

Forgetting Vietnam

Trinh T. Minh-ha with Lucie Kim-Chi Mercier

Trinh T. Minh-ha teaches in the University of California, Berkeley's departments of Rhetoric, and Gender and Women's Studies. Born in Hanoi in 1952, Trinh emigrated to the United States in 1970 where she studied musical composition, ethnomusicology and French literature, completing her PhD dissertation in 1977 under the title: *Un Art sans Oeuvre: l'Anonymat dans les Arts Contemporains* [*An Art Without Oeuvre: Anonymity in Contemporary Arts*]. Since the early 1980s she has developed a complex theoretical, visual and poetic response to the implicit politics regulating the production of discourses and images of cultural difference. Working through the multidimensional effects of imperialism and neo-colonial modernity, her works played a pivotal role in the emergence of postcolonial theory and critique. Her now canonical 1989 book, *Woman, Native, Other*, investigates the contradictory imperatives faced by an 'I' positioned 'in difference' as a 'Third World woman' in the act of writing, as well as in critiquing the roles of the creator, intellectual and anthropologist. But aside from the critique of mechanisms of cultural representations, Trinh's works experiment with deconstructive and transgressive ways of questioning their own classifications. They play on, with and across cultural and national boundaries. Alongside films and installations, Trinh has published numerous essays and books on cinema, cultural politics, feminism and the arts.

The interview took place in London in December 2017, when the London premiere of *Forgetting Vietnam* at Tate Modern was programmed in parallel with a full retrospective of Trinh's films at the Institute of Contemporary Arts.

Lucie Kim-Chi Mercier [LM] You made three films around Vietnam; can you speak a little about the process that led you from one to the next? Is there a thread running through the different films, namely *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989), *A Tale of Love* (1995) and *Forgetting Vietnam* (2015)?

Trinh T. Minh-ha [TMH] In terms of realisation they are three very different films, but certainly, there are threads linking them together because they are all about 'culture' in the largest sense of the term. Whenever I go to places and shoot in cultures different than my own, I'm not interested at all in 'covering a story' – an individual's story or an individualist subject. I never work that way. I'd rather come into places and events with questions like: What characterises a culture? What is its everyday reality? What leads a country to be seen as such? And importantly, *how* do we show and tell (from what position, with what tools)?

Surname Viet Given Name Nam, as you can tell from the title, concerns the naming of a country. It has to do with gender and national identity, as well as with the politics of naming, translating and interviewing. *Forgetting Vietnam*, which engages with the process of remembering and forgetting, also relates to the naming of a country, by featuring the multi-dimensional roles of land and water. In Vietnamese, *đất nước*, the term for country, designates 'land' and 'water', but

just saying ‘*nước*’ or ‘water’ already refers to a country (for example ‘*nước ta*’ means both ‘our water’ or ‘our country’).

I start from there, from Vietnam as a body of water – in its geological formation and via its people’s economic and cultural activities – to commemorate its fiftieth anniversary of the end of the War. *A Tale of Love* is a film based on the national poem of Vietnam, *Kim Vân Kieu*. If there’s one thing the Vietnamese diaspora across all nations remembers of the culture, it’s this poem. It’s unique because it speaks to people from all classes in all walks of life. Villagers know verses of it. They’ve become popular sayings and are widely cited in a host of circumstances, especially situations related to questions of gender and nation, virtue and loyalty. Even if people don’t remember all 3,254 verses of the epic love poem (none could do so in any case), they do remember fragments pertaining to the distinct roles and deeds of the characters in the poem.

This was what I adopted in approaching the poem with my film: not illustrating it; not manufacturing a realist representation of it; not narrating it linearly from beginning to end, but offering a multi-time, multi-layered, music-for-the-eye work. Therefore, coming in from the middle, opening with the ear via the poem’s closing verse which deliberately states its function as a fabulation for beguiling the long night. What is emphasised is the nature of the poetic, hence the singing and recitation against a visual work that also invokes the olfactory dimension of experiencing love. And what is retained from the poem are only those instances that highlight the ‘scents of a narrative’ – here, as I have it, the conflicted loyalties and the nonconforming choices of the woman protagonist who, despite her sacrifice and impeccable ethics in love, does not fit squarely into patriarchal norms and ideology.

