy were scientific and truth.<sup>26</sup> In this process, people from other cultures were defined as uncivilized and believed to be following the linear path to civilization.<sup>27</sup> Scientists defined non-Europeans as at a prehistoric stage of development, and increasingly represented European as the "most perfect in human achievement," a goal non-Europeans should pursue as Edward Burnett Taylor, one of the earliest scientists and anthropologists of the nineteenth century believed.<sup>28</sup> Scholars such as philosophers, naturalists, and scientists who created the basis of anthropology during the Enlightenment

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<sup>23</sup> Larry Wolf, "Discovering Cultural Perspective: The Intellectual History of Anthropological Thought in the Age of Enlightenment," in *The Anthropology of the Enlightenment*, ed. Larry Wolff and Marco Cipolloni. (Stanford: California, Stanford University Press, 2007), 5.

<sup>24</sup> Mary Louis Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 15.

<sup>25</sup> Londa Schiebinger, *Nature's Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 3.

<sup>26</sup> Larry Wolff and Marco Cipolloni. *The Anthropology of the Enlightenment* (Stanford: California, Stanford University Press, 2007), xi.

<sup>27</sup> George W. Stocking, Jr. *Race, Culture and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 74-75.

<sup>28</sup> Stocking, *Race, Culture and Evolution*, 74.

believed that their study of foreign culture was capable of categorizing the developmental stages of non-Europeans in terms of primitiveness, savagery, and barbarism.<sup>29</sup> By defining, sketching, and reframing non-European societies by Eurocentric standards, Europeans strengthened their own self-identity as civilized, which worked to naturalize European superiority.<sup>30</sup> These fundamental methodological assumptions functioned as a mechanism to conserve Euro-centric views of race as scientific and truthful.

Later anthropologists criticized the idea of evolutionism and the Enlightenment that underpinned the study of human culture. Franz Boas, a German-born businessman who assisted in bringing anthropology to the United States in the late nineteenth century, challenged the methodological mainstay of evolutionism. Boas rejected the traditional method of taking cultural characteristics abstracted from contemporary cultures and placing them along a trajectory of development.<sup>31</sup> Emphasizing the distinctive history of each cultural group, Boas contributed to combating scientific racism as early as 1887.<sup>32</sup> Katharine Dunham, an African American dancer and anthropologist, and Zora Neale Hurston, an African American folklorist, dedicated themselves to anthropological fieldwork that challenged the hierarchical relationships between observer and study subjects through their studies of vernacular expression through prose and movement.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Wolff and Cipolloni, *The Anthropology of the Enlightenment*, xi-xii.

<sup>30</sup> Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 32.

<sup>31</sup> John J. Honigmann, *The Development of Anthropological Ideas*, (Homewood, Illinois: The Dorsey Press, 1976), 195-196.

<sup>32</sup> Lee D. Baker, "Columbia University's Franz Boas: He Led the Undoing of Scientific Racism," *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 22 (1998-1999): 94.

<sup>33</sup> Hannah Durkin, "Dance Anthropology and the Impact of 1930s Haiti on Katherine Dunham's scientific and Artistic Consciousness," *International Journal of Francophone Studies*. Vol. 14, number. 1&2. (2011), 124.

Nonetheless, the binary of subject and object persisted through the 20<sup>th</sup> century in some anthropologists' writings and films. As John J. Honigmann explains, despite Boas's hostility towards evolutionism, Boas and his students made reference to the evidence of "progress" in analyzing their study subjects and sometimes their study revealed resemblances to evolutionists' ideas.<sup>34</sup> Even though the word "evolution" might have disappeared from anthropologists' writing in 1970s and 80s, some of these writings resonate with earlier conventions of anthropology that define the Other from Euro-centered notions of culture and work to perpetuate the hierarchical relationships between observer and study subject. As Alan Lomax, an American field collector of folk music of the twentieth century, stated:

[T]he smaller economies and the nonliterate folk, in whom the human variety largely resides, struggle vainly to maintain healthy self-awareness. They lack school systems, scholar historians, time on the air, and the funds to pay for any of these modern essentials for cultural self-development. Now and urgently they need ... help in preserving and adapting their extraverbal and oral traditions.<sup>35</sup>

Lomax refers to anthropological study subjects as the "nonliterate folk" and defines the regions where anthropologists typically work as "small economies." Since these countries do not know the value of their culture or have any power to conserve their own heritage, anthropologists are obligated to preserve the local culture and lifestyle of the study subjects on their behalf. Some anthropologists claim that their analysis is more credible than the viewpoints of the people they study because their views are scientific. For instance, Conrad Phillip Kottak gave anthropologists' viewpoints higher priority to the perspectives of their study subjects because anthropologists were tasked with "placing particular cultures in broader comparative and historical perspectives" while "natives may fail to admit, or even to recognize, certain aspects

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<sup>34</sup> Honigmann, *The Development of Anthropological Ideas*, 199.

<sup>35</sup> Alan Lomax. "Urgent Anthropology: Cinema, Science and Culture Renewal," *Current Anthropology*, vol. 14. No. 4 (oct, 1973). 475.

and results of their behavior.”<sup>36</sup> Kottak considers that the anthropologist’s task is to examine the anthropologist’s hypotheses and to place them in historical context by analyzing individual culture and society. This belief conserves the lopsided power relationship between anthropologists and their subjects by privileging the former as competent observers and relegating the latter to the status of objects to be observed.

Visual anthropology, institutionalized in the United States as a subgenre of anthropology, inherited the hierarchical power relationships. This new subgenre of anthropology, which included all the anthropological studies of visual material, such as film as well as photography and drawing, was formulated during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>37</sup> *Ax Fight* (1975) directed by American anthropologists Timothy Asch and Napoleon Chagnon is a good example of the persistence of power relationships between filmmakers and study subjects in anthropological films. This film focuses on explaining a fight among the Yanomami of the highlands of Venezuela. In the first part of the film, Asch and Chagnon introduce what is believed to be a fight two days after their arrival in February 1971 with almost no analysis. In the second part of the film, the film replays the event in slow motion while Chagnon explains the relationships of the study subjects, and how the fight had started. Filmed from a distance, there is no interaction between the director and any of Yanomami villagers. Asch and Chagnon employ filming techniques to present how filmed images are supposed to be understood. By creating order out of chaos while they examine, analyze, and categorize their study subjects from their own viewpoints this way, the filmmakers’ explanations gain credibility. Thus, even though the explanations are given only from the filmmakers’ perspectives, they work to privilege their

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<sup>36</sup> Conrad Phillip Kottak, *Anthropology: The Exploration of Human Diversity*, (New York: Random House, 1978), 10.

<sup>37</sup> Ruby. “The Professionalization of Visual Anthropology,” 5.

interpretation as trustworthy and preserve the relationship between filmmaker and study subject as subject and object of the gaze, respectively.

#### Filmic Device as a Tool to Capture Reality

Since the emergence of visual anthropology in American universities, film has been associated with a privileged access to the “real” over other forms of representation. This is because film not only represents an object photorealistically, but also evokes an affinity to what existed once when a film was shot. A camera produces an image by capturing reflected light from objects in front of a lens element. The camera captures every detail immediately as an impression. Because of the camera’s ability to produce representations that are more accurate to the referent and because of its physical relationship to the material reality, anthropologists believed that photographic images have physical and existential connections to filmed subjects. This intimate relationship between photographic images and reality is called “indexical,” a term coined by the late-nineteenth-century philosopher and semiologist Charles Sanders Peirce.<sup>38</sup> In addition to people’s belief in the camera’s ability to produce an indexical transcription of reality, sound effects heighten the filmic device’s association with reality. When sound effects are synchronized with images, they reinforce the sense of presence and add aural traces of the world depicted in film.<sup>39</sup> Many anthropologists shared the belief in indexical relationships between the filmed images and filmed subjects and advocated film as a technique to capture the reality of anthropological subjects. According to Margaret Mead:

If a tape recorder, camera, or video is set up and left in the same place, large batches of material can be collected without the intervention of the filmmaker, or ethnographer and without the continuous self-consciousness of those who are being observed. The camera

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<sup>38</sup> Charles S. Peirce, “Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs,” *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler. (New York: Dover Publications, 2011), 106-107.

<sup>39</sup> Spence and Navaro, *Crafting Truth: Documentary Form and Meaning*, 16-18.

or tape recorder that stays in one spot, that is not turned, wound, refocused, or visibly loaded, does become part of the background scene, and what it records did happen.<sup>40</sup>

This quote underscores the myth that films produce the objective depictions of the world.

Reflecting the expectation that the camera produces indexical depictions of reality, Mead expresses how anthropologists could make use of the camera's ability to produce a complete duplication of what existed in front of it. Mead claims that a filmic device can capture reality if it is undisturbed and filmed subjects are captured in frame for a longer time than dominant films. Although filmmakers decide the framing and remain present on location, their belief in filmic devices mitigates these concerns about objectivity.

Because anthropological filmmakers were confident in the camera's power to present reality in this way, they warned other anthropological filmmakers to avoid manual operation as much as possible so as not to undermine the camera's independent capacity to reflect "reality." Alan Lomax recommends detailed filming techniques in order to make good use of filmic devices and capture reality:

Dramatic editing, shifts of perspectives, and all the tricks of montage simply destroy the value of the film document for the scientist. He requires the whole event, the full context, the whole body in action, the entire group—and, above all, long, continuous, undisturbed shots so that the overlay of patterns in the interaction itself will have time to emerge.<sup>41</sup>

Lomax advised anthropologists not to emphasize the typical filmmaker's manual operations such as editing, change of focus and framing, or fragmenting a shot by zooming in or inserting multiple cuts. Such filmmaking techniques, according to Lomax, would hinder anthropologists from depicting the entirety of events, the background, and the movements of the study subjects. The camera alone had the capacity to duplicate and reveal the whole of reality. In this way,

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<sup>40</sup> Margaret Mead, "Visual Anthropology in a Discipline of Words," in *Principles of Visual Anthropology*, ed. Paul Hockings. (Berlin: Ratzlow-Druck, 2003), 9.

<sup>41</sup> Lomax. "Urgent Anthropology: Cinema, Science and Culture Renewal," 474-479.

Lomax's advocacy for long sustained shots with minimal editing is underscored by his belief that the entire reality comes into view with the help of a camera.

Visual anthropologists' faith in the camera's ability to reflect the world instantaneously and with precision gave credence to the anthropological film as a savior for the study of anthropology at the height of the discipline's institutionalization in the United States. The 1960s and 1970s were years of crisis because of the worldwide social and cultural changes that affected the lives of their study subjects. For instance, Lomax expressed his concern with environmental changes and urbanization that transformed traditions and cultural heritage in non-European parts of the world.<sup>42</sup> Anthropologists who believed that they were obligated to preserve traditional culture and lifestyles considered traditional note taking inadequate to conserve the cultural heritage of the "non-literate folk."<sup>43</sup> Technological devices such as the camera and other filmic devices, by contrast, could document these cultural forms before they disappeared. Filmic devices would thus rescue the discipline of anthropology as well as their study subjects. For instance, Lomax claims:

Although ethnographic books ... store knowledge for science and enrich the life of the urban elite, they seldom strengthen or even adequately represent folk and primitive culture. The new media—tape and color film synchronized with sound—produce virtually total documents of culture and, at the same time, can beneficially affect it. Electronic devices now have the potential to record, store, retrieve, and reproduce the whole man's culture.... Where print leaves out the nonverbal and is too slow for present purposes, the new media are immediate and total.<sup>44</sup>

The indexical relationship between the filmed image and "reality" informed Lomax's idea that new media and film could produce more total depictions of foreign culture than drawing and writing. The traditional methodologies, involving copious note-taking, demanded too much time

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<sup>42</sup> Lomax. "Urgent Anthropology," 480.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 475.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

because anthropologists have to rely on analytical skills in making a record of society, culture, and lifestyle.

In summary, the myth that anthropological filmmakers are able to depict the real emerged from two forces. First, films were an indexical medium that presented images that were physically connected to reality. Therefore, filming in static long takes and minimal editing was believed to capture reality. Second, the indexical relationships between filmed or photographed images and reality led proponents of visual anthropology to believe that film would preserve foreign culture better than descriptions and sketches would since film had the capacity to reflect a complete and objective image of study subjects' lives.

#### Development of the Stylistic Conventions

Contrary to claims that a camera will capture reality if left undisturbed, the anthropological filmmakers' use of uncut shots reveals the shortcomings of static long takes in enabling viewers to understand reality. Consider, for instance, the representational strategies of *Ax Fight* (1975). The film offers two different kinds edited scenes after showing an unedited version of the same scene. The unedited section of the film works to challenge Asch and Chagnon's voiceover narrations that viewers are about to see and hear the unedited record of a fight among the Yanomami. This is because what is filmed in this part of the film remains unintelligible until the edited part explains that a fight is taking place. This unedited overview of the fight includes some long, silent sequences of men standing, moving around, confronting each other, moving away, and, suddenly, attacking other men with axes. It also contains shots of women shouting. No verbal or visual information explains the relationships among the villagers or what is being said. In addition, the confrontation suddenly intensifies as one of the villagers

inexplicably starts running after another. The scene does not appear to be intelligible for viewers. In this way, contrary to the anthropologists' claim that a camera can replicate reality, the unedited scenes of chaotic violence reveal that the film requires editing and camerawork to produce understanding.

Because of film's shortcomings, anthropological filmmaking techniques were developed to construct reality through meticulous camerawork and editing. In a paradoxical relationship to the anthropologists' previous reliance on static long takes with minimal editing, long static takes in anthropological films are always accompanied by editing and slow motion. *Ax Fight* is no exception. The filmmaking techniques enhance the credibility of the film's construction of reality because these edited versions create order out of what appear to be chaotic to viewers as they examine, analyze, and categorize the study subjects. With *Ax Fight* as its main example, the rest of this chapter explores how anthropological filmmakers construct reality through filming techniques.

