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Mekong Delta Blues

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BY J. HOBERMAN

SURNAME VIET GIVEN NAME NAM. Produced, directed, written, edited, and translated by Trinh T. Minh-ha. Released by Women Make Movies. At the Collective for Living Cinema, through April 9.

Even allowing for revived interest in Indochina, Trinh T. Minh-ha's knotty, elusive *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*, at the Collective for Living Cinema through Sunday, is not to be recommended lightly. Trinh's first two documentaries were as unpretentiously artisanal as home movies and as conceptually sophisticated as a graduate seminar at Yale. "My approach is one which avoids any sureness of signification," the Berkeley-based, French-educated, Vietnamese-born multimedia artist told the editors of *Camera Obscura*, a journal that might have been created to explicate her oeuvre.

The idea of Trinh T. Minh-ha is as powerful as her films—as she well knows. In her forthcoming (and formidable) book *Woman, Native, Other*, she almost singlehandedly relativizes the established canon: "She who 'happens to be' a (non-white) Third World member, a woman, and a writer is bound to go through the ordeal of exposing her work to the abuse of praises and criticisms that either ignore, dispense with, or overemphasize her racial and sexual attributes. . . . Have you read the grievances some of our sisters express on being among the few women chosen for a 'Special Third World Women's Issue' or being the only Third World woman at readings, workshops, and meetings? It is as if everywhere we go, we become Someone's private zoo."

Trinh originally dealt with this zoo factor by multiplying it—that is to say, by situating herself in another Third World. Her antiethnographic *Reassemblage* (1982) examined village life in rural Senegal as "an empty subject," while *Naked Spaces: Living Is Round* (1985), a study of West African vernacular architecture,

placed the term "director" under erasure. With *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*, Trinh turns to her own identity—or rather that of the Vietnamese female other. *Surname Viet* is more "professional" than Trinh's African movies, but it exhibits the same discreetly confrontational taste for eccentric camera placement and accented line readings. Deceptively self-evident, the movie has a circular drift, advancing through and around the gradual accrual of details to plot the coordinates of Vietnamese femininity.

Class seems to