In other words, when I approach culture, what appeals to me is not the search for ‘a good story’, the individual story, or the clear message that marks our consumerist society’s media productions. The ubiquitous demand for a centralised story sets the mould for funding and exhibition networks whose criteria for what is ‘good,’ and ‘clear’ serve to promote a monolithic, domination-subordination mode of storytelling. What appeals to me, however, is a making that maintains at core a relation to infinity: a focus that is vast in scope yet specific to the culture observed; situations that pertain to local people and at the same time speak to those from elsewhere; women whose peculiar conditions do not merely represent those of their peers—in this case, Vietnamese women. So when people say ‘it’s a film on Vietnamese women’, I would say yes, *but ...* For example, I remember well when I presented and showed *Surname Viet* in Bologna in Italy, some women from the audience told me how moved they were by what they had heard in the film. They felt that it was their own condition that was being addressed. And this, I was told, also occurred with a group of Palestinian women who discussed my book *Woman, Native, Other*. So when you choose something specific it could be at the same time locally precise and very wide in scope.

LM: Let me linger a little bit on this question of the ‘name’, and the paradox that in order to deconstruct or undo the idea of a specific place or nation state you have to reassert its name. For instance in a lot of these films you name ‘Vietnam’ in the title. In *Reassemblage*, you narrate that someone asked you: You want to make a film on Senegal, but *what* in Senegal? A signifier of a nation state seems to be very important both as the locus of a de-figuration and, at the same time, a locus of play.

TMH: Absolutely. It tells us something about our compartmentalised world – how knowledge is forcibly compartmentalised for control purposes, and how, even with the constant talk about virtual boundlessness in globalisation, the world we live is a world of proliferating fences and

walls. Boundaries are all over in our language, in the way we relate to people and events in life.

In remote villages of West Africa, where lived 'Africa' is not divided into nations, people identify mainly in terms of genealogy, ethnicity and linguistic belonging, and it's not at all uncommon for these villagers to speak four to six African languages. In other words, they are fluent across geographical and ethnic borders. They speak the languages of their neighbours in addition to their native language and the trade language of their region. So the system of the nation state and its derivative notion of nationalism remain quite disconnected, at odds with this cultural context – something like an exogenous imposition, a hard line drawn over the map of precolonial African kingdoms.

Such a structure of governance taken for granted as the norm is not unrelated to the way we consume film in general. In a story-driven approach to documentary for example, it is often thought that if you cover a subject, you have to focus on a specific topic, a 'case study' – something finite like an individual's story, a conflict, a ceremony, an incidence within a village or a community, or else a family drama– but if you are focusing on everyday life, building on the gestures of a culture via ordinary activities, and composing a distinct tapestry of sense, sight and sound as you go, it doesn't seem like a subject for a number of film consumers, especially film programmers and funders, who always ask for 'a story' (obviously, not the kind of cosmic, spiritual indigenous storytelling whose scope reaches across generations, which I discussed in *Woman, Native, Other*). So even when you make a documentary they beg you to develop an individualist, character-bound story with a beginning, middle and end, abiding by the normative theatrical three acts and its conflict-driven climax. For me, filmmaking is not at all about stories or messages. Those come along, but they can't define cinema.

Why not approach filmically a country, a people, a culture by starting with what comes with an image (mental, material, digital) or with a name like 'Vietnam', 'China', 'Japan', or 'Senegal', for example – as explicitly asked in my earlier film, *Reassemblage* (1982). What exactly stands for, characterises and speaks to a cultural and political event? Through the specific apparatus of film and video, how does one show, tell and receive while refusing merely to represent? In other words, the given name or the recorded sound image is a site of departure, where one takes off rather than arrives.

The focus here is on the play between seeing and not seeing; on the work of the invisible within the visible, and vice versa; or else, on how the seen both displays and veils, and how what is necessarily left unseen in each instance of the seen could contribute to bringing about *another seeing*. Questioning the prevailing claim to visibility, such a seeing acknowledges its limits while inducing one to *see anew*, not only with eyes wide open, but also with eyes wide shut. Of course, this is only one way of questioning the established tendency to reduce reality to the realm of the visible. Another way would be to address the other senses involved since cinema is not a mere art for the eye but an experience of the whole body.

LM: I was struck by the multiple facets and ambivalence of the title, *Forgetting Vietnam*. So, with 'forgetting' you highlight the act by which one might attempt to forget, the paradox of acting the forgetting, and you give us this beautiful quotation: "'To really forget, we must fully know what we want to forget'" (Pham Thi Hoài). But how to remember the face of a war?' This runs against the idea of a *devoir de mémoire*, in the sense of memorialisation. Indeed, it inverts it: what's at stake is not a determinate form of remembrance, as in Walter Benjamin's idea of the Proustian image, but a determinate forgetting... So, I'm interested in how you treat memory and forgetting via image and sound.