Voiceover narrations when synchronized with images of study subjects directly shape viewers' understandings of filmed images. In contrast to the ideal that long, unedited shots will automatically capture and reveal a comprehensible reality, this technique shapes certain views as reality by narrating what merits attention and how certain behaviors should be understood. For instance, the voiceover is pivotal in constructing the chaotic violence in *Ax Fight* because the voiceover produces a setting for viewers to see what is filmed as a fight by offering information about hostility between some of the Yanomami. The texts that appear in the edited section of *Ax Fight* function in a similar way to the voiceover narrations. The text explains that a former villager named Mohesiwa who was visiting the village where the fight occurred, beat Sinabimi, a female villager who had refused him food. Following this text, the narrations are synchronized

with the unedited scenes replayed to explain how the volatile situation intensified and how the fight escalated. Against the backdrop of images of an anonymous woman sobbing in the arms of another woman, the voiceover explains that the crying woman is Sinabimi, who was beaten by Mohesiwa. In the following scene, viewers see the confrontation of two men. The narration explains that the men are Mohesiwa and Sinabimi's brother, who wishes to avenge his sister. The narration also explains how the violent confrontation could be seen as a fight by illustrating the significance of each blow. With the image of Mohesiwa striking Sinabimi's brother with a long wooden pole, the narration reveals that this is the start point of the fight; Mohesiwa had been insulted by Sinabimi's brother's provocation. With the following scene where Sinabimi's brother strikes back at Mohesiwa, the voiceover narrates that Sinabimi's brother waited to give calculated attacks on Mohesiwa's arm which is crucial for this fight to hold long wooden weapons. In the next scene, the narration explains that Mohesiwa's brother came to help the injured Mohesiwa. In the last scene, viewers see three men staring at each other and understand that it is a confrontation between Sinabimi's and Mohesiwa's supporters. In this way, the information offered through narrations enable viewers to see what is filmed as a fight among the Yanomami.

The voiceover narration directs the viewer's attention to specific parts of filmed images and in so doing, creates meaning. *Karba's First Years: A Study of Balinese Childhood* (1952), by Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson is a good example. By showing interactions between Karba, a Balinese newborn, and his parents throughout his first year, this film demonstrates that the Balinese are cheerful, artistic but reticent, and that their ways of child-rearing instill their characters. The camera, set up on a tripod, does not change focus or angle while showing the interactions between Balinese parents and their children. Yet the voiceover narration, not the

static camerawork, produces the viewer's "knowledge" of Balinese childhood from the visual information. In one of the last shots where Karba's mother bathes him and in the following shots where Karba is filmed while sitting with his friends, Mead's voice describes how the formation of the Balinese character is depicted in the scene:

[H]ere we see his mother bathing Karba in an old tin tub we had given them.... [H]e is still being nursed. But notice the difference, her treatment of him. How much harsher it is. He isn't a happy, indulged baby anymore.... There is a change in her treatment of him and his treatment of her..... He runs over to father and stands beside him, looking miserable. His mother still borrows a baby and tries to tease him, but he has learned not to respond.<sup>45</sup>

Mead's voice asserts her claim that the Balinese unresponsiveness is shaped through the parent-child relationship. In conjunction with a wide shot of Karba being bathed by his mother, Mead's voiceover narration claims that the mother's coldness is responsible for Karba's flat affect.

Without voiceover narrations, the images of interactions between Karba and his mother would not draw the viewers' attention to the mother's treatment of the child. From the image, it is not entirely clear if her treatment of Karba qualifies as harsh or not. The voiceover narrations not only direct the viewer's attention to the mother's treatment of Karba, but also make a judgment about it. In this way, the anthropological filmmakers construct meaning using voiceover narration instead of simply relying on the camera's power to reproduce reality.

Filmmakers utilize camerawork, such as the tracking shot, to emphasize the significance of a particular series of bodily movements and to create meaning from them. "Tracking" is the movement of the camera as it follows a subject. Anthropological filmmakers follow and keep a particular study subject continuously within the frame with minimal changes of focus, and in so doing draw viewer's attention to the specific flow of actions as a way of creating certain

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<sup>45</sup> Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson, *Karba's First Years: A Study of Balinese Childhood*, VHS (New York: Institute for Intercultural Studies, 1952).

meanings out of the actions.<sup>46</sup> For instance, long tracking shots that were used to capture one Yanomami person's brutal assault with an ax can urge viewers to regard the Yanomami as aggressive. . Chagnon is a famous scholar who conducted exhaustive anthropological research on the Yanomami. In his book, *Yanomamo: The Fierce People*, Chagnon demonstrates that Yanomami villagers are violent.<sup>47</sup> The panning supports Chagnon's interpretations of the Yanomami and racializes the Yanomami as aggressive. As one of the villagers starts running toward the visitors with an ax, the camera captures him running from the right edge of the screen to the left edge straight toward one of the Yanomami. For this film, it is essential that the camera pan and change perspectives to display the ax-wielding villager and to expose the long stretches of action in the frame; this is the only scene where viewers see the armed villager. Until this point, viewers see the Yanomami with clubs, which do not appear to be as violent as an ax. By capturing the Yanomami with an ax, the film imbues the Yanomami's actions with ferocity. By changing the focus and emphasizing the action of the Yanomami running with an ax, the film shows how the ax is mobilized as the deadliest weapon. In this way, the camerawork can create certain meanings of race as the truth.

Slow motion and pauses are other anthropological filmmaking techniques that are used to create emphasis and evoke certain meanings. For instance, the long tracking shot of the brutal assault by one of the ax-wielding Yanomami takes place suddenly in the unedited parts of the film; it is almost impossible for viewers to examine the running villager or the ax he holds in his hand. Therefore, without the slow motion or voiceover narration, the body movement appears as a sudden and random full-scale sprint rather than as part of the fight. In edited parts of the film,

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<sup>46</sup> Lomax. "Urgent Anthropology," 477-479.

<sup>47</sup> Napoleon A. Chagnon, *Yanomamo: The Fierce People* (Chicago: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968). 2-3.

viewers hear the voiceover explanations that Sinabimi's husband's brother, Kebuwa, is furious enough to grab an ax. Then, the long tracking shot of Kebuwa running is shown in slow motion. In doing so, the film offers an interpretation that the ax is the climax of the fight between Sinabimi's and Mohesiwa's supporters. It also emphasizes the aggression of the Yanomami by letting viewers witness the ax Kebuwa holds in his hand. In doing so, the ax fight, a particular view of seeing the conflict among the Yanomami, comes into view as reality.

Decelerating actions also offer visual proof to heighten the credibility of the viewpoints offered by the voiceover narrations. This works quite efficiently since fast actions tend to lose the viewer's attention in real time. Consider the confrontation scene in which Mohesiwa and Sinabimi's brother exchange several blows in a wide shot of the antagonists. In the unedited part of the film, these violent actions transpire within fifteen to twenty seconds so that it is impossible for viewers to see each blow. In addition, the unedited scenes do not mention the relationship between the two Yanomami, so there seems to be no reason for the fight. In the edited version, slow motion and pauses decelerate the rapid body movements and viewers are able to see how Sinabimi's brother's blow was directed toward Mohesiwa's arm. This heightens the credibility of the voiceover narration that describes Sinabimi's brother's attack as a "calculated blow" because arms are crucial body parts for their fight using seemingly heavy, long clubs as weapons.<sup>48</sup> The following slow motion scenes show how slow motion not only reveals the details of individual actions but also the speed of those actions. Here, viewers see how Mohesiwa strikes Sinabimi's brother twice on his thigh. Even though these are shown in the continuing slow motion, Mohesiwa's actions appear quicker relative to previous movements. Therefore, the slow motion emphasizes the immediacy of Mohesiwa's action and his fury.

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<sup>48</sup> Timothy Asch and Napoleon A. Chagnon, *Ax Fight*, VHS (Watertown, Massachusetts: Documentary Educational Resources, 1989).

Therefore, when the voiceover describes Mohesiwa's fury with Sinabimi's brother's provocation, slow motion scenes supply the visual evidence; viewers see Mohesiwa strikes Sinobimi's brother twice and Mohesiwa's actions were faster and more immediate than previous actions. In this way, viewers are able to interpret what seems to be an arbitrary exchange of blows as the intensification of the conflict between Sinabimi's brother and Mohesiwa. Thus, slow motion offers powerful visual evidence of the narrative presented in the film.

Anthropological films emphasize the complexity and the breadth of the background in order to actively construct a sense of entirety in the filmed landscape. Although as anthropologists such as Lomax mention, wide-angle framing enables anthropologists to include more objects in a scene than a narrower lens and highlights the expansiveness of the environment, the framing does not reveal detailed information about filmed subject's body movements. Therefore, the cinematographer offers a closer or narrower angle of vision to compensate for what cannot be seen in wide-angle framing to produce a sense of wholeness in film. For instance, wide-angle framing of the confrontation is shown in the middle of the confrontation scenes of *Ax Fight*. The wide-angle framing offers a clear picture of the environment, including the woods that surround the village and the Yanomami who are viewing the fight from a distance. These shots, which allow viewers to see the landscape, do not contextualize where the fight occurs unless the wide-angle framing is juxtaposed with closer shots because the Yanomami villagers appear to be a very small group of people and there is no way for viewers to know what is happening. In the opening sequences of *Ax Fight*, viewers see some Yanomami people fighting in the middle of the frame, with the Yanomami men taking up the full frame. The wide-angle views of the village are offered by gradually zooming out from this middle framing. The wider views of the village as well as the Yanomami people who appear small in the framing operate as

part of the landscape and as a context where the fight occurs because they are shown in relation to the closer shot of the fight. In this way, the wide-angle framing itself does not reveal reality, but filmmakers apply multiple filming techniques such as zooming work to actively construct a vision of the whole.

Sound also privileges a filmmaker's interpretation of filmed subjects' sonic culture as reality. The sounds corresponding to the filmed images appear falsely to viewers as what was originally and naturally captured when the film was shot. Therefore, viewers use the sounds to understand what they are seeing on film. In this way, the sounds tend to gain credibility from viewers as evidential material of the physical world captured by the microphone.<sup>49</sup>

Anthropological film uses viewers' belief in sound in constructing credible reality in film. Wild tracking sound, for instance, is composed of the ordinary, everyday sound of conversation, weeping, laughter, and music.<sup>50</sup> Because anthropological films are usually made for an audience unfamiliar with the region depicted in the film, anthropological filmmakers construct a seamless and credible reality simply by attaching wild tracking sound in place of undesired sound which occurred naturally in the course of filming.

Anthropological films often construct a reality that has a complicit relationship with the dominant narrative structure in popular cinema. By producing a narrative from the experiences of study subjects, anthropological films present those experiences as the anthropologist's or filmmaker's own stories. According to Thomas Schartz, popular films compose "exposition, complication, and resolution," in other words, "a beginning, a middle, and an end," in order to

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<sup>49</sup> Spence and Navaro, *Crafting Truth*, 241-242.

<sup>50</sup> Lomax. "Urgent Anthropology," 477-479.

construct a sense of whole and closure in a story.<sup>51</sup> David Bordwell points to a similar narrative structure, which he calls the *cause-effect logic*, created by editing, mise-en-scene, cinematography and sound.<sup>52</sup> Jump cuts, in which several shots of the same subjects are taken out during the editing process, are one of the editing techniques widely employed for constructing the consumable and pleasurable narrative in film. As with popular films, anthropological films construct and develop a narrative and present the lives of study subjects as a consumable coherent being for viewers' pleasure. For example, *Nanook of the North* mobilizes jump cuts and sound effects to emphasize the hardships, crisis, excitement, accomplishment, and successes of the Inuit and also to construct fragmented linear narratives that begin, develop, and end. A sequence depicting the building of an igloo shows a few short scenes of the Inuit carving, carrying and assembling ice blocks. The jump cuts here provide summaries of progress as a large amount of actual time is spent carrying, building, and carving ice. The scenes of smooth and effortless igloo construction enabled by the use of jump cuts give viewers a gratifying sense of closure produced by the linear and steady construction process. Sound effect emphasizes this narrative development. For instance, in a sequence of Nanook's heated battle with a seal in *Nanook of the North*, the soundtrack of violins in a minor key and high tempo constructs the experience of Nanook as thrilling. The music becomes gradually faster and louder, building excitement as Nanook pulls a seal out of the water, then changes dramatically to lighter and soothing tones after the moment of sudden silence when Nanook catches a seal.<sup>53</sup> Although the music is clearly attached to the scene in the editing process, the emotion constructed by this

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<sup>51</sup> Thomas Schartz, *Old Hollywood/New Hollywood: Ritual, Art, and Industry*, (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1976), 47.

<sup>52</sup> David Bordwell. "The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice." in *Film Theory and Criticism*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshal Cohen. (New York: Oxford, 2004), 717.

<sup>53</sup> Robert J. Flaherty, *Nanook of the North: A Story Of Life and Love In the Actual Arctic*, VHS, (Claremont, California: Criterion Collection, 1922).

sound appears to viewers as a part of Nanook's experience. In this way, anthropological films construct narrative that begins, develops, and ends similarly to dominant films by utilizing filmmaking techniques such as sounds and jump cuts. This structure presents Nanook's experience as an enjoyable story.

The representations of the lives and experiences of study subjects in anthropological films tend to focus on men. Many of these films define the lives of females only in terms of their connections with males. *Nanook of the North* turns to eventful social activities such as hunting, fishing and construction of an igloo by focusing on a male Inuit, Nanook, and his male friends in the Canadian Arctic. The only female in the film is Nanook's wife, Nyla. She appears with a baby a few times in the film, but mostly appears as an observer to what Nanook is doing. While the film allows viewers glimpse a smiling Nyla with her baby on her back, it does not offer a more detailed description of what she does in Inuit society. Instead, it emphasizes how hard male members of Inuit society work as it depicts Inuit men enduring frigid weather while building an igloo, by laboriously cutting heavy ice blocks, picking up and carrying them on their shoulders, and lifting them once more for placement. By focusing on the tough male experience, *Nanook of the North* develops a narrative of the lives of the Inuit without women. This resonates with how the project of natural history as well as anthropology highlights white male-centered views as Irma McClaurin underlines.<sup>54</sup> By focusing on male study subjects, anthropological films work to encourage viewers to identify with male-centered views of the world.

## Conclusion

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<sup>54</sup> Irma McClaurin, *Black Feminist Anthropology: Theory, Politics, Praxis, and Poetics* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 2-11.

The belief that film has a privileged access to reality has served, historically, to perpetuate hierarchical relationships between observers and filmed subjects. By relying on the audience's faith in the camera's ability to duplicate reality, filmmakers employ diverse filmmaking techniques such as framing, zooming, slow motion, and voiceover narrations and produce male, American-centered views of the world as reality while concealing their physical presence. Seen in this light, anthropologist's filmic constructions of reality and anthropological filming techniques function as strong ideological tools.

