

en's accounts.) But the relations they generate among themselves as well as with the verbal texts of the film continually displace the notion of fixed time and place. Hence, the challenge is to use the very specificities of the black and white news footage and photographs to reach out both to a plural past and to an unspecified present and future.

An example: the 1950s footage of the north-south movement of the refugees is juxtaposed with a young woman's letter to her sister, reminiscing the time mother and daughters spent in Guam (in 1975) while waiting to be admitted into the States. Here the focus is neither on the plight of the refugees in the 50s nor on that in the 70s; rather, what seems more important to me is the specific nature of the problems women of many times and many places have to undergo—as women. This is brought out in the remembered story, through the mother's anguish and terror of rape in experiencing *again* "fleeing war on foot." So while the viewers follow images of refugees in the 50s with women clad quite unanimously in peasant attire and dark pants, they also hear about the mother's conviction in wearing dark clothes and persuading her daughters to do the same in the 1975 exodus "so as not to draw any attention to ourselves as women."

Another prominent example is the ending sequence of step-printed images of a group of refugees in the 1950s floating amidst the sea on a raft, seen with comments on the contemporary condition of the "boat people" and more recently yet, of the "beach people." The rephotography here stretches both the historical and the filmic time. It materializes the fragility of life, as it sets into relief the desperate and helpless character of such an escape. The insignificance of the tiny human forms on the drifting raft is seen against the vastness of the sea. But the fact that such a scene was recorded also reminds the viewer of the presence of a seer: the refugees had been spotted in the distance by a camera (and reproduced by another camera). Thus, hope is alive as long as there is a witness—or to evoke a statement in the film, as long as the witnesses themselves do not die without witnesses. In selecting the archival materials, recontextualizing and rephotographing them while acknowledging their transformations, I was, in other words, more interested in reflecting on the plight of women, of refugee and of exile through images, than in rehashing the mediated horrors of the war and the turmoil of the subsequent fall of Saigon—which accounted for the contemporary disquieting expansion of the Vietnamese diaspora.

To come back to a word you have astutely used, rephotography displaces, and displacement causes resonance. It is extremely difficult, on a certain level, to rationalize such "resonance" without arresting it. As Pushkin would say, "poetry has to be a little stupid." But if I am to further the discussion on another level without denying such a limit, I would add that the use of news footage and photography

has its own problems in film practices—especially in documentary practices. The images have both a truth- and an error-value. In other words, they are above all media memories. This is where the desire to create a different look and reading becomes a necessity. In the film, the older news photography is not only selectively reproduced, it is also deliberately reframed, de- and recomposed, rhythmized, and repeated with differences. Needless to say, media images of Vietnam are not only ideologically loaded; they are also gender clichés. So the point is not simply to lift these news images out of their contexts so as to make them serve a new context—a feminist reading against the grain, for example—but also to make them *speak anew*.

Perhaps an example here is the very grainy black and white images of three women moving in slow truncated motion, right at the beginning of the film. They appear three times throughout the film, each time slightly different in their rhythms, framing and visual legibility. The third time the viewer sees them again, they are presented as they were originally shot, and with the original soundtrack, in which a male journalistic voice informs us that they were captured prisoners, whose bodies were “traditionally used by the enemy as ammunition bearers, village infiltrators and informers. . . .” A multiple approach to the same image is at times useful to cause resonance in the very modification of the material. Just as the story of Kieu has been, throughout centuries, appropriated according to the ideological need of each government, the media images of women during the war have been shot for causes in which women hardly come out as subjects—never fully witnessing, only glorified as heroines or victimized as bystanders of, spectators to, and exiles in their own history.



Sitting on a reed, leaning  
against an apricot branch



and the willow to the west



Whom shall I befriend