Image: Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989)

TMH: This follows nicely from the earlier discussion concerning the land-water pair *đất nước* that defines Vietnam as a country. A common place to start would be to say: land records, water dissolves. The forces of preservation and oblivion go hand-in-hand. As stated at the beginning of *Forgetting Vietnam*, 'It all begins with Two.' Non-binary pairs multiply in unexpected courses and there are always at least two ways to enter my films.

To return differently to what I said about my three films on Vietnam being very distinct from one another, *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* is a 16mm film in which the stories of women interviewed in Vietnam by a French-based Vietnamese writer, Mai Thu Van, were first translated and published in French, then retranslated by myself into English and made into a 'script' for the film. Through the condition of women both in Vietnam and in the diaspora, the work features the historical multi-naming of a country and the politics of translation and interview – or documentary's antiquated devices.

Shot in 35mm, *A Tale of Love* deals with the genre commonly called 'fiction' or 'narrative feature' in which the love story is requisite. With the love story comes a whole process of voyeurism, for every story of love on screen is a story of voyeurism. The more of a voyeur you are in a feature narrative, the more intimate the view you offer to the spectator, right? So the camera would follow people everywhere. In their bathroom, in their shower, in their bed, in their nudity, but also in their terminal illness, in their hunger, in their suffering. It is an extreme form of voyeurism which I literally and provocatively exposed and incorporated into the role of one of the main characters of the film: the photographer. *A Tale of Love* is structured in such a way as to give you at first the feeling that you have a story, but as the film moves on, the story seems to disappear. As it loses its linearity and is made to dissolve, the viewer is invited to follow the narrative threads the way a deer would track a scent. 'Narrative, in her world, is a track of scents passed on from lover to lover', says a character in the film.

In *Forgetting Vietnam*, I was dealing with footage shot in 1995, with the advent of Hi8 video, and footage shot in 2012, with the advent of High Definition (HD) video. So you have low and high technology, tradition and modernity, rural and urban, and it's arduous to make them work together. Like other Third World countries, this is a problem that Vietnam is struggling with, not only because the leap required to bridge the gap between old and new is much more abrupt than in European countries, but also because the concept regulating the relation between low tech and high tech in today's consumer society is *incompatibility*. Everything is linearly made incompatible between past and present, North and South, East and West, so that we are constantly compelled to keep on consuming in our throwaway society.

The three films are therefore different from one another in their treatment, approach and concerns, even though this may escape many viewers. It's interesting to see how curators tend to program them. They usually put my African films on the same bill, and my two last Vietnam films would often be screened in consecutive order, one after the other with barely a break in between; and that's because they go by subject. But if, instead of content, they were to go by cinematic concerns, they wouldn't program them together. For me, lumping them together would make it impossible for the viewer to open up and take in their autonomy and integrity as film.

I mention all this to give you the wider context required to respond to your question about the complex relation between forgetting and remembering. In the making of *Forgetting Vietnam* one of the commitments I kept in relation to war images was the following: most of the films made on the war in Vietnam show you the horrors of war mainly through what constitutes the sensational in cinema. So: explosions, bombings, killings, bodies, buildings and environment being burned, mutilated and blasted; violent, bloody scenes with wounds oozing open (blood as depicted in mainstream films is cheap), and then suffering that is strident – noisy, and loud. Such a depiction of war amply exploited on screen for spectacular effect is something that I do not want at all to have in my films. Showing brutality has its journalistic function, but violence for violence's sake is how the media continue to desensitise human suffering and distress, as well as how the entertainment industry claims to serve a consumer society steeped in violent media.