## Chapter 2 “The Construction of the Real: A Case Study of the Vietnam War Fiction and Nonfiction Films

In the 1960s and 70s, the media played a significant role in declining public confidence in the U.S. government. Americans witnessed the violent and totalitarian attitudes of the U.S. government through media. During the civil rights movement, media highlighted police violence against unarmed citizens. In the Vietnam War period, images of burning villages, displaced civilians, and weary soldiers saturated the media and worked to discredit the nationalistic and optimistic narrative of the Vietnam War that war officials sought to project.<sup>55</sup> In the aftermath of the Tet Offensive in January 1968 when the media began to expose an increasing number of images and information, increasing numbers of people started to question government authority. When four anti-war student demonstrators were killed by the Ohio National Guardsmen on the campus of Kent State University, American people’s distrust of the government became more widely shared.<sup>56</sup> The media coverage of the war, the public’s growing mistrust of government policy, and mass public protests forced an end to American involvement in the war by April 30<sup>th</sup> 1975.

Due to these political and social backgrounds of the 1960s and 1970s, the multiplicity of meaning that is reflected in media representation functioned as new type of realism during this time period. Media coverage and continuing violence worked to urge Americans to seek out alternative views to the ones offered by government officials and to know what was “really” going on, both in Vietnam and also domestically within the United States. In response to public demand for information, many Vietnam War-themed fiction and non-fiction filmmakers constructed complex and persuasive realities of the Vietnam War using diverse realist filming

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<sup>55</sup>Hallin, *Uncensored War*, 200-229.

<sup>56</sup> James Roman, “Platform Shoes, Pet Rocks, Disco and a Dysfunctional presidency, 1970-1979” in *Bigger Than Blockbusters: Movies That Defined America* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2009) 175.

techniques. According to Thomas Doherty, a “stony cynicism and brutal realism” dominates the genre of Vietnam War films, in contrast to the romanticized stories driven by masculine heroes characteristic of World War II films.<sup>57</sup> Due to the multiplicity of meanings that functioned as a new type of realism in this time period, the montage, which was not considered a conventional realist filmmaking technique, started to work within the structure of realism in this period. By offering multiple viewpoints in succession, the montage function to construct more persuasive views of the “reality” that resist nationalistic views offered by government officials.

Yet, realist filmmaking techniques work to urge viewers to identify with American views of the Vietnam War and represent the Vietnamese as mass. Even though anti-war films I am going to discuss in this chapter reject the racism that was directed at the Vietnamese from the U.S. government and emphasize a multiplicity of experiences among Vietnamese and Americans, the filming techniques function to present American centered views of the war as a point of viewer identification and urge viewers to see the Vietnamese as the object of observation. In this way, the hierarchical relationships between the subject and the object of observation are naturalized through realist filming techniques even in some of the most extreme anti-war films and power imbalanced relationships are replayed between the Americans and the Vietnamese even in films critical of official war discourse.

This chapter analyzes three films – *Hearts and Minds* (1974), *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and *We Were Soldiers* (2002)— as examples of how the filmic construction of reality challenged dominant nationalistic or racist views offered by the U.S. government and popular Vietnam War themed-films. Wilson James points out that many popular Vietnam War-themed films simplify the war as good versus evil and represent the Vietnamese simply as a mass of Communists.

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<sup>57</sup> Thomas Doherty, *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993)286-287.

Wilson states the constructed drama in these films “relies on the same clichés, the same one dimensional characters and the same Manichean struggle between ‘the Communists’ and heroic Americans.”<sup>58</sup> These anti-war films about the Vietnam War emphasize the multiplicity of viewpoints from ordinary Vietnamese and American people and disrupt nationalistic views offered by the U.S. government that reduce the Vietnamese to merely “gooks.”<sup>59</sup> Similarly to how Italian neorealist films highlight multiple experiences of common Italian people in protest to the Fascist regime at the time, the anti-war films employ diverse realist filming techniques that work in resistance to totalitarian, nationalistic, and racist views toward the Vietnamese by juxtaposing varying experiences of American and Vietnamese people. I will discuss how these films employ realist filming techniques to mobilize the juxtaposition of viewpoints that serves to discredit government-sponsored narratives of war and to convey an anti-war message. The realist filming techniques used in these three films are not necessarily identical to the conventional realist filming techniques that were embraced by Andre Bazin and Italian neorealist filmmakers. This chapter highlights how realist filming techniques stylistically develop to incorporate and register new kinds of filming techniques as realist conventions.

In contrast to the impulse to speak back to nationalistic ideology, realist filmmaking techniques work to naturalize U.S. centered views of the Vietnam War and racialize the Vietnamese as a faceless and nameless mass of Orientalized people. Even though these anti-war films challenge racist views toward the Vietnamese by portraying the violence of the U.S. military and insensitivity of government officials toward ordinary Vietnamese people, the filming techniques as well as narratives urge viewers to identify with the American characters.

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<sup>58</sup>James Wilson, *Vietnam in Prose and Film*, (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1982), 80.

<sup>59</sup>Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud, *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 78.

Therefore, the filming techniques function to racialize the Vietnamese as a mass even as they problematize this way of viewing the Other. In this chapter, I will point out filming techniques that are used in Vietnam War themed films that resemble anthropological filming techniques and reproduce the idea of race that was offered by U.S. centered views regardless of the impulse to speak back to the nationalistic and racist views to the war.

### The Vietnam War and Films

*Hearts and Minds* employs conventional and popular realist filming techniques that has been adopted by Grierson and Italian neorealist filmmakers. Some of the techniques that are seen in this film are location shooting and the use of real-time. These techniques were incorporated into Vietnam War films such as *Hearts and Minds* for the purpose of intensifying the realism of scenes. In one sequence, an American soldier's father, David Emerson, praises the United States and President Nixon's leadership, after explaining how his son's death was reported by the military. Emerson appears on screen and says:

There is no question in my mind that he and everybody else that did what he did there is no sacrifice that is in vain. [...] that is the price you pay for the freedom and that's the price that you pay for the kind of stature that we have and it's the kind of risk you take to preserve the ideals that we have. [...] I think that really the strength of our system ... is that you do rely on somebody like President Nixon for leadership. I think his team of people with him are outstanding and ... the leadership he has shown and decisions that he has made...they are the kind of decisions I would expect from the president of this country.<sup>60</sup>

Emerson recounts how he learned that his son had died, what kind of person his son was, and what he, as a father, thinks his son achieved for his nation. Filmed at Emerson's house, the natural light falls unevenly over the room, shading the father's face. The scene also uses a long

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<sup>60</sup> Bert Schneider and Peter Davis, *Hearts and Minds*, DVD, (New York: BBS Productions, 1974).

take to capture Emerson's entire speech. Sometimes Emerson loses his train of thought, pauses, and repeats himself. There are also many unnecessary sounds of footsteps that could have been edited out, but which were intentionally left in. Yet, by including the entire speech of this father without disturbing the shot at the authentic location, this scene evokes a sense of immediacy and authenticity. This resonates with Grierson's foundational idea of the genre. Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Grierson described the significance of the genre as being able to capture reality immediately in authentic locations.<sup>61</sup> Using similar techniques, such scenes photo-realistically capture the reality of the Vietnam War period through the details of a character, landscape, and the atmosphere.

The father's defense of the U.S. government and the righteousness of the cause is not, however, the primary message of this scene. In juxtaposing the father's and the mother's and grief, *Hearts and Minds* evokes the different attitudes toward the Vietnam War that by that time had split American society. The skepticism of Emerson's wife, Mary Cochran Emerson toward her husband's patriotic views functions to undermine his support for the United States policy. The wife's testimony, coupled with her facial expressions and restless body movements, work to decenter her husband's claim that the United States is a great country and their son's death was justified. After listening to her husband's first testimony, Mary Emerson reminisces fondly about the memories she shared with her son. Mary Emerson smiles the entire time she speaks about her son and viewers hear her husband lovingly laugh at her memories. After Mary describes her memories of her son, she stays on screen while David talks about how he is proud of the United States and of the fact that his son dedicated his life to the country. Behind her husband, Mary does not seem to be impressed by her husband's testimony. She looks restless

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<sup>61</sup> Grierson, "Flaherty," 32.

and is seen touching a chair, a dining table, and a plastic model of an airplane. By including Mary on screen during David's speech, this scene dramatizes not only the political schism in American society but also the human cost of the war to American families.

Coarse camerawork heightens the sense of immediacy and emotion of filmed subjects. In a scene in which a heartbroken father mourns his dead daughter, the mobility of the hand-held camera vividly captures the father's uncontrollable anger against President Nixon. The Vietnamese man named Vu Duc Vinh testifies as an authentic witness to U.S. violence in Vietnam as follows:

[M]y eight years old daughter was killed. Three-years-old son too.[sic] President Nixon murdered them. What have I done to Nixon to come here and murder them. My daughter died right here. She was feeding pigs. She was sweet. She is dead. Pigs are alive. My mother and my children took shelter here. Here they died.... I give you my daughter's beautiful shirts. Take it back to the United States. Tell them what happened here. My daughter is dead. She will not wear the shirt again. Throw this shirt at Nixon's face. Tell them she was only a schoolgirl.<sup>62</sup>

Similarly to the scene of David and Mary Emerson, this scene is filmed on location where the heartbroken father's family died. The mobility of the hand-held camera not only heightens the sense of immediacy but also the emotion of Vinh, the heartbroken father. While recounting the death of his mother, his eight-year-old daughter, three-year-old son, Vinh agonized movements to express his uncontrollable anger as he explains where and how his entire family died. The hand-held camera sometimes fails to capture him, sometimes blurs his image, and other times shows him in the corner of the frame. It is this coarse camerawork that works to emphasize the anger of Vinh as credible. This coarse camerawork emphasize a sense of immediacy in the scene and this is registered as realistic because it is more unmediated than Hollywood films. Thus, this

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<sup>62</sup> Schneider and Davis, *Hearts and Minds*.

convincingly portrayed anger of the Vietnamese functions as a powerful criticism against the U.S. government.

*Hearts and Minds* strings together separate shots that reveal from multiple perspectives the effects of the U.S. bombardment of Vietnam. This technique, called montage, was not originally considered as realist filmmaking techniques but films in 1970s worked to reinvent the filming techniques as realism. The presentation of competing viewpoints constructs a compelling argument about the U.S. government's misguided policy in Vietnam. For instance, aerial and ground shots inserted after a scene that foregrounds President Nixon's words work to criticize the unjust use of military power by displaying the outcome of his decision to use the bombers. The scene starts with medium shots of Nixon giving a speech at a White House dinner, honoring returned prisoner of wars. Nixon refers to his decision to authorize the use of the B-52 bombers as "one of the most difficult decisions" but praises the courage of U.S. soldiers who operated the B-52s, then invites the audience to applaud the soldiers' service. At the end of the speech, the viewers see and hear the audience stand and applaud. Against the sound of applause, the film cuts to short shots of B-52s dropping countless bombs and aerial views of the subsequent explosions. The ground views open with North Vietnamese anti-aircraft shooting at airplanes and an airplane falling in the dark. The last portion of the ground shot muffles the loud sounds of bombing and explosions, which continue to be heard from the high angle shots. At the last part, a young Vietnamese woman is shown sobbing with no sound. She is seen in front of her dead children by the ruins of a Vietnamese hospital. The series of shots edited together show the result of Nixon's decision to use long-range B-52 bombers. Editing the effects of the bombing from multiple perspectives this way functions to criticize Nixon's political leadership and U.S. military actions. In addition, detailed depictions of the individual shots that were

captured in authentic locations add to the verisimilitude of the argument. For instance, during the scene of Nixon's speech, the camerawork is jerky. Nixon's voice echoes in the hall. Nixon's interactions with the audiences' applause likewise increase the sense of immediacy. The applause interrupts his speech and affects his facial expressions. This emphasis on the authenticity of filming works to heighten the verisimilitude of the criticism.

The juxtaposition of high-angle and ground shots works to shock the audience with powerful criticism of U.S. military attacks. *Hearts and Minds* offers collages of interviews by U.S. politicians and pilots who explain what made the high angle shots possible. These interviews, filmed on the interviewees' front porches demonstrate how politicians and pilots considered the bombing and military attacks as part of their job. Because the detail of these interviewees' experience offer viewers a sense of intimacy with their job as pilots, the following ground shots come as a shock. This scene begins with an interview of General William Westmoreland, the commanding general of U.S. forces during the Vietnam War. In his testimony, Westmoreland, who directed aggressive military attacks against the Viet Cong, talks about how he was assigned to the position as "a new job," by General MacArthur.<sup>63</sup> After this scene, viewers see a series of interviews with pilots who testify about how they experienced bombing missions as a thrilling and exciting job. For instance, one of the pilots, Lieutenant George Coker, likens his experience during air missions to a race car driver who desires to drive in the Indianapolis 500 and comments that the risk of being killed is part of what makes the race as well as air mission thrilling. This analogy highlights Coker's psychological distance from the consequences of his actions. Another pilot interviewed, Randy Floyd, states:

It can be described much like a singer doing an aria that's totally into what he's doing [...] Flying an aircraft can be a great deal like that.... I can tell when the aircraft feels

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<sup>63</sup> Schneider and Davis, *Hearts and Minds*.

right, when it's about to stall. I can tell when I can pull another fraction of a pound or the airplane will stall, flip out and spin on me. I would follow a little path way on something like a TV screen in front of me that would direct me right, left or center...follow the steering, keep the steering symbol [...] centered. I'd see a little attack light when we'd stepped into attack. I could pull the "commit" switch on my stick, and the computer took over. A computer figured out the ballistics, the airspeed, the slant range and dropped the bombs when we got to the appropriate point, in whichever kind of attack we'd selected, whether it was flying straight and level or tossing our bombs out. So it was very much like a technical expertise thing. I was a good pilot.... I had a lot of pride in my ability to fly.<sup>64</sup>

While Coker equates air missions with racecar driving, Floyd draws parallels between a pilot's air missions and singing. Floyd and Coker's metaphors, as well as their explanations of their experiences as pilots, reveal the pilots' alienation from the outside world, as they focus exclusively on the mechanical operations of the aircraft and bombing as a display of personal expertise.

