

To further rupture viewers' access to meaning, Trinh intersperses the women's staged monologues with Vietnamese songs and folk sayings, heard in the background and sometimes overpowering their speeches. The songs' lyrics and sayings are often subtitled, thematically emphasizing the popular understandings of Vietnamese gender roles: "She who is married is like a dragon with wings/She who has no husband is like a rice-mill with a broken axle." At the same time, Trinh subverts the meaning of these lyrics by placing them adjacent to quotations from several women poets of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and from writers who have protested against Vietnamese patriarchy. As an example of this, she cites feminist poet Hồ Xuân Hương, famous for integrating double entendres into her poetry: "To marry and have a child, how banal! But to be pregnant without the help of a husband, what merit!" Underlying this reference to literary foremothers like Hồ Xuân Hương is Trinh's remapping of a feminist genealogy rooted in women's oral and folk culture. This remapping represents an important move for Trinh in establishing the agentic power found in women's storytelling, especially in the second half of the film where the pleasurable act of telling stories is most apparent.

Juxtaposed with these recitations of poetry are the objectified images of Vietnamese women. The film interweaves the sounds and text as part of Trinh's practice of reframing Vietnamese women, whose bodies have been visually captured during the French and American wars and within Vietnamese cultural history. Trinh's technique launches a critique against the scopic regime that has appropriated the idea of womanhood within a patriarchal imagination.¹⁴ For example, the film begins and ends with women's bodies swaying in traditional costumes as they perform on a brightly lit stage, the spectacle of which is shot in full color, up close, and in slow motion (see Fig. 4-1). During the interviews of the women, Trinh also frames them in extreme close-ups while they speak; at the same time, she directs the camera in a seemingly wandering manner to catch the subtle movements of their hands, feet, and heads. Refusing to assign meaning to these bodies, however, she relays the problem of how nationalist causes have reinterpreted women. She challenges viewers to apprehend the objectifying manner in which visual imagery reifies woman-as-nation. However, if she critiques the spectacle that is "Vietnam," she also gives viewers a glimpse into what the women subjects take pleasure in seeing and realizes the moments when they themselves enjoy being seen. Trinh's practice of reframing and the "re-photography"



FIGURE 4.1. Women dancing for the nation. From the film *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* © 1989. Women Make Movies.

of women's bodies does not simply obliterate truth: it also points to a regeneration of meaning and import within the diaspora.¹⁵

The second half of the film, which features “real” interviews of Vietnamese immigrant women in the United States, further troubles the notion of veracity in documentaries and critiques the genre's overreliance on voice-giving claims. Here, Trinh emphasizes the inadequacy of translation and “the problematic of translating experience onto film.”¹⁶ This latter portion of the film accents Trinh's positioning of herself as collaborator in the filmmaking and interviewing process, one faithless to the ethnographic imperative. An off-screen narrator (the voice of a second-generation Vietnamese American, Lan Trinh) “interviews” Trinh on the reasons why she chose to make the film, which stories she wanted to retell, and how many interviewees were picked. Trinh states, “Interview: an antiquated device of documentary. Truth is selected, renewed, displaced, and speech is always tactical.”

At this point, Trinh stresses her performing self as an integral part of the interviewing process. In effect, she becomes the “framer” who is

“framed” within this collaborative project. She writes, “Because of the film, I am constantly questioned in who I am, as its making also transforms the way I see the world around me.”¹⁷ Viewers thus realize that she confronts the problem of having to revise her own practices in representing the Other. We also learn that Trinh inhabits the subject of her own film; she is both a translator and traitor as a result of the collaborative act. As Trinh retells it, the problem of being “framed” had actually been sutured into the fabric of the film from its inception, a point Trinh emphasizes repeatedly in her film. At the crux of the film is a demystification of the collaborative processes of filmmaking and storytelling.

Relaying faulty translations and subtitles, Trinh especially demonstrates the problematic of translating Mai Thu Vân’s five-year research project from Vietnamese into French and then into accented English. Even so, critics understand Mai’s work on Vietnamese women, *Vietnam: un peuple, des voix*, as ancillary to Trinh’s project. Such scholarship, which perceives Trinh as the sole author of the film, relies on a Eurocentric idea of the auteur. In actuality, within the film and the theoretical writings that complement it, Trinh frequently discusses how authorship is continually displaced in the making of the film. She underscores the act of collaboration threaded throughout the film and thus, the film’s “unsewing” of image and meaning, sound and text.¹⁸

When critics privilege Trinh’s film over and above *Vietnam: un peuple, des voix*, then, they miss the critical textures that both Mai Thu Vân and Trinh weave into their works. Fundamental to Mai’s collection of interviews is her postcolonial critique of a Western idealization of revolutionary socialism. Overwhelmingly, her female subjects narrate lived experiences marked by deprivation within socialist Việt Nam. As a Marxist, Mai felt compelled to change her views on socialism because the women’s narratives shook her preconceptions of its effects on Vietnamese women. In conjunction with Mai’s book and her participation, Trinh redoubles her critiques against the structures of knowing embedded in Western feminism. In the second half of the film, Trinh enunciates the difficulty Mai Thu Vân faced when she tried to get her book published by major presses in France without an accompanying preface by French feminist Simone De Beauvoir. Mai critiques a hegemonic French feminism that disallows a feminist voice divergent from its own. On the book’s negative reception, Trinh reads Mai’s letter in the film: “Dear Minh-ha, Since the publication of the book, I felt like having lost a part of myself. At least in France where, in spite of the Mouvement de Liberation de la Femme, maternalism remains the cornerstone of the dominant ideology.”