And then you have the other kinds of films evolving from this war, of which you really have to ask: Whose interest does it serve? For most of the time what's covertly at stake are American interests. Whether their politics is liberal or conservative, mainstream films made in the name of the war in Vietnam speak to one side of the war and contribute to sustaining American hegemony. So, sometimes during one of these films' screenings, I would be sitting in the audience with other Vietnamese people, and they would look at me and say: Do you think it has anything to do with us? [Laughter]

With *Forgetting Vietnam*, viewers often wonder why there are no images of the war, but the war is all over, whether visible or otherwise. Its traces are everywhere, present in the environment, in people's memory, in their speech and daily rituals. For example, the poets quoted in the film are mostly young -- those whose generation has not known the war. Yet their thoughts and feelings are full of it, like this young woman poet, Phan Huyền Thư, who, writing about Huế – the ancient imperial city in central Vietnam whose traumatised inhabitants silently endured the mass killings perpetrated during the historical Offensive of Tết Mậu Thân 1968 – would disclose her sentiments as follows: '*I want to murmur to Huế and to caress it / But I'm afraid to touch the sensitive spot on Vietnam's body.*'

The War's affect still runs deep within the young generations born after it or at its end.. On the surface, everything seems to have returned to normalcy today, and ironically, in the current era of terror, Vietnam is reportedly one of the safest places to travel to. But the War is

all-permeating, very present in its absence, and not just present the way the media represents it. The commitment to not use any footage of the War that has been taken and circulated on the media in *Forgetting Vietnam* was a question both of ethics and of *intense remembering in forgetting*. In *Surname Viet Given name Nam* I deliberately used some archival footage of the refugees in the 1950s with the stories of refugees in the late 1970s and 1980s so as to remember rape as a national and yet gender-specific problem across times of war. But in *Forgetting Vietnam*, I didn't want any war footage because as soon as you have 'Vietnam' in a film, people would expect to see these kind of images, and when these are not there, they feel somehow lost, as if Vietnam as a war is the only way they could relate to the country. So this is one way of forgetting.

Another more obvious way to forget could be seen in what has happened with tourism since the end of the War. There are many American soldiers who travelled there, not so much to remember Vietnam as to forget the Vietnam they knew, which is partly understandable. They are likely interested in returning to learn about the country of which they knew so little when they first came, deluded by their might, to eradicate an enemy force via military power. However, there is also a nostalgic side to it. They return to their battlefields, but this time as a tourist, as a consumer, so of course the Vietnamese folks would immediately oblige. Today in the flourishing industry of war tourism, the complex interwoven tunnel system in southern Vietnam, which bears witness to the guerillas' unmatched ingenuity and endurance, has become a source of investment. The multileveled subterranean structure that allowed the Vietnamese to gain victory over the Americans is precisely now part of the exoticism of war in the tropics, and the very places for touristic ...

LM: You can even shoot a gun right, you can shoot a gun as part of the experience?

TMH: It's incredible. That's a second aspect of the forgetting. This being said, what is equally important to me is that when you go to a place with a camera, you rely on the camera to remember for you. And with new technologies – the iPhone being a popular example – you can select, delete, trash, edit, collect, keep whatever you want. This is how memory is treated today through digital technology. The difference between old and new technology is all about systems of memory. However, when I don't have a camera I remember very intensely the experience of an event, a place, a culture, a people. Relying on the camera to capture and record has led people to think that they can preserve memories with a camera. But actually, what they preserve is of a different nature than what they experience and remember. In that sense, one can talk about a 'memory for forgetfulness', since forgetting here means engaging critically with the world of camera and iPhone ever-faster memory. Show, tell, record. On the one hand, such an unquestioned economy of display-so-as-to-remember should be problematised in relation to everyday practices of forgetfulness and to indigenous economies of preservation-through-burial, for example. On the other hand, the more you attempt to forget and evade what you try to forget, the more it comes back to haunt you. Vietnam's spectre still haunts the White House, as it has the world at large. The question of remembering and forgetfulness could never be separated. For me, it remains a non-binary pair, two faces of the same coin.

LM: I would like to discuss the problem of heroism because it appears to stretch all the way back in your work to *Lovecidal: Walking with the Disappeared* (2016), which articulates a critique of the heroic version of war, war seen in terms of victory vs. defeat. The discourse on heroism seems to lock memory on every side. Memory is locked by the discourses of victory, that is, in the official Vietnamese discourses of history and state, as well as in a left-wing discourse which maintains a

melancholic relationship to that moment – with its strong internationalist commitment against the war that hasn't since achieved comparable momentum. In the US, you also have the two sides of, if you will, 'defeat': the Vietnamese diaspora for whom it is still difficult to speak about the war now, as well as the American veteran's side.