The locations of filming of interviews by Westmoreland, Coker, and Floyd add further personal feeling to their interviews. Filmed on the front porches or outside their own homes, These detailed depiction of mundane locations that are captured in the shots evoke the viewer's sense of intimacy with the interviewees' lives. Thus, the following views from inside the cockpit synchronized with Floyd's testimonies function to urge viewers to identify with these pilots' perspectives. The close up shots of monitor screens, views of other military jets from the cockpit, and views of bombs being dropped from the aircraft offer visual evidence of how in fact these pilots could experience bombing as clean personal jobs. Juxtaposed to these engaging visual and oral depictions of pilots' experiences, the oral testimonies of the Vietnamese who lost family members in bombings and the ground shots that reveal the aftereffects of bombing appear disturbing for viewers. Vietnamese people stand before their destroyed houses, and testify that the bombing destroyed all of their property and murdered their family members. Because the

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<sup>64</sup> Schneider and Davis, *Hearts and Minds*.

earlier interviews with American pilots work to let viewers identify with their views of their jobs, the revelations of the pain, loss, and desperation experienced by the Vietnamese work to shock the audience to know the atrocious and intolerable outcome of what was referred to as a clean job or expertise. In this way, the juxtaposition of high angle shots and ground shots work to construct a powerful castigation of U.S. military actions.

*Hearts and Minds* thus constructs a persuasive critique of totalitarian, racist, and nationalistic views of the war and the political leadership of the U.S. government. In addition to the collages of images that let viewers see the same events from multiple viewpoints, realist filmmaking techniques such as the use of camerawork and natural light work to enhance the verisimilitude of the arguments.

At the same time, even as *Hearts and Minds* served to advance political debate that ultimately supported U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam by ridiculing U.S. political power and urging the American audience to think critically about the war, the filming techniques create contrasts in the representations of the American and Vietnamese people. Shots of Vietnamese people highlight their physical features and behavior through close ups of their hands, arms and legs, while the static camerawork tends to be frequently used to draw the viewer's attention to American character's speech rather than his behavior or physical characteristics. These contrasts, which are consistent with the genealogy of anthropological filmmaking conventions, work to racialize the Vietnamese as a nameless mass of powerless people in the film. This is apparent in the opening sequences where the theme of the Vietnam War is introduced. This scene starts with a high angle, medium to wide tracking shot of a horse-drawn cart and a Vietnamese man. The view gradually zooms out and viewers eventually see an extreme wide angle, high shot of a village. In the next scene, with the Vietnamese song, the camera tracks two

children and a woman who seems to be carrying something on her shoulder. The gradual zoom out slowly shows the entire environment of a rice field where the woman works with many other women. In a wide shot of these Vietnamese women bending forward to make bundles of straw, in the distance a U.S. soldier walks across the screen. This time, a few American soldiers walking against the camera are filmed from the back in a wide shot and the zoom out reveals a Vietnamese worker trying to pull a water hose by herself. The wide-angle framing and zooming emphasize the width and the complexity of the vision, constructing a sense of the village's landscape. With close up shots, viewers see details of the Vietnamese workers' physical movements, such as tying bundles of straw together with their hands. After zooming out, viewers are able to link these movements to an environment that is more complicated, with many other Vietnamese workers as well as American soldiers. In doing so, these filming techniques urge viewers to observe the Vietnamese who are influenced by the presence of U.S. soldiers as if they are a part of the Vietnam's landscape. This scene is followed by an interview of an American politician who offers historical contexts of the Vietnam War. In this scene, Clark Clifford, introduced as "former aide to President Truman" in the following scene, explains during an interview that the United States was led into war by the belief that it was the greatest nation on earth. Clifford's words as well as his calm attitude with frequent smiling during the interview imply his satisfaction and pride in leading such a great nation with so much power. Some shots that are edited after this shot work to criticize the U.S. political leadership. Viewers are offered with some shots of a musical piece, politician's speech, and a news report that explain how the world embraced the U.S. political leadership which helps the Communists. Yet, the last shots show the U.S. soldiers from a tank shoot an unarmed Vietnamese man. These series of shots work to criticize the U.S. political leadership and political misconceptions that are

offered by the U.S. politicians such as Clifford. Nonetheless, the filming techniques that are used to criticize the U.S. political leadership in this scene work to racialize the Vietnamese as faceless mass of people to be observed and create contrasts in the representations of the American and Vietnamese people. Clifford, introduced as an individual, seated in a chair and filmed with static camerawork that shows him in medium or close up shots creates an interesting contrast to the anonymous group of Vietnamese filmed while working from a wide angle. In filming the Vietnamese, their physical features and behavior are foregrounded through close ups of their hands, arms and legs. Through distant, wide-angle shots the Vietnamese are also shown as if they are a part of the entire landscape. In filming this American politician, the static camerawork draws the viewer's attention to his speech rather than his behavior or physical characteristics. In this way, even though these U.S. politicians are criticized, filming techniques work to urge viewers to see the Vietnamese as voiceless Other.

*Hearts and Minds'* use of the filming techniques also exposes the imbalance of sexual power. Some of the filming techniques that are used in a scene with Vietnamese prostitutes are somewhat pornographic and voyeuristic. In this process, Vietnamese women are reduced to sexual objects by two forces: by American soldiers and by the viewers of the film. Having viewers identify with male figures reinforces androcentrism. This scene starts with a wide shot of American soldiers feeling, touching, and kissing the torsos of Vietnamese prostitutes in beds that are partitioned by thin curtains. This scene is filmed from a distance with a hand-held camera. Viewers see only the Vietnamese prostitutes and American soldiers behind the curtains. As one of the soldiers talks to his friend in the next bed across the curtain about a hickey he gave the prostitute, the camera zooms in showing a closer, yet partial, glimpse of the prostitute and their interactions. This distanced and limited vision functions to mobilize voyeurism and solicits

viewers to peep at the interaction. Bill Nichols mentions, “[p]ornography does not please viewers completely and ... this deferred completion of pleasure favors fetishistic representation and fuels the desire for more pornography.”<sup>65</sup> As Nichols points out, this sequence turns viewers into voyeurs by arousing viewer’s desire to have a more complete look behind the curtain. Because of the stimulated desire to view more, a shot where one of the prostitute’s breasts is shown in close up appears to be a pleasurable view. In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey demonstrates that pervasive male-centered views of the world that are embodied in films strengthen male-oriented social values, which fetishize women.<sup>66</sup> Although *Hearts and Minds* is not considered as a classic Hollywood film, and the representation of prostitution is constructed as a critique of the American military, the viewing of Vietnamese women’s bodies nonetheless promotes a male-centered viewpoint. By constructing Vietnamese prostitutes as an object of the male gaze, and making viewers identify with male perspectives, *Hearts and Minds* actively works to naturalize a patriarchal vision of the world.

Although most viewers are aware of the fact that what happens in fictional films is staged, what happens in fictional war films is embedded in people’s conceptions of war experiences. This is partly because Hollywood Vietnam War films participate in shaping people’s memories of war not only by producing detailed depictions of the war, but also by making strong associations between the film itself and the actuality of the war experience. According to Marita Sturken, filmmakers make a strong association between the film production process and the actual experiences of war in order to appeal to viewers that the war representations are credible. For instance, Francis Ford Coppola, the director of *Apocalypse*

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<sup>65</sup> Bill Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 74.

<sup>66</sup> Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” Chap. 2 in *Visual and Other Pleasure*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2009), 30.

*Now*, claimed that his filming process was akin to the actual experience of the war despite the fact that he is not a war veteran and his film was shot in the Philippines. Because the filmmaking process was continuously interrupted by many unexpected occurrences such as weather, illness, and the Philippine government's real-life campaign against rebels in the nearby hills, Coppola claimed that his film is Vietnam at the Cannes Film Festival in 1979.<sup>67</sup> Because of the strong associations that have been constructed between filmmaking and the experience of war, the film is presented as credible. Especially for generations born after the actual war occurred, their perception and memory of war tends to resonate deeply with these representations in film.<sup>68</sup> Even for veterans, the narrative of popular films becomes inextricably intertwined with their experience of the war. Sturken quotes veteran William Adams' writing about his memory about his war experiences as "what 'really' happened is now so thoroughly mixed up in my mind with what has been said about what happened that the pure experience is no longer there."<sup>69</sup> In this way, fiction as well as non-fiction filmic representations of war significantly shape public memory about the war.

The use of highly refined realist filming techniques in *Apocalypse Now* show the Vietnam War experiences from American as well as Vietnamese perspectives. In doing so, this film's representation of the Vietnam War functions to challenge the "us" and "them" binary that tends to be foregrounded in nationalistic representation of the Vietnam War. *Apocalypse Now* emphasizes the complexity of the environment of the Vietnam War. *Apocalypse Now* follows the protagonist, Captain Willard, whose secret mission is to assassinate Colonel Walter E. Kurtz. The narrative develops as Willard travels deep into Vietnam to find Kurtz. As the backdrop of

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<sup>67</sup> Marita Sturken. *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 98.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 96-98.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

Willard's journey, this film constructs detailed portrayals of Vietnam under the war where the Vietnamese and Americans exist together. The filming techniques that are used to establish the details as realistic depictions of the war resemble anthropological filmmaking techniques, although in this case the filming techniques work to resist nationalistic representation of the war that demonize the Vietnamese as evil communists by emphasizing the effect of the war on the Vietnamese people. For instance, in a sequence where Captain Willard lands to meet the U.S. Army air cavalry unit charged with escorting his team to the mouth of the Nung River, there are long, wide-angle and panning shots that capture detailed landscapes of Vietnam. This scene portrays many Vietnamese people who are devastated in the midst of war. As Willard's ship edges closer to the shore, the wide-angle and panning shots reveal extensive views of the ocean and mountains in the background.<sup>70</sup> The shots also capture many military tanks, ships, and airplanes on the shore at different distances. When the camera pans and shows the beach, many American soldiers and Vietnamese come into view. There are Vietnamese civilians and American soldiers running around, and there is also a Vietnamese baby in an old Vietnamese lady's arms. The following sequence where Willard tries to meet the Colonel shows in wide framing a group of Vietnamese villagers escaping with the help of the American soldiers, lines of Vietnamese people in dirty clothes sitting on the ground in despair, and many Vietnamese people waiting in a line to receive medical treatment. Similarly to how anthropological films produce a sense of wholeness by emphasizing the complexity and the detail of the background in the filmed environment using wide-angle, panning, and tracking shots, this scene also heightens realism by its intricate construction of the war-torn zone including American people as well as many ordinary Vietnamese. Although the main narrative develops around the American characters

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<sup>70</sup> Francis Ford Coppola, *Apocalypse Now*, (Hollywood: California, Paramount Home Entertainment, 2006).

such as Willard, the realist depiction of the war-torn zone that portrays the experiences of the ordinary Vietnamese villagers works to resist racist representations of the Vietnamese. Viewers witness tattered clothes and darkened faces with dust in the portrayal of escaping Vietnamese from the burning village. In the depiction of many wounded Vietnamese people who are waiting in line to receive medical treatment, viewers can clearly see their depressed, exhausted, and stressed out facial expressions with the ceaseless sounds of children crying. These realist depictions of the war-torn zone highlight the threats and despair ordinary Vietnamese experienced during the war. Similarly to how ordinary Italian people's experiences are emphasized in Italian neorealist films, the multiplicity of depictions regarding Vietnamese war experiences work in protest to totalitarian views of the Vietnam War that regard all Vietnamese as an enemy worthy to be murdered en masse.

These highly detailed constructions of the Vietnam War in *Apocalypse Now* that show the environment, people, and military actions function to present the irony of the war. Similarly to *Hearts and Minds*, one of the air mission scenes of *Apocalypse Now* juxtaposes a high-angle view from military aircraft and a ground view to reveal the same scene from different viewpoints. In contrast to the high angle shots in *Hearts and Mind* that were synchronized with the pilot's oral testimonies to offer meticulous explanations of the pilot's bombing experience, the high-angle shots in *Apocalypse Now* emphasize the heroism and spectacle of the U.S. military actions by synchronizing with "Ride of the Valkyries." Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries," is a musical piece frequently used to heighten the 'heroism' of nationalistic interventions in film. Nazi Germany favored this piece and D. W. Griffith also featured this piece in his well-known film *Birth of a Nation* (1915). By applying this music, already reminiscent of many nationalistic and heroic actions to the air mission, the high-angle shots of

*Apocalypse Now* add a sense of sophistication to U.S. military actions. For instance, several weapons on the helicopters are emphasized and the helicopters are shown in a highly stylized formation in accordance with the trombone opening of “Ride of the Valkyries.” This depiction of the helicopters turns the military actions into a spectacle. The ground shots that are followed by the high-angle shots depict a quiet and peaceful rural Vietnamese village. The sounds of birds, dogs, and children singing synchronized with images of four women and a child with vegetables and containers in front of a building accentuate the innocence of the villagers. The camera slowly pans to show the next building where a few children and a woman walk outside. The juxtapositions of the high-angle and ground shot as well as the representation of the approaching U.S. military aircraft by “Ride of the Valkyries” gradually shows how supposedly heroic U.S. military actions ruthlessly destroy vulnerable villagers’ lives. As the sounds of helicopters, synchronized with “Ride of the Valkyries” start to be heard in the village, a Vietnamese female soldier appears and urges the civilians to flee. When the sounds of helicopters and Wagner’s music become louder and clearly audible, viewers see numerous Vietnamese villagers, including children with their teachers and elderly women, running in all directions to escape. The practice of juxtaposing ground and high-angle views continues as the American military commences bombing the village. On the one hand, the high angle shots expose discussions among the U.S. soldiers and the crew in the helicopter about their shooting techniques. On the other hand, the ground view shows how American military actions mercilessly mass-murder helpless Vietnamese villagers who are seen desperately trying to save their own and their family’s lives. Because the Vietnamese villagers do not seem to be a major threat to the U.S. military, an emphasis on the spectacle and alleged heroism of the American military as they destroy the Vietnamese village questions the appropriateness of U.S. action. By

foregrounding alternating views of the bombing sequence, the film fosters a critical view of the war.