TMH: Your take on heroism in this context is pertinent, and I can see the link with *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*, in which the women interviewed criticise the way they were presented by the foreign media, that is, always as 'heroic fighters'. In *Forgetting Vietnam* and especially in my last book *Lovecidal*, it is the victory mindset that I see regulating war, paradoxically bringing together the two warring sides. It is a mindset that divides the world into winners and losers. When you think about it, it is absurd to always want to be the winner and to always consider the other to be the loser. Heroism righteously trotted out to disavow suffering and distress partakes in such inanity. In today's 'new wars' it might be more appropriate to say that the line between winning and losing has been so muddled that there is no longer a loser. Every war champion claims victory at all cost, and hence, battles are only fought between victor and victor.

For example, one of the most striking and puzzling moments for me during the 1991 Gulf War was when the Americans were declaring victory over Iraq. As television screens were filled with talk about the war coming to an end, thanks to the glorious results of Operation Desert Storm and the swift victory by American-led coalition forces, we, earnest spectators, were briefly shown images of Iraqi's celebrating their own 'victory'. This is what in *Lovecidal* I call the 'Twin Victories'. Of course, for Western media reporters, it was mind-boggling to see such a celebration when Iraq had lost the war. Everyone said at the time that Saddam Hussein was deceiving his people. For me, it's not the same concept of victory. Same word, similar striving, but not the same thing. The West is always probing and measuring the other in their terms, but it would be more relevant to ask seriously why Iraq claimed victory where the Western world only saw defeat. As with the Algerian or the Vietnam wars, the West may obtain military victory temporarily via a power from the sky, but nations of lesser means ultimately gain political victory via a power from the underground. These persist through elaborate subterranean structures built to fight those who claim to see everything from the sky.

Victory can also be a victory like 9/11. Who is winning? Who is losing? Such senseless questions evade the full significance of war. There is political victory, there is symbolic victory, and then there is this victory achieved by force of arms, which ultimately serves the military empire, allowing those considered all-powerful to prevail over those fighting through guerrilla means. It is this imbalance of asymmetrical warfare and the rise of singular forms of everyday resistance that I raised in *Lovecidal*. Not only do they speak to the absurdity of war, they carry the potential to change the landscape of struggles for justice.

In the war against the French, the moment I focused on was also the moment of victory and defeat at Dien Bien Phu – that memorable closing instance when a Viet Minh combatant asked the French colonel, *in French*, 'c'est fini?' and the officer replied, 'Oui, c'est fini.' It's like hearing two children play fighting and then turning to one another as they end the game: 'Is it over?' 'Yes, time's up.' War comes down to something so infantile, so insignificant. You lose so many lives just for that moment of victory. Together with the affective dimension of war, this is the absurdity that I wanted to highlight. The same thing goes with the so-called 'end of the war' in Iraq. The Americans' exit strategy was to pull out during the night so that you couldn't see their withdrawal. Then they continued the war through means which were not explicitly martial, but were fed by their military-industrial complex: arms industries promoting not only the circulation

of American weapons, but also private security contractors and more.

It is interesting that you link heroism to memory in the context of state discourse (the official voice of Vietnam) as well as left-wing discourse. The orthodox Left could not hear women speaking critically within their midst; it could not tolerate the complex positioning of Mai Thu Van, whose interviews I adapted for *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*. She's a well-informed Marxist herself, but her book was shunned by Leftists because she exposed the shortcomings of the system through the voices of women – from both North and South -- who dared express their discontent and call into doubt the Party's patriarchal structures and State feminism. Of course, the absurd question that arises in these cases is: Who is more Marxist than whom? Is *her* stance more Marxist, because she is critical and she remains true to these heroic fighters' voices? Or is it the oblivious dogmatic Left that can just unfold its own narrative, without having to involve themselves in the struggle of women throughout history and His-story (history by and for men)?

LM: If you don't mind, as we are currently celebrating the 50th anniversary of 1968, I would be interested in shifting this reflection back in time. I'm thinking of two works that were made around '68 on the Vietnam War that explicitly tackled the issue of heroism. Firstly, the film *Loin du Vietnam [Far from Vietnam]* (1967) – collectively realised by Joris Ivens, William Klein, Claude Lelouch, Chris Marker, Alain Resnais, Agnès Varda and Jean-Luc Godard – a film in which, in a striking scene, Bernard Fresson monologues to a completely silent Karen Blanguert about the heroism of the Vietnamese people, the rightness of their cause, and the impossibility of living with the idea that he cannot prove his own heroism. The problem of being 'far' from Vietnam, which Godard develops. Secondly, Susan Sontag's text *Trip to Hanoi* (1969), in which she spends a good half of her narrative complaining that her trip is a sort of anti-climax because she was expecting to see a heroic people in action and is disappointed. They are living a great destiny but they don't seem quite to grasp what is happening to them.... And the tension is very much about communication; she finds it really hard to communicate with them. In the end she reconciles herself with her ideal and she ends on a praise of their 'laconic', 'flat' form of communication as a model of 'economy of words'. In your own trajectory, how did you react to these kinds of engagements with the Vietnam War?