Regardless of the impulse to show the experiences of ordinary Vietnamese people in wartime, the U.S. character, Willard, is constructed as a surrogate witness of the war-torn zones. Willard's immediate reactions to the construction of the war setting are graphically depicted. These portrayals do not directly influence the narrative, but function to present Willard as the viewer's surrogate witness to the war and illustrate the construction of the war as credible. For instance, when Willard arrives at the shore where the air cavalry is located, the tracking shot of Willard walking into a village from the shore sets the tone of the environment. It shows many objects that are prepared for the film, such as a Vietnamese child being carried by a U.S. soldier and TV crews who are trying to film American soldiers. Then, the tracking shot pauses on Willard's surprised face in a medium close-up. This shot that captures Willard's reactions increases the verisimilitude of the construction of the war environment because viewers identify with his reaction to the war. In following sequence, Willard tries to meet Colonel Bill Kilgore, and viewers see how unwillingly Willard participates in the war, as if he is one of the anonymous U.S. soldiers. In this scene, Willard fails to acquire the support of his cavalry's escort to the Nang River and as a result, must participate in the missions led by the Colonel. During the military operation, Willard is shown with other anonymous soldiers loading his gun, listening to soldiers' stories, and shooting from the aircraft they are riding in. This depiction of Willard's reluctance and boredom with military actions allow viewers to empathize with him. The ways in which filming techniques let viewers witness Willard's unexpected encounters with these scenes and unwilling participation in the war depict the staged experience of the war as real.

Because filmmaking techniques urge viewers to see the war through Willard's eyes, the filmmaking techniques that focus on the American characters work to racialize the Vietnamese victims rather than agents. The narrative as well as filming techniques urge viewers to identify with American characters. The Vietnamese do not speak or create meaningful actions that affect the cinematic narrative without any stories or even names. Instead, they function as a part of the landscape where Willard plays a major role. This works to dehumanize the Vietnamese and racialize them as an inscrutable mass, which dangerously replicates racist representations of the Vietnamese that waged the war. For instance, in a scene where Kilgore leaves playing cards on the bodies of Vietnamese lying on the ground, the Vietnamese are shown as a silent mass of static bodies while American characters such as Willard and Kilgore are represented through their voices as individuals. Nguyet Nguyen who analyzes the same scene, states "they are cards, not humans, they do not have names or lives; they are instead numbers and letters and objects in a game of cards."<sup>71</sup> In the scenes where Vietnamese people are shown escaping or waiting in a line, they appear only as a backdrop to American characters. As American characters move around, the camera tracks them and the Vietnamese who were shown in the background disappear. Again, viewers are encouraged to identify with American characters. Like anthropological films that capture the filmed subjects in the wide complex setting the film creates as the landscape, the Vietnamese here are parts of the background of the Vietnam War. This works to replicate foundational attitudes to the racism that this film explicitly seeks to challenge. The Vietnamese are confined to the shadows of their American occupiers.

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<sup>71</sup> Nguyet Nguyen, "Representation of Vietnam in Vietnamese and U.S. War Films: A Comparative Semiotic Study of *Canh Dong Hoang* and *Apocalypse Now*" (master's thesis, University of Oregon, 2009), 56.

*We Were Soldiers*, directed by Randall Wallace, reveals how realist filmmaking techniques have developed since the time period when *Apocalypse Now* and *Hearts and Minds* were produced to negotiate with viewer's conception of war, race, and gender. In contrast to the realist filming techniques deployed in the previous films, the realist filming techniques in current films such as *We Were Soldiers* urge viewers to identify filmed character's subjective experiences of the war and their emotion. While earlier anti-war films tend to emphasize the multiplicity of viewpoints of the war and enable viewers to see the war critically, *We Were Soldiers* produces multiplicity of viewpoints in order to emphasize subjective experiences of the war as single authoritarian views of the war.

*We Were Soldiers* focuses on a Vietnamese Colonel and an American Colonel and expresses their competing attitudes toward the war. In contrast to the earlier filmic representations of the Vietnam War, *We Were Soldiers* focuses on characters' complicated attitudes toward the war and toward racism and the ambivalent emotion functions as realistic representations of the war. Hall Moore, a white, middle-class, educated man, is a tough but compassionate leader during war. But at home, he is a devout Christian and internally troubled by moral considerations about participating in the war. In one scene, Moore prays for himself and his soldiers' protection. With close medium framing of Moore who kneels before a statue of Mary, he says, "every soldier among us will approach you, each in his own way. Our enemies, too, according to their own understanding, will ask for protection and for victory. And so we bow before your infinite wisdom." After pausing for a while, he then changes his mind and says: "[y]es, and one more thing, dear Lord, about our enemies, ignore their heathen prayers and help us blow those little bastards straight to hell."<sup>72</sup> While saying that, he frowns, pauses in the

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<sup>72</sup> Wallace, *We Were Soldiers*.

middle of his prayers, and quickly shakes his head as if to conceal his concern. Moore's behaviors and expressions show he is hesitant to define the Vietnamese as heathens who are condemned to die. The ambivalence toward the war produce his inner criticism of the patriotic view of the war, based on his subjective viewpoints of the war.

Additionally, the Vietnamese Colonel who is frequently shown in battle scenes in parallel to Moore is shown as an intelligent, but at the same time, caring and sympathetic leader. In middle to close medium shots, he is shown berating his soldiers but also affectionately touching their scars and caring for them. In addition, the colonel shows compassion not only toward the Vietnamese, but also to the American dead. After a major battle, the Colonel holds a small American flag that one of the American journalists had placed in front of piles of dead bodies. With sad music in a minor key, the Vietnamese colonel, shown in medium close up, holds the flag and states: “[s]uch a tragedy. They think this was their victory. So this will be an American war. And the end will be the same except for the numbers who will die before we get there.”<sup>73</sup> After the speech, viewers see him replace the flag and walk away. In this scene, the filming techniques do not racialize the Vietnamese Colonel, but focus on him as a thoughtful leader. This speech also emphasizes the humanity of the Colonel. In this scene, the Colonel is sympathetic to the Americans who sacrificed their lives for their nation. Thus, Moore and the Vietnamese Colonel, are both constructed as thoughtful and humane characters. In this way, displaying Vietnamese and American characters' ambivalence toward each other and also toward the war and these characters' subjective experiences of the war in *We Were Soldiers* function as realist representations of the war.

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<sup>73</sup> Wallace, *We Were Soldiers*.

The detailed portrayals of the battle between the Vietnamese and the Americans produce the experiences of the war from their two perspectives. The experiences of Vietnamese and American colonels are juxtaposed throughout the battle scenes. At the beginning of a battle sequence when an American military helicopter bombs the ground upon landing in Vietnam, the scene changes to an underground military base. The following depiction of the military base demarcates them as the Vietnamese. The base is introduced by a long tracking shot of a Vietnamese soldier walking into a dark narrow path and into a wider space where the Vietnamese Colonel is seated in front of a map. In middle framing, viewers see many other Vietnamese soldiers in uniforms that seemingly represent Vietcong army and Vietnamese flags that are attached to the wall behind the Colonel. In addition, most of the conversations are held in Vietnamese. Therefore, viewers are urged to understand the conversations through subtitles when the colonel explains his strategy using a map and orders his soldiers to stand in position. In this way, *We Were Soldiers* produces the Vietnamese experiences of the war using detailed portrayals of the Vietnamese army. The Vietnamese and American experiences of the war are juxtaposed. As a result of the colonel's strategizing, viewers see in the following wide-angle shot the American soldiers taking gunfire from every direction as soon as they land. The following scene shows the middle shots of how the Vietnamese colonel tells his soldiers in the underground military base to shift immediately to their flank and Moore directs his newly arrived soldiers to strengthen their positions to avoid being flanked. The subsequent scenes show how both the Vietnamese colonel and Moore order their soldiers to use the creek beds to overwhelm each other. In this way, the battle seen from these two perspectives enable viewers to see how both American and Vietnamese colonel gather information from their soldiers, grasp their army's and enemies' positions and strategy, and attack. In contrast to the representations of the

Vietnamese in *Hearts and Minds* and *Apocalypse Now* where the Vietnamese were shown as victims, *We Were Soldiers* reveals the Vietnamese as an equal fighting force.

The filming techniques that were used in *We Were Soldiers* highlight the emotion of both the Vietnamese and the American characters and challenge conventional representations of the Vietnamese in war films, which place the American characters at the center of the narrative. The filming techniques capture the emotion of the Vietnamese soldiers as parallel to one of the American soldiers. For instance, the death of the American soldier, Lieutenant Geoghegan in battle is juxtaposed with a fighting scene of a Vietnamese soldier. The scenes where both the American and Vietnamese soldiers fight and die evoke similar emotions by using tracking shots, zooming, slow motions, and sound track. Viewers see Geoghegan dying while trying to help his comrade who was shot behind him. After his comrade is shot, viewers see Geoghegan in the medium close-up running toward the comrade yelling that he will get him. The slow motion emphasizes Geoghegan's panic. Geoghegan is then shot while trying to carry his comrade and the slow motion decelerates to emphasize his disbelief. In this way, the slow motion calls attention to Geoghegan's enthusiasm, emotion, and shock. The Vietnamese character, shown fighting in the following battle scenes, is first seen at a meeting in an underground military base. Viewers see the Vietnamese character attentively listening to the colonel and gazing at a girl's picture before he prepares to leave for the battle. The screen changes after Geoghegan dies to show a wide-angle shot of the battlefield and the gradual zooming shows the Vietnamese soldier in the shade of a tree preparing his weapon. The medium close up shows his anxious face while trying to catch his breath and taking a deep breath before he pushes himself to leave the shade of the tree. This shot, focusing on his facial expression and his movements, emphasizes his anxiety, and his will to fight. In the subsequent scenes, the camera tracks him running in the wide shot in

slow motion. The sounds of his breath are synchronized with these tracking shots and accentuate his frantic attempt to play a part in the battle. In this way, while Geoghegan's emotions are highlighted through slow motion, the Vietnamese soldier's nervous and frantic sentiment is similarly emphasized by the medium close up and the soundtrack. These intricate filming techniques revitalize the Vietnamese as equal to the Americans.

Regardless of the impulse to destabilize dominant racial and sexual power imbalances in war film representations, *We Were Soldiers*' sophisticated camerawork urges viewers to identify with the American soldiers. *We Were Soldiers* constructs the battlefield where viewers experience the violence through the movements of the camera, which is the viewer's surrogate witness. This works quite differently from *Apocalypse Now* in the way that the camera itself registers the shock, not the characters in the film, so that viewers vicariously experience the speed and shock of the war. For instance, when Moore's soldiers are surrounded and attacked, the camera lowers to the ground as soldiers try to shoot from a prone position. This lets viewers experience the threat of gunfire from every direction. In addition, the movement of the hand-held camera operated by the cameraman replicates the limited vision of the soldiers. Because this scene is shot from a prone position with a hand-held camera, it cannot capture everything that is transpiring. After gunshots are heard, the camera attempts to turn as fast as possible, but the movement of the soldiers the camera tries to capture is too fast and it is not captured. When the camera turns in the direction of the gunshots, a soldier who has been shot falls next to the camera. This limited agency embodied in the camerawork helps viewers to know what it feels like not to know what is occurring. As if to imitate the viewpoints of the American soldiers, the camera wobbles each time an American soldier rises from the ground to shoot.<sup>74</sup> This way of

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<sup>74</sup> Randall Wallace, *We Were Soldiers*, DVD (Hollywood, California: Paramount, 2002).

emphasizing the limited vision and movements of the camera that imitate the speed of war and soldiers' experience work to present what is filmed as authentic battlefield experiences. The viewer's vision is further obscured by soldiers' blood hitting the camera, which literally covers parts of the screen. The background noise of shooting and screaming also circumscribes the viewer's ability to hear. This rather crude movement of the camera and sound urge viewers to experience the immediacy of the battle as if they are there with the U.S. soldiers, and function to present the battle from American viewpoints.

The realist filming techniques, that urge viewers to identify with American soldiers in *We Were Soldiers*, locate the "truth" of the war in the subjective experience of those soldiers and thus serve to reproduce hierarchical power relationships between the Vietnamese and Americans. Even when the camera is showing anonymous American soldiers, the camera registers the shock and fear that the U.S. soldiers experience. Therefore, the American soldiers tend to be shown in close ups, middle shots, or wide shots where viewers can recognize the soldiers' facial expressions. In contrast, the Vietnamese soldiers are mostly shown from the viewpoints of the U.S. soldiers. Thus, the Vietnamese are shown in extremely wide shots where they are barely visible. The contrasting representations recuperate some of the conventional representations that encourage viewers to see the Vietnamese as a nameless mass of people. For instance, in one of the battle scenes, viewers see a medium close up shot of two anonymous American soldiers in the dark while in a prone position. The camera is positioned beside these characters so that viewers hear them whispering to each other and can identify with the U.S. soldiers' viewpoint. One of the soldiers insists that he can smell the Vietnamese soldiers approaching and another soldier requests illumination through a radio. As soon as the areas in front of them are illuminated, many shadows of the Vietnamese soldiers are shown in wide shot and these

American soldiers shoot and kill them immediately. In this scene, viewers hear the conversations between American soldiers and see their faces clearly. Thus viewers are able to identify with a strictly American perspective and are not allowed to empathize with the “enemy.”

The imbalanced use of slow motion also re-registers racist views of the Vietnamese by dehumanizing them. As stated in the first chapter, slow motion is used to reiterate the significance of filmed actions. In battle scenes, slow motion is frequently used at the moment U.S. soldiers are killed, to underline their heroism and to elicit the viewers' sorrow. In *We Were Soldiers*, the facial expressions of American—but not Vietnamese-- soldiers are shown in slow motion. This technique slowly captures the instant of being shot, so that viewers are able to see the gravity and the impact of being shot as well as the facial expressions of dying soldiers. The facial expressions of dying soldiers emphasize their emotion such as shock and disbelief, and this functions to urge viewers to empathize with their experiences. For instance, when Geoghegan's fighting sequences are juxtaposed with Vietnamese soldiers' fighting sequences, the actual moments of their deaths are filmed quite differently. On the one hand, the usage of slow motion in filming the moment when Geoghegan is shot enables viewers to see his astonished face filled with disbelief. This works to urge viewers to empathize with the American soldier's experience and shock. On the other hand, the Vietnamese soldier is shown running in the slow motion. However, the moment when the Vietnamese soldier is shot is captured in real time. The soldier is shown in profile and his face is not even shown in a way that viewers could recognize his facial expressions. Therefore, the Vietnamese character dies as if it is an emotionless object. In this way, the narrative, as well as the filming techniques, urge viewers to sympathize with the experiences of the American soldiers. These distinctively divergent ways of representing Vietnamese and American people's experience privilege the American perspectives and make

their experience central to the narrative. Likewise, Vietnamese experiences of the war are depicted as subordinate to American ones.

## Conclusion

The political and social situations of the United States in the 1960s to 70s created the environment where realist filming techniques were widely employed in order to present a multiplicity of war experiences by the American and Vietnamese and produced powerful criticism against nationalistic views of the Vietnam War. In reaction to the growing distrust of the U.S. government and also in response to the popular desire to know what was happening through media, embodying the multiplicity of viewpoints in film functioned as a powerful expression of realism. The realist filming techniques in this time period reinvented film montage, which was not traditionally considered as a new realist filming techniques. The montage captures detailed depiction of multiple viewpoints such as interviews and media footage in ways that both reflected and challenged dominant American images of the Vietnamese and especially *Hearts and Minds* and *Apocalypse Now* highlighted the distress and devastation of ordinary Vietnamese people during the war. In so doing, they rejected dominant government and popular representations of the Vietnamese as “gooks” who are worthy to be murdered en masse, and reconstructed the epistemological foundation of realist film by rooting “truth” in subjective experience.

Yet, as I have described, the realist filming techniques that were used in these films also racialized the Vietnamese as silent nameless subjects to be examined through their behavior or simply as a part of the landscape. The U.S. centered views of the war offered through filming techniques as well as narrative function as a way to naturalize this way of viewing the

Vietnamese as objects of observation. The filming techniques in *We Were Soldiers* urge viewers to identify with the characters' emotion of being on the battleground. Even though both Vietnamese and American characters are depicted as individuals in this film, it lacks multiplicity of political viewpoints and debates that were highly embraced as realism in earlier films. Therefore, the filming techniques enable viewers to identify with American characters who are constructed as single authoritative subject and observer of the Vietnam War. Thus, the film perpetuates hierarchical relationships that were continued from anthropological filmmaking techniques and naturalizes the power imbalanced relationships between the Vietnamese and the Americans. Presenting U.S. perspectives as viewer's point of identification in these films works to encourage viewers to see the Vietnamese as the nameless Other. Because *We Were Soldiers* as well as *Hearts and Minds* and *Apocalypse Now* offer the U.S. soldiers' viewpoints as a powerful point of identification for viewers, the hierarchical binary between the U.S. soldiers as us and the Vietnamese as Other or objects to be observed persists in this Vietnam War themed film.

### Chapter 3 The Disruption of the Real: A Case Study of Films by Trinh. T. Minh-ha

In this chapter, I will demonstrate how filmic constructions of reality are disrupted in Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Reassemblage* (1982) and *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989). As demonstrated in the previous chapters, films were believed to offer privileged access to the reality because of their close resemblance to the objects they depicted. Partly by relying on the belief that films are an accurate representation of reality, anthropological filmmakers began to act as objective narrators while employing filmmaking techniques that control the representations of filmed subjects through camerawork, framing, voiceover narrations, and lighting. These techniques were similarly employed in fictional and non-fiction Vietnam War films discussed in the second chapter. Trinh T. Minh-ha's work challenges how anthropological and realist films craft their representations of the Other as the real through anthropological filmmaking conventions.

The first part of this chapter will focus mainly on how *Reassemblage* disrupted the power and authority preserved for filmmakers, especially anthropological filmmakers. While most of the film was shot in Senegal and some of the comments by the Senegalese are introduced through voiceover narrations, Trinh's voiceover narrations openly depicts what dominant anthropological films have not described. Trinh also disrupts unified visions of filmed subjects that cast herself as a filmmaker who has power to control representations using clever post production techniques. The overall effect of revealing herself works to force anthropological filmmakers out of the privileged, hidden position as omniscient narrator. The second part of this chapter will focus on *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* to explore how films are used to highlight a filmed subject's agency. Trinh uses non-professional Vietnamese American actresses in the first part of the film and Trinh interviews them in the second half. Their lines are based on an

English version of interviews conducted by Mai Thu Van in Vietnamese and translated into French for publication as *Vietnam: un peuple, des voix* in 1983. The plot highlights the articulation of filmed subjects and disrupts the ability of translation and subtitles as a part of power structure to contain representations of filmed subjects. The final part of this chapter will unravel how Trinh's films challenge the tendency to construct narrative and male and American centered views of the history of Vietnam as a part of the filmed subject's reality.

Throughout this chapter, I will examine how filming techniques used in Trinh's films challenge dominant filming techniques that tend to preserve a way of controlling and containing representations of filmed subjects as authoritative reality and reinforce and naturalize the dominant ideology and power imbalance.

### Disrupting Filmic Construction of Reality

Trinh questions filmic constructions of reality, in part, by appropriating panning shots and voiceover narration. Panning is the horizontal movement of the camera on a vertical axis. Conventionally, it is used to follow a series of actions by study subjects or the wide expanse of a landscape for capturing the entirety of the scene on screen. Voiceover narrations usually accompany panning shots to direct the viewer's attention to certain objects or the settings. For instance, in a war scene among the Dani people, mountain Papuans of West New Guinea in *Dead Bird* (1961), directed by Robert Gardner, panning is used from a distance to capture Dani running with spears. By maintaining them within the frame and explaining individual body movements using voiceover narration, the film visualizes them in a fight on screen.<sup>75</sup> *Reassemblage*, in contrast, disrupts this filmmaking process that allows filmmakers to construct a

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<sup>75</sup> Robert Gardner, *Dead Bird*, VHS (Cambridge, MA: Film Study Center, 1961).

single homogeneous reality on screen using these tools from their perspective. *Reassemblage* uses panning shots to show how such a solid, intelligible reality does not exist without the filmmaker's editing, camerawork, and conceptualization of the images. One scene utilizes panning to reveal a pile of discarded wood planks, ruined foundations, and the land, and Trinh's voiceover narration emphasizes the incomprehensibility of reality. While panning, Trinh narrates:

The Casamance  
Sun and Palms  
The part of Senegal where tourist settlements flourish  
A film about what? My friend ask.  
A film about Senegal; but what in Senegal?<sup>76</sup>

The panning shots and voiceover narration do not reveal Senegal as any particular entity. The voiceover narration directly asks viewers what should be looked at in filming Senegal instead of directing viewers toward a particular object seen on screen. Instead, the voiceover narration as well as the panning shots call attention to the unsystematic and random nature of reality that lay bare before the camera. These techniques underline how traditional anthropological filmmaking conventions produce a sense of wholeness by simplifying and limiting interpretations of Senegal. In this way, the panning and voiceover narrations in *Reassemblage* divulge how anthropological filmmaking conventions craft the ultimate vision of reality.

*Reassemblage* disrupts the power of filmmakers as omniscient and authoritative narrators of the truth and study subjects as the objects of their gaze by emphasizing the gaze directed at Trinh herself from the Senegalese. As I have argued in the last two chapters, conventional anthropological filmmaking techniques establish relationships between a filmmaker and study subject as subject and object of the gaze. Trinh challenges the distance commonly maintained to

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<sup>76</sup> Trinh T, Minh-ha, *Reassemblage: From the Firelight to the Screen*, VHS, (Wychoff, NJ: Women Make Movies, 1982).

privilege filmmakers' views and their analysis of ethnic culture and the lives of filmed subjects.

With an image of Senegalese girls, Trinh mentions:

What I see is life looking at me  
I am looking through a circle in a circle of looks  
115 degrees Fahrenheit. I put on a hat while laughter bursts out behind me. I haven't seen any woman wearing a hat...A woman comments on polygamy: "It's good for men ... not for us. We accept it owing to the force of circumstances. What about you? Do you have a husband all for yourself?"<sup>77</sup>

This narration focuses on the filmmaker that is filming the Senegalese. By narrating the position of the filmmaker from the perspectives of the filmed subjects, Trinh's film reveals that the power and authority fixed in the relationship of subject and object in conventional anthropological films is merely a forced belief and performance on the side of the filmmakers due to their privileged positions. Trinh discloses how the Senegalese as the 'study subjects', gaze at, examine, and question her, the filmmaker. Whereas orthodox ethnographic filmmakers maintain their authority in defining the study subjects by silencing them, Trinh's subjects laugh at how she looks and question her views of the world. Her views are cast in opposition to the worldviews of her subjects in the film. Trinh thus interrupts how filmmakers are privileged as objective examiners in dominant anthropological filmmaking by showing how they can also be the objects of the gaze. In addition, this scene highlights the limitation of the filmmaker's vision. In filming a foreign society and culture, filmmakers actively emphasize the complexity and width of the landscape to construct reality persuasively. As demonstrated in the first chapter, wide-angle lenses and zoom lenses are employed to offer extensive views of the landscape in relation to filmed events. This scene exposes the limitation of the filmmaker's vision by exposing Trinh, looking at filmed subjects through a lens, a process that literally limits her vision

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<sup>77</sup> Minh-ha, *Reassemblage*.

especially compared to her subjects. In this way, *Reassemblage* illuminates the filmmaker, Trinh herself, at the location of filming to highlight the narrowness of their construction of reality and criticizes the unreasonable authority granted to anthropological filmmakers.

The voiceover narrations in *Reassemblage* also mock the authority offered to filmmakers in filmic constructions of reality by revealing the filmmaker, Trinh herself. The filmmaker's role of "objective narrator" includes keeping their physical hidden. While producing credible representations of reality in films through camerawork, editing, and voiceover narrations, and also by organizing shots in order, the filmmaker's methods are designed to mask their physical presence as if they were omniscient narrators. The voiceover narrations in *Reassemblage* problematize these tendencies in the documentary and anthropological filmmaking traditions. In a scene where men make iron tools around a tent and women carry a containers, and children in a sand storm, the voiceover narrations can be heard thus:

Documentary because reality is organized into an explanation of itself  
Every detail is recorded. The man on the screen smiles at us while the necklace he wears,  
the design of the cloth he puts on, the stool he sits on are objectively commented upon  
It has no eye it records  
....  
The omnipresent eye. Scratching my hair or washing my face become a very special act<sup>78</sup>

Belief in the camera's ability to produce a replica of the world led anthropologists to conceal their physical presence and act as objective and omniscient narrators, but Trinh's voiceover discloses herself as the filmmaker and seems to undermine her authority by highlighting mundane activities she normally does. The viewer's attention is drawn to the face and body of the filmmaker and this works to expose the irrational privileges granted to filmmakers.

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<sup>78</sup> Minh-ha, *Reassemblage*.

*Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* underlines the synchronizing of sound and images as one of the mechanisms to construct reality on screen by de-synchronizing them suddenly and disrupting the viewer's desire to understand filmed subjects through the combination of the sound and images. By revealing herself through manipulating the sound, Trinh accentuates that the sound is not naturally entitled to the images but is forced on filmed subjects to control their representation. As discussed in previous chapters, the synchronization of sound and image provides an essential link between the image, soundtrack, and being.<sup>79</sup> When certain sounds are attached to particular images, they are presumed to relate to the filmed images, thereby viewers understand filmed events through the sound effects. Sound effects function as a part of evidential material for filmed subjects, which appear in front of the camera. Wide tracking sounds are one of the sound effects favored by many anthropologists that make use of this mechanism to complete the filmmaker's views of a foreign culture or society as a coherent whole in their films. Because what appears coherent on screen is produced through filmic constructions of reality, understanding filmed subjects through film, in a way, imprisons them in an unbalanced power structure. For instance, as is demonstrated in the first chapter, the violin used in a hunting sequence in *Nanook of the North* appear related to the emotions and experiences of Nanook because synchronizing Nanook's actions with the music on screen functions to make Nanook's world and experiences accessible. Filmed subjects are constrained in the structure of reality constructed by the filmmaker. In contrast, *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* disrupts the viewer's desire to empathize with the coherent being of study subjects by continuously desynchronizing sound from image. For instance, in one scene where a non-professional actress

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<sup>79</sup> Amy Lawrence, "Women's voices in third world cinema," in *Multiple voices in feminist film criticism*, Ed. Diane Carson, Linda Dittmar, and Janice R. Welsch, (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 416.

acts out one interviewee's experience in South Vietnam, a song about a flower losing its stamen and fragrance cuts in and out to unsettle the balanced representations that would normally be erected. At first, viewers hear both the actress's voice and the song, but the song later drowns out her voice completely. This manufactured discontinuity disrupts the viewer's desire to make sense of the Vietnamese woman on screen through sound effects and reveals the fact that sounds are manually added to the images in the film to mess with the filmic construction of reality. In this way, Trinh challenges the notion of a 'real' identity for study subjects that is constructed and presented as accessible on screen through the synchronization of sound and image.

The use of panning in Trinh's films also disrupts the ways in which films construct reality through camerawork tracking bodily movements. As discussed in the previous two chapters, tracking shots emphasize the significance of particular body movements the film is attempting to emphasize for filmic construction of reality. In the first chapter, I showed how the anthropological film *Ax Fight* tracks a Yanomami running from one corner of the frame to the other to underline certain parts of his bodily movement and use them as a proof of reality, the ax fight, the film attempts to convey using camerawork. Similar tracking shots are frequently employed in Vietnam War films to heighten the significance of mainly American characters. This way of emphasizing bodily movements with camerawork is naturalized so viewers are trained to expect the tracking of bodily movements of study subjects. *Reassemblage* speaks back to this tradition by refusing to track filmed subjects in order to expose the camerawork that emphasizes and constructs filmic reality using particular bodily movements. In *Reassemblage*, when people are included in the frame, they mostly appear in the corner of the frame and disappear when the camera moves horizontally as if to imply that they are not meant to be objects of attention. Jump cuts are also employed at this time to interfere with viewers and their

desire to rely on bodily movements to make sense of the film. This way of combining panning and jump cuts in *Reassemblage* disrupts the viewer's desire to continuously gaze at the foreign Senegalese on screen. In so doing, Trinh challenges the institutional tendency to represent human beings as objects of analysis.