TMH: We're not dealing here with Left versus Right, but rather with a left within the Left, with the issue of gender looming large. This fight is much more challenging. Sometimes we speak the same language, and yet we feel as if we were dispossessed of the very tools that enable us to have a voice. The rhetoric of equality and justice is readily appropriated by the Left's 'old boys club', which is why the 'linguistic self' (Gloria Anzaldúa), the 'verbal struggle' (Mao) and the politics of representation continue to be fought on the feminist front.

When I made *Surname Viet*, I did initially get hostile reactions from both the Left and the Right. But the more vicious ones were from the Left, not from so-called 'rednecks' as one might expect, but from righteous people who didn't want to hear any of the views put forth in the film: partly, it seems, because women didn't really count and their voices didn't score with theirs; partly because the history of the war in Vietnam is a territory they authoritatively owned and controlled. The only thing they would hear was that the Communist Party was criticised, which they immediately interpreted as a stance against the revolution and socialist Vietnam, which was not at all the point. There was no room in their mind for difference, only for opposition. A film on the plight and suffering of women in the war is commonly viewed as being partial, but it doesn't seem to cross many viewers' minds to regard as biased and chauvinist all the films made on the War which almost exclusively feature male anguish and male heroism.



Image: Trinh T. Minh-ha, *A Tale of Love* (1995)

In the aftermath of Vietnam's victory, many people who fought dearly for socialist Vietnam couldn't voice their thoughts. They spoke almost as if they were muzzled. You couldn't speak unless you did so about the fatherland in positive terms. Even sadness and mourning were state-mediated; it took decades of struggle for writers in Vietnam to concede with quiet laughter that they have at long last 'gained permission to be sad' and 'can now weep without being gagged.' I'm thinking here of the wonderful writer, archivist and translator Pham Thi Hoài, whose novel *The Crystal Messenger* (1988) was banned in Vietnam, and who is now living in Berlin. During wartime she was an enthusiastic revolutionary of North Vietnam and yet she has come around since then to asking aloud the question: What happened to that revolutionary spirit? What is left from that revolution?

This is where we can situate my response to a work like *Loin du Vietnam*. I don't want to comment too much on Susan Sontag because the kind of expectation she had for 'a heroic people' in action could, at best, be qualified as naive, and, at worst, as arrogant in its paternalism. This is the tension around communication, which is somewhat similar to the early situation of feminism, or should I specify 'white feminism', in which the fight for 'women' excluded or barely acknowledged the plight and contributions of women of colour. So in its exclusive claim for equality, 'woman' could remain oppositional and discriminatory from within. Going to Vietnam with a superiority complex and a preconceived idea of what the revolution should look like, and expecting communication with the locals to be readily friendly and forward to an American foreigner, is much less interesting to pay attention to because, as an attitude, it is highly patronising.

But Godard is an interesting case. Although *Loin du Vietnam* is a collective work that seemed to be put together quite expeditiously, it was an activist gesture of support. The short section titled 'Camera Eye' that Godard contributed, appearing on screen with his camera – lens and apparatus – was quite to the point. Unlike some of the other sections that endorse unquestioningly the norms of reportage (omniscient voice-over running throughout the footage, in which the relation

between the verbal and the visual was not thought through), Godard's section critically deals with the core of reportage. For this kind of eye-witness genre, being present and shooting on site is essential. But Godard told us from the outset that he was denied permission to go to Vietnam to shoot and he accepted the North-Vietnamese government's refusal because, as he interpreted it, his politics were rather vague and that perhaps what he would come up with might do more harm than good for their cause. Rather than abandon the project, however, he offered a work that spoke to his being 'far from Vietnam'. Such a position has disadvantages, but it could open up a wealth of possibilities such as acknowledging that 'Vietnam is in us' and that one should create three or four Vietnams...