While Trinh's films problematize diverse filmmaking practices that construct reality and knowledge about Third World populations, some of the filming methods she utilizes to show the Senegalese in *Reassemblage* reproduce the imbalanced power relationships between filmmakers and study subjects she seems to be trying to condemn. Despite breaking from tradition, in a sense, *Reassemblage* does not offer any room for the Senegalese to speak for themselves by casting their representation with her own. In this light, the representational style used in *Reassemblage* is unable to mitigate the subject/object dichotomy established in conventional anthropological films. Trinh remains distant from study subjects and describes situations from her own viewpoint. For example, the Senegalese are shown working, dancing, eating, and so on, but Trinh does not let anybody in the film participate or interfere with the narration. Even some lines supposedly quoted from one of the Senegalese are mediated, interpreted, and presented according to Trinh's wishes. Take this quote as an example:

A man attending a slide show on Africa turns to his wife and says with guilt in his voice: "I have seen some pornography tonight."  
... "A fine layer of dust covers us from head to toe. When the sandstorm comes," says a child, "we lay on our mat with our mother's headscarf on our face and wait until it goes away."<sup>80</sup>

The quotations from the Senegalese man and child are given via Trinh's voiceover. This domination of the representation of the Senegalese by the filmmaker's own voiceover narration works to expose the filmmaker's forced contextualization and challenge how conventional

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<sup>80</sup> Minh-ha, *Reassemblage*.

anthropological filmmakers distance themselves from their study subjects in order to maintain authority in defining the objects of their gaze. Yet, while Trinh's voiceover takes over the narrative with her concern regarding realist claims in anthropological filmmaking, the Senegalese remain static symbols on screen interpreted by the filmmaker without given the ability to express themselves in their own words. In this way, Trinh purposely keeps a distance from her study subjects to reveal how they examine and question a filmmaker's perspective, but viewers must rely on her voice to make sense of the film because there are no other perspectives than Trinh's expressed in the film. In this light, the Senegalese are used for Trinh's own intentions of disrupting common anthropological filmmaking conventions.

In contrast, the unconventional plots employed in *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* allow Trinh to highlight filmed subject's self-representations and negotiate with their own conceptions of reality. The following section explores how *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* challenged the issue of self-representation in filmmaking.

### Subtitles and Filmic Construction of Reality

*Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* disrupts the lopsided power relationships preserved in filmic constructions of reality, which also appear in *Reassemblage*. This is done by challenging translation as a mechanism to construct the reality in documentary films. Usually, translation in documentary filmmaking occurs as voiceover or as subtitles on the bottom of the screen to help viewers understand a foreign language. Even though the meaning of 'sub' in 'subtitle' seems to imply translations are represented in a subordinate position to the image on screen, subtitles actually privilege text over images because viewers attempt to understand what images mean through the text. In addition, because viewers often do not understand the language used when

subtitles appear, they tend to give credence to subtitles and try to understand what interviewees are saying through them. The position of the subtitle on screen works to heighten the credibility of the translation in faithfully replicating what the interviewees are saying as well. They seem to play a secondary and supportive role to the interviewees on screen by appearing as small texts. This is how they persuade viewers to understand filmed subjects using subtitles without suspecting that translations might be wrong or that there might be different interpretations of what the interviewees are saying. Thus, similarly to sound effects, subtitles function as a powerful mechanism that controls the representation of filmed subjects on screen. Seen in this light, the authority residing in the subtitles and translations work to deny the speaker's agency. Amy Lawrence asserts that the traditional talking heads documentary leads viewers into making reductive assumptions about the subjectivity of interviewees, who are often non-European and non-American indigenous populations. When viewers attempt to understand unfamiliar subjects on screen through translation, the filmed subjects are reduced to the filmmaker's or translator's words without the subject's self-consciousness or the ability to shape their own stories.<sup>81</sup> In summation, subtitles are merely another means for colonizers to exercise authority over Third World populations.

Trinh's films decentralize the authority and power that exist in the act of translation, first by offering texts to the interviews in English and directing viewers' attention to the images on screen instead of the texts. As I stated earlier, one of the ways in which translations gain authority is when viewers cannot understand the language used in the film and must rely on the texts. However, the English subtitles in *Surname Viet, Given Name* do not appear as supportive or authoritative, mostly because the performance is in English. Viewers thus pay more attention

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<sup>81</sup> Lawrence, "Women's Voices in Third World Cinema, 414-415.

to the performance itself. By adding English subtitles to English oral testimony, *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* undermines the authority of subtitles.

*Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* also replaces subtitles from a subordinate position to a position where they appear independent from and superior to the images. This draws viewers' attention to the system of subtitle itself as a way of controlling the meaning of filmed subjects. In the film, the texts is emphasized by appearing separately on screen on a black screen before the action, or by covering parts of the screen or the entire screen with words while interviewees are speaking. These enlarged words on screen are not positioned below the image but over or between them. This decontextualization of subtitles not only interferes with the viewer's desire to understand the images and speech from the text on screen, but also gives rise to the idea that the text has its own context. As a result, it undercuts the authority that resides in subtitles and highlights them as a system of power that contains and controls the speech of filmed subjects on screen.

Trinh's use of Vietnamese American actresses in appropriating interviews is crucial in unsettling the authority of translation. Trinh uses interviews, conducted by Mai Thu Van in Vietnamese, and translated in French for publication as *Vietnam: un peuple, des voix* in 1983. Trinh adds another layer of readings to these by translating them into English. She uses the English translations of Mai Thu Van's interviews as the texts which appear on screen, and are performed by non-professional Vietnamese American actresses. As many critics mention, the speech of these actresses is unnatural. Amy Lawrence says this performance emphasizes the different nuances of printed Standard English and the actresses' voice, rhythms, and accents.<sup>82</sup> Yet, the unnaturalness of their speech originates not only from the fact that they are not native

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<sup>82</sup> Lawrence, "Women's Voices in Third World Cinema," 414.

English speakers, but as Lawrence mentions also by the fact that they are "performing." Their performances imply that their speech has its own contexts on many different levels. For instance, the actress performing the role of Ly reads the following lines:

We receive, from time to time, a package from my brother who lives abroad. He sends us 2 kilos of MSG, 3 kilos of wool. We sell them back in the free market and buy whatever we need... It is a satisfying exchange! This is the same situation for almost all families.... How can we do otherwise? My mother lives with us...I belong to the restaurant service.... I do see the foreigners coming and going....we can't develop any relationship with them.<sup>83</sup>

The actress performing Ly's testimonies reads these lines in a disjointed manner. Her strange mannerisms indicate her nervousness about reading the lines as accurately as possible while acting. She suddenly pauses in the middle of a sentence to cut the vegetables as a part of her performance and quickly goes to the next line after reading "[h]ow can we do otherwise?" without giving any pause. When she reads "I do see the foreigners," viewers can tell she corrected herself after reading the line incorrectly and pausing. Another actress, introduced as Kim, playing Cat Tien also stops in the middle of the lines to correct her pronunciation. She reads her lines with almost no emphasis and her facial expression remains stern. This creates an interesting contrast with a later scene where Kim speaks about performing in Vietnamese. Her Vietnamese seems fluent. Her facial expressions change dramatically during her speech when she thinks about her past. In this way, the actresses who are featured in *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* tend to nervously stop, stutter, or repeat themselves, especially when these performances are compared to their natural speech in the second parts of the film where they talk about themselves. Highlighting this unnatural type of speech and performances implies the distinctive context in which these speeches are made and destabilizes the authority of the translation that attempts to speak for the study subjects. In doing so, as Lawrence argues, that

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<sup>83</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Framer Framed* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 50-51.

placing stress on the actresses' performance establishes them as conscious and active performers, undercutting the linkage between subtitles and images by revealing the differences in their speech.

In addition, Trinh's plot forces the actresses to appropriate translated English interviews for their own sentiments about Vietnam. These actresses' performances undermine the authority of the English text not only by adding nuance and self-expression as Lawrence points out, but also by allowing for a range of interpretations to intervene between the translated text and the acted interpretation. When the actresses perform their lines, they express the written interviews quite differently by altering pitch, speed of narration, and use of body language. These styles of speech not only display nuance, but also new and distinct meanings and interpretations generated by the actresses. For instance, in one English performance of Cat Tien's interview, Kim, places seemingly random emphasis on some words in the script. The written text is as follows:

I am a doctor, with almost 20 years of experience.... My husband is also a doctor.... It was [total] panic.... [My husband] told me: 'We have nothing to blame ourselves for, we are not criminals. We are from the South. If the country is divided into two, it is not because of us!' .... Two years after, it was a disaster, the equipment was paralyzed, the stock of medicines emptied, the buildings dilapidated.... For weeks, I didn't receive any news concerning my husband.... After three month in the atmosphere, I decided to quit my job. As for my husband, I was left without news....Twenty five months! Twenty five months in hell.... My children were neglected like orphans. The only reasonable solution was to... accept to lose the rations tickets and to live in uncertainty. I earned 80 dong per month, a salary of destitution in a bath of humiliation.<sup>84</sup>

The text stresses Cat Tien's frustration over what her and her husband went through after the fall of Vietnam. The first part stresses her anger over the mistreatment that Vietnamese people from the South endured in Vietnam. Her exasperation is emphasized with exclamation points after the quote of her husband's words "it is not because of us" and "Twenty five months." Tien's

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<sup>84</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam*, VHS (New York: Women Make Movies, 1989).

emotion underscores the fact that she was still furious about the ways in which she and her husband ended up being victims in the aftermath of the Vietnam War when Mai Thu Van conducted this interview in 1983. The second underscores Tien's rage about not hearing from her husband and the humiliation having to live in destitution. In contrast to Tien's display of anger through her generous use of exclamation marks, Kim's performance does not call attention to the temper Tien expressed. Kim's voice stays soft, calm, and deep throughout her performance without placing any weight on any of these lines. In an interview that appeared in the last part of the film, Kim discloses how she felt performing the role of Cat Tien:

At first I was very hesitant when you asked me to participate, but then I thought: why would I refuse, when I am a Vietnamese woman myself, and the role in the film speaks the truth of the Vietnamese women still in Vietnam as well as of those emigrated to the U.S.?.... I still have many friends in Vietnam. Compared with Cat Tien (my role) their condition is much worse. Some of them who were highly placed in the past are now selling treats on the street, or trying to survive with their children.<sup>85</sup>

Kim contextualizes Cat Tien's personal anger, pain, and frustration by drawing from Vietnamese women she knows and Vietnamese women in general. Her performance may be seen to represent the pain of Vietnamese women and their continued misery. Kim's performance gains meanings clearly different from the original circumstances. Her performance takes on different meaning at different points because different people, such as Tien and Kim, as well as an interviewee and a translator, interpret the same sentences in different ways. In short, the actresses interpret the script upon the basis of their own understanding. Thus, actresses' performance can be seen to undermine the authority that resides in the text itself by pointing out that any representation will not be the same as the original.

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<sup>85</sup> Minh-ha, *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam*.

Trinh's unconventional techniques in *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* challenge a belief that a filmic representation of real life accurately depicts reality. In the second half of the film, Trinh explores Vietnamese American actresses' conception of the real by asking the actresses who performed in the first part of the film about their everyday lives in the United States and letting them choose how they will be presented in the second half of the film. This unconventional way of filming people's everyday life calls attention to the fact that their conception of reality is not necessarily an accurate depiction of their everyday lives. It may also imply that the fictitious and imaginary are a part of everyday life. For instance, during interviews in the second half of the film, the actresses are supposed to act as they do in their daily life, but they preferred to be filmed at unusual settings. These actresses, who previously appeared in simple clothes and without make-up, appear in dressy clothes with full make-up while attending unusual events such as a circus or a wedding. One of the actresses is filmed feeding a koi with her child at a fishpond that Trinh and her staff members found for her because she had no fishpond at home and wanted one. In this scene the woman is filmed with her child in wide to medium shots. The fishpond is a fictional element of her life, but is nonetheless part of her reality because she chose that place to represent her reality. This illustrates the ambiguity between the real and fictional elements of people's lives and challenges the anthropological filming techniques of respecting the real time, which was believed to be an accurate depiction of life and reality. In her interview, Trinh explains that the actress who wished to be filmed at a fishpond was a working-class woman living in a very small apartment with a large family. She speculates on the significance of the fishpond for this woman. Because a fishpond has been a "richly significant symbol in Asian culture," Trinh believes the fishpond might have been a

dream place to escape from a stressful daily life.<sup>86</sup> As Trinh mentions, the fact that the actress wanted to represent her everyday life through the fishpond might mean that her idea of reality is not the stress of daily life trying to make ends meet while raising a child on her own, but the precious time she can relax and think about her future at the fishpond. More importantly, her conception of the reality is fictional and negates how conventional anthropological filmmakers depict the reality of filmed subjects. By implication, what conventional anthropological filmmakers depict is merely their own conception of an endlessly interpretable reality. When filmmakers impose their own conceptions of the real on the studied subjects, they deny filmed subjects' agency to represent themselves. Trinh's unconventional techniques illustrate the ambiguity between fictional and real in people's lives while problematizing how the filmmakers' idea of the real tends to be imposed on studied subjects in conventional anthropological films.

#### Filmic Construction of Reality and Dominant Ideal

Filmic construction of reality tends to have a complicit relationship with the dominant narrative conventions and ideologies of a society. Both in *Reassemblage* and *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam*, Trinh challenges how the lives of non-European and non-American people and their histories tend to be constructed as a coherent narrative and narrated from male-centered viewpoints. By giving prominence to women in Senegalese and Vietnamese society, these two films call attention to the ways in which narrative conventions and patriarchal ideologies intrude on ethnographical and historical narrations in films.

*Reassemblage* calls attention to the fact that filmmakers break their study subjects' experiences into pieces and manipulate them to construct a coherent narrative. For this purpose,

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<sup>86</sup> Minh-ha. *Framer Framed*, 165.

*Reassemblage* appropriates jump cuts to reveal the filmmaker and underlines how dominant filmmakers produce fragmented visions enabled by jump cuts. As mentioned earlier, filmic constructions of reality are linked to dominant narrative structures, and filming techniques such as jump cuts are used for this purpose. In the use of jump cuts, subjects seen in sequential clips appear to jump from one spot to another. This discontinuity constructs a continuous flow to the narrative that develops and ends in a limited amount of time in anthropological films. For example, jump cuts in *Nanook of the North* (1922) summarize the lengthy process of building an igloo. Boiling down an hour and half of material about carrying, building, and curving ice and to four minutes can enable filmmakers to present igloo construction as a small coherent piece from beginning to end. Trinh's films draw viewers' attention to this way of breaking experiences of study subjects into pieces for constructing stories in film. *Reassemblage* shows only glimpses of the Senegalese with the use of jump cuts where subjects appear and, all of a sudden, disappear. This unconventional use of editing calls viewers' attention to the disjunctions created by jump cuts and also highlights Trinh's presence, where she arbitrarily dismisses some parts of the sequence. In doing so, Trinh discloses how dominant filmmakers remove the body movements and actions of study subjects for crafting entirety and reality in their films.