More generally speaking, and just like with the film Godard made on the Palestinian struggle, *Ici et ailleurs*, [*Here and Elsewhere*], whatever he is critical of, he is right in the midst of it. He is reckless in the way he attacks and exposes himself as a film director. The criticism is not pointed outward, it is pointed right at himself. Sometimes what he offers can be offensive but it is actually offensive – with him right in the middle of the picture, so to speak. For me this is far more dangerously challenging than the position in which criticism is voiced from a safe place, as if what one points to is outside, external to oneself and to where one stands. As I just mentioned, Godard actually put to use the government's rejection to assume his position as outsider and his being genuinely 'far from Vietnam.' He is not claiming to speak and show from 'inside' Vietnam.

When I came up with the title 'Forgetting Vietnam', I was staying away from the righteous, moralistic connotation of one like 'Remember Vietnam'. With all the wars going on today, the White House is not remembering well. Every time war looms, the spectre of Vietnam haunts the President's speeches, even though he may assert that no, this is not its repetition. But the mere fact that its name repeatedly crops up means that the spectre of the Vietnam War still walks the halls of the White House.

Contextually, Godard is explicit in his positioning. He is far from Vietnam. In *Ici et ailleurs* he makes us smile and cringe at the kind of grandiose speech that struggles of liberation and socialist regimes are so fond of, and with that the grandiose notion of heroism. It's discomfiting to listen to grandiosity in its in-progress construct: militant speech coming out of a child's mouth innocently performed with pompous gestures, its being awkwardly rehearsed by a woman on screen.

LM: It seems to me that with this question we are really in the midst of your own research into another way of relating to politics. Do you feel that the critique of anthropology and ethnography that you were leading in the early 1980s is still current? Is it still urgent for you? Or has it lost some of its urgency?

TMH: Well, the first thing to recall is the link between anthropology and colonialism. Anthropology has done a lot to disengage itself from the fact that it was born with Europe's colonial expansions, but in its pseudo-scientific claims anthropology remains steeped in a colonial ethos. The questioning of the anthropological apparatus and its essentialising constructs was urgent when I was living in Senegal and doing research in West Africa. It was not as if I didn't encounter such a colonialism-inflected discourse in Vietnam, but I was very young at the time and was not as puzzled as I had been in Senegal by a discourse that turned you into an 'other'. What was so baffling for me in Senegal was not just the white administration or the white anthropologists and researchers who carried on this colonial structure of the mind, but actually the insiders themselves, African intellectuals and city-dwellers who often enacted the anthropologist's mindset in speaking authoritatively about their own culture. So at the time it was urgent for me, and

especially when making the film *Reassemblage* (1981).

I've moved on since, and today when some viewers tell me they find my films to be 'ethnographic', I take it positively, especially when coming from an ethnographer. You can be ethnographic without making an ethnographic film, not because you adopt a process recognised or approved by anthropology, but because of the rigour you bring into your work when you look at another culture. Having learnt to see anthropology through my studies and research in ethnomusicology, I think anthropology is at its best when it acknowledges the crisis at the core of its being, and when it assumes the precariousness of its status, rather than evade or deny this by trying to institute its authority. It is a vulnerable field because you are trying to do research in a context that is unfamiliar to you, and then trying to share it, to translate it to another context. You are constantly in the position of mediator and translator. If one recognises the impossibility of the task of translation (the way Walter Benjamin discusses it) and the impossibility of translation in one's work, it becomes an interesting work — one that is situated at the edge of being no longer valid. Offering something valuable while questioning its validation is a way of de-positioning while positioning. So that's where anthropology could be at its best. And I do find a small number of scholars and young people working in that direction today.

LM: In order to bring the different threads of our conversation together, I'd like to ask you to say a bit more on the way in which you reflect on 1968 today, and in relation to the Vietnam War?

TMH: There are many ways to answer such a vast question. I'll give it a try, first by drawing on the context of our discussion, taking Vietnam as an example to relate to the revolutionary spirit of that transnational moment. On the one hand, as stated in *Forgetting Vietnam*, 'can one simply place the War in a museum?' Through what is made visible and put on display for memory, what precisely is kept invisible and erased from memory? In other words, how to remember the historical 'defeat' of '68's emancipatory ideas so as to keep their legacy alive in today's so-called 'free-market' ideology (a mere alias for corporate greed)?