Juxtaposing a scene in the actual filming time and in the jump cuts works to divulge filmic construction of reality that oftentimes resembles to dominant narrative style is man-made fable. In one sequence where Senegalese people are filmed while preparing and eating a meal, Trinh initially shows them with jump cut without any sound, and later, shows the rest of the scene in actual filming time with sound. In the first sequence, anonymous Senegalese people appear and then disappear all of a sudden and filmed events, such as preparation of a meal or eating, appear as small, fragmented parts of actions because they are sped up though the use of

jump cuts. In the second sequence, in actual filming time, the film captures the lives of Senegalese people unfolding at a much slower speed. What seemed to be just an anonymous mass of people who are captured in fragmented actions through the jump cuts show up as individuals actually enjoying their mealtime filmed in real time. In these scenes of slower speed, actions are continuous with no start or end. This way of setting the same scene filmed differently side-by-side highlights how filmmakers cut the lives of study subjects into pieces to create a story. The anthropological filmmakers remove tedious scenes for the purpose of creating unified and easily consumable stories on film. *Reassemblage* gives prominence to anthropological filming techniques that create reality for study subjects.

*Reassemblage* draws attention to how conventional ethnographic and anthropological films produce gendered representations of ethnic groups and consciously emphasize certain gendered activities in order to exoticize the lives of study subjects. While conventional anthropological films focus on uncommon and abnormal male social activities that are easy targets of exoticism, *Reassemblage* reveals how both Senegalese men and women participate in the domestic activities. In doing so, Trinh's film accentuates representations in dominant anthropological films actively strengthen gendered notions of the lives of ethnic groups. For instance, *Nanook of the North* focuses only on the unfamiliar features of Inuit life. The film shows how male members of the Inuit eat raw seal, lick their knives to cut ice blocks better for their igloos, and grease their sleighs using their tongue during fishing, hunting, and cultural rituals. In contrast, *Reassemblage* highlights more ubiquitous activities for both men and women. *Reassemblage* starts with a shot of a Senegalese man sitting down in a dark interior of a house sharpening a knife. The next shot is another shot of man smoking his pipe and carving some wood. Then, the sound children running can be seen with percussive sound. Viewers also

see Senegalese women cooking, carrying containers, and taking care of babies. As many critics have pointed out, Trinh's films are notable in that women who appear in them are represented not merely as observers of, but as active participants in society.<sup>87</sup> *Reassemblage* shows how young and old women participate in communal activities -- pounding grain, spinning cotton, making food, and taking care of children. More importantly, however, Trinh's films, especially *Reassemblage*, depict how Senegalese men and women share a domestic environment. They live, eat, and work in the same house and the neighborhood. By focusing on the everyday activities of the Senegalese men and women, *Reassemblage* undermines widespread tendencies in anthropological films that focus on exotic features of the lives of study subjects and draws the viewers' attention to the strangeness of study subjects.

In *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam*, Trinh T. Minh-ha challenges the male-centered constructions of the history of Vietnam and the Vietnam War by noting the contributions of women in Vietnamese history. As seen in the second chapter, the history of the Vietnam War tends to be represented from male perspectives and women tend to be represented as victims of the war. *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* visualizes the history of the Vietnam War from the perspective of Vietnamese women. Through popular sayings, oral histories, songs, poems, pictures, and slow-motion videos, the film testifies about how Vietnamese women participated in the history of Vietnam as mothers, laborers, vendors, poets, and activists while struggling under patriarchal social values. For instance, their participation in nation-building is forcefully represented in the following sequences where Vietnamese women carry wood in combat clothes and another woman dances. Trinh's narrations are as follows:

The notorious double day flashes back in my memory: women work as a full unit of economic production *and* do all the unpaid housework and child care. Popular sayings

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<sup>87</sup> Minh-ha, *Framer Framed*, 112.

qualify the three steps of her life and her victimization as that of a lady before marriage, that of a maid during marriage, and that of a monkey long after marriage.<sup>88</sup>

The above quote highlights the hardship women experienced in playing the roles of mother and national citizen under a patriarchal society. The popular saying points out that the Vietnamese women raised children, did unpaid work at home, and were also a driving economic force, but were not regarded as socially equal. In both the lullaby and the later quote, *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* emphasizes how Vietnamese women participated in Vietnamese nation-building. This challenges the notion of a male dominant history and rejects constructed images of Vietnam repeated and naturalized in the popular media.

The skillful use of slow motion questions socially constructed gender roles and highlights the significance of Vietnamese women's participation in nation-building. *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* shows the diversity of Vietnamese women in slow motion. Such images include both modern and traditional dancers, laboring women while transporting and selling goods or fishing on a boat, as well as women activists marching through the street, and female soldiers carrying weapons. Slow motion shots frequently appear in juxtaposition to images of Vietnamese men performing in front of the public. This is followed by a traditional saying that implies conventional and sexist social norms. Shown in parallel and sometimes accompanied by Trinh's voiceover narration, they not only visualize the role of women in nation building, but also challenge socially constructed, sexist gender roles. For instance, one of the scenes exposes a series of slow motion images of Vietnamese women dancing and another shot of many women clapping their hands. These images are followed by another shot of slow motion images where viewers can see a female Vietnamese soldier carrying a wooden box with a machine gun on her

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<sup>88</sup> Minh-ha, *Framer Framed*, 112.

shoulder. Following these images, viewers see two men shaking hands and hugging in public. This is followed by more another slow motion shot of Vietnamese men and women clapping.

Trinh's voiceover narration states:

When he claps his hands, she has entertained  
When she claps her hands, he has made a significant contribution—to his village, his town, his country. The fatherland, as they call it now.<sup>89</sup>

The quote presents several strong criticisms in relation to the series of slow motion images of Vietnamese women and men. The first line that is offered in the narration appears as ironical because viewers saw the slow motion images of the female Vietnamese soldier. By juxtaposing contradictory information, this scene functions as a powerful irony that the partial roles that women play as entertainers dominate women's social roles. The second and third lines reveal that the contributions of Vietnamese men are acknowledged as significant, but women's contributions are obliterated. *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* highlights the diverse social roles played by Vietnamese women, such as entertainers, workers, and soldiers. The slow motion is used to turn the spotlight on the significance of their presence in the history of Vietnam. When these fragmented images of social roles played by Vietnamese women are played with the voiceover narration that offers popular conceptions of women's roles in a society, this juxtaposition visualize how dominant social norms select partial roles that are played by women such as performers and entertainers and marginalize other roles.

*Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* exposes how war appeared as a gendered experience for women. Women's participation in political struggles appear differently from that of male participants because women in Vietnam battled patriarchal social values throughout their country's history along with the national struggles. In the popular description of the Vietnam

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<sup>89</sup> Minh-ha, *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam*.

War, Vietnamese men and American men are depicted almost as if they are the only ones who existed on the battlefield and Vietnamese women are frequently depicted as powerless victims. Yet, Trinh's narrations of popular history reveal that Vietnamese women participated in the national struggle and war and their experiences of the war have always been gendered. For instance, one of the scenes highlights how Vietnamese women were able to mobilize their agency by fighting in battle. The voiceover narration tells a famous story about a female warrior, Trieu Thi Trinh, who led thirty battles against the Chinese and committed suicide when her army was defeated because she refused to return to a life of submission to male authority.<sup>90</sup> After the voiceover narration, with images of Vietnamese women making straw hats, a famous line attributed to Trieu Thi Trinh is read in Vietnamese and subtitles appear on screen as follows: "I only want to ride the wind and walk the waves, slay the big whale of the Eastern sea, clean up frontiers, and save the people from drowning. Why should I imitate others, bow my head, stoop over and be slave to a man?"<sup>91</sup> The story of Trieu Thi Trinh emphasizes how Vietnamese women saw participation in the war as an opportunity to play an active role in the society and to resist sexist social values. Karen Gottschang Turner's well-known book about Vietnamese women's participation in nation-building resonates with Trinh's historical narration. Turner examines the same historical character, Trieu Thi Trinh and states "[t]he theme that runs through Vietnam's traditional history is this: foreign influence muted these progressive forces, women suffered and so their revolts made sense—when fighting for the nation they were fighting for their rights."<sup>92</sup> Thus, these Vietnamese women did not fight to kill the enemy, but to resist the sexist social norms that they refused to accept committing suicide. The series of popular histories and legends

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<sup>90</sup> Minh-ha, *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam*.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> Karen Gottschang Turner, *Even the Women Must Fight: Memories of War From North Vietnam* (New York: John Wiley and Sons Inc, 1998), 27.

introduced in *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* also exposes how battle itself was gendered for Vietnamese women. Trinh mentions:

The two sisters Trung Trac and Trung Nhi of Vietnam's earliest history of resistance are proudly remembered for the uprising they led in fighting against Chinese domination.... It is fantasied that to conquer their female armies, the only successful strategy the Chinese soldiers finally came up with was to strip themselves to the skin and expose their "thing" shamelessly to the sight of their female opponents. The women fighters retreated in disgust and the Trung sisters committed suicide.<sup>93</sup>

This legend is about how Trung Trac, Trung Nhi, and Trieu Thi Trinh rebelled against Chinese domination while they struggled under the pressure of patriarchal social values during the third century. This popular history of the Trung sisters narrates the significance of gendered social norm because what caused them to commit suicide was narrated as not the battle itself, but their own shame. The Chinese male soldier's behavior was to be a serious insult to these sisters perhaps because they were nurtured by and were made to comply with strict gendered social norms. In addition, the story recounts that male soldiers used the ideas of womanhood to defeat these female soldiers. This experience of receiving gendered violence points out that these women struggled under gendered social norms at home as well as on the battlefield. In this way, this history recounts female historical figures fighting against gendered social values as they rebelled against Chinese colonialism. When popular films depict war, they tend to emphasize men killing each other, but the historical narrations Trinh offers underline how women and men experience war differently.

Trinh emphasizes how historical figures become mythologized and reinterpreted by different people, researchers, and political regimes. Thus, the film exposes the fluid and multifaceted nature of the truth. Regardless of heroic myths that have been popularly recounted

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<sup>93</sup> Minh-ha, *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam*.

about these national female fighters, the appearances of the Trung sisters and Trieu Thi Trinh are ambiguous and fictitious.<sup>94</sup> Their physical depictions are introduced through a voiceover narration: “[p]opular descriptions of the physical appearance of the sisters Trung are often confusingly similar to those of Trieu Thi Trinh.... She was said to be nine feet tall, with frightful breasts, three meters long, flying over her shoulders as she rode on an elephant.”<sup>95</sup> Although these figures are popularly described as national heroes, their physical features are exaggerated. In addition, historical interpretations of the character Kieu from the *Tale of Kieu* written in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century by Nguyen Du are another example. Trinh’s voiceover narration explains that the beautiful and talented Kieu, who experiences destitution and humiliation in the poem, becomes a metaphor of Vietnam and recited by the poor as well as rich as their own ideal of womanhood.<sup>96</sup> These collages of historical figures interpreted in diverse manners highlight the abstract and ambivalent nature of history. This creates vivid contrasts to how history tends to be narrated in filmic constructions of reality. Film strengthens the periodization of history and creates a single way of viewing history while eliminating any contradicting or ambiguous viewpoints.

As I have discussed, Trinh T. Minh-ha’s *Reassemblage* and *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* challenge the power and authority endowed to anthropological filmmaking conventions. The voiceover narrations in *Reassemblage* divulges the physical presence of the filmmaker, as well as filmed subjects who directly gaze at the filmmaker, Trinh. In addition, both of these films highlighted a number of filmmaking techniques as part of the mechanisms to privilege filmmaker’s construction of filmed subjects. By appropriating these techniques, Trinh’s films

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<sup>94</sup> Minh-ha, *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam*.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

not only disrupt their filmic construction of reality but also viewer's desire to see and learn about foreign people and society through films.

## Conclusion

Filmic construction of reality has developed and carried over to different genres of film. As I have demonstrated, realist as well as anthropological filming techniques produce historically and socially constructed views of the world that are influenced racial power imbalance as truthful. As chapter one and two showed, these realist filming techniques are interchangeably employed in fiction and non-fiction films. Documentary and anthropological films were institutionalized differently, but they share exactly the same research interests especially at the birth of these genres. Also, realist filming techniques such as long take, real time, location shooting, and the use of natural light are widely in non-fiction, documentary and anthropological films, as well as fiction films as stylistic conventions. Anthropological filmmaking techniques, such as wide-angle framing, zooming, and voiceover narrations, were also seen in fiction films as well. As I have discussed in the second chapter, the anthropological filming techniques work to show the Vietnamese as nameless of people even though the Vietnam War films I have discussed share the impulse to speak back to the racism.

Trinh T. Minh-ha's films seem to direct attention to anthropological films and successfully appropriate these filming techniques to disrupt the filmic construction of reality. Her films worked to reveal the unreasonable authority that was endowed to filmmakers and decenters many filming techniques that were conventionally used as the authority to control representations of filmed subjects. Thus, her films make clear that racist and sexist views will continue to be reproduced as long as the same filming techniques are used because the filming techniques were nurtured in relation to dominant ideology. In resistance to the popular notion of reality that tends to be reproduced in dominant films, her films revealed the multifaceted and mythic nature of reality.

Yet, Trinh's critique against filmic construction of reality seems to underestimate the fluidity of filmmaking techniques. As we have seen in the second chapter, mobile camerawork that captured the heart broken Vietnamese father's oral testimony in *Hearts and Minds* emphasizes his anger against the U.S. military actions. The wide-angle shots of mass of the Vietnamese in *Apocalypse Now* work to emphasize the hardships and devastation the ordinary Vietnamese people have experienced under the Vietnam War. Tracking shot and slow motion that are used to show one of the Vietnamese characters in *We Were Soldiers* highlights emotion of the Vietnamese soldier who is nervously and desperately trying to play his role at the war. Some of the filming techniques that were used in the second chapter underline that filming techniques only create meanings eclectically and are not necessarily complicit with racism or sexism all the time.

Trinh usefully direct our attention to the techniques frequently used to film foreign people in anthropology such as framing, editing, and subtitles. Yet the implication that there is no way people could learn about others by films might have to be considered more carefully. If filmmaking techniques can be used freely and function eclectically, Trinh's understanding of anthropological filmmaking techniques are one way of seeing certain filming techniques, but not the only way. Trinh highlights the multifaceted characteristic of history, but this might be the case for filmmaking techniques as well.

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