For example in Vietnam, 1968 was the memorable year when the Offensive of Tết Mậu Thân was launched. The message which informed North Vietnamese forces that they were about to inaugurate the largest campaign of surprise attacks against South Vietnam's military and civilian control centres was relevant enough: 'Crack the sky, shake the earth.' In its zealous mission of liberation, Hanoi firmly believed that the Offensive would trigger a spontaneous, supportive uprising of the population which would lead to a quick, sweeping victory. But the outcome of the Offensive was far from what was expected: the loss of lives – mainly civilians, but also troops from both sides of the battle – was staggering. Nonetheless, the failure to achieve their main objective of spurring uprisings throughout the South was still translated into a victory for the North, as the media's coverage of the atrocities and the extent of these human losses during the Offensive exposed the truth of war in all its messiness and changed the American public's perception of their role in Vietnam.

Today, the 1968 Huế carnage allegedly perpetrated by the National Liberation Front during their occupation, as well as by America's firepower in their resolution to recapture the city, remains a 'most sensitive case'. On the one hand, placed into oblivion in the official version of War history and conveniently absented from the government-operated War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City. On the other, persisting in people's collective memory, thereby revealing the utter delusion of war when to win and regain control means to destroy what one set out to protect. In this bitter lesson of war, victory in defeat for the Northern forces was followed by defeat in victory for the Southern forces and the US. As stated in the film, no matter how

carefully selective memory is in rewriting history, the ‘scars of war have surfaced publicly’. The survivors’ harrowing testimonies as well as the mass graves discovered in and around the city, which revealed victims buried alive in addition to those clubbed or shot dead, have had a massive impact on the 1975 refugees exodus. They have also triggered the exodus of human remains since the 1990s. The War’s many faces cannot be reduced nor simply buried.

Must victory thrive on selective forgetfulness and the erasure of its defeats? The socialist Vietnamese government has never acknowledged the slow but unprecedented exodus of ‘boat people’ and refugees – some two million persons by 2001 – who continued to leave Vietnam following the War’s end. As Pham Thi Hoài remarked, ‘It took the winners ten years to realise that victory was not something that could be eaten ... It took the US twenty years to sign a peace treaty with its own past.’ Her analysis also informed how the War provided the Communist Party with justifications to fight and rule with ‘the mandate of Heaven’ – a principle borrowed from China whose legitimacy must constantly be reified and deified. This is how the war-heroes’ monopolising authority and the war-military leadership, turned now into totalitarian control, continue to thrive.

Decades after the Vietnam War, the foundational cultural values of the revolutionary cause have lost their validity and the consecrated ideas of communist ideology have become a farce – blatantly betrayed, at best relegated to die-hard nostalgia. Social inequality has increased at full speed. To give you an example of the Vietnamese flavour of state capitalism today: while foreigners talk avidly about a booming real estate market and the new Housing Law which allows them to invest in Vietnamese property, to the consternation of Los Angeles’ South Vietnamese diaspora, the upper echelons of *socialist* Vietnam’s ruling class are buying up luxury properties in Orange County and elsewhere in the US. When this crony class comes to America for a visit, they reportedly bring regiments of house servants, moving in *with style*.

Whose victory is it? This is a question one could also ask in relation to the ’68 of the West and the rest of the world, whose notions of ‘revolution’ have since been so hollowed out by racial, sexual and fiscal backlash that rather than radically changing, for one, America, the old values have been comprehensively reiterated. With the ‘Alt-white’ effect and the dire political situation in the US today, the country continues at core to be a ‘nation at war’ – not only abroad, but also, more destructively, at home. We are undergoing a virulent revival of the old orthodoxy. There’s no voice of reason, no discursive logic, no psychiatric name-calling that could be effectively used in response to the kind of belligerently segregative rhetoric coming from the Oval Office, and its Alt-right mouthpieces, which is tearing the country apart and letting loose all forms of bigotry and human debasement in social relations.

What happened to ‘the revolution of values,’ which Martin Luther King Jr. used to dream of, during which the established political and cultural institutions lost their legitimacy and patriarchal colonial systems came under attack, triggering the decline of Western hegemony? In the present climate of disappearing ethics, of an unbridled revival of sexism, racism, homophobia, xenophobia and Islamophobia, to mention a few examples, America’s heartsick society is suffering a huge throwback to its past. However, to acknowledge this state of things is not to assume a defeatist stance. As I discussed in *Lovecidal*, the transgressive phenomenon of women marching across nations in their struggles for justice has now amplified in scope to become the Women’s March, built on diverse alliances around the world. Highlighting a different focus each year, it contributes to changing the way people take up political action as they become aware of their agency as political and social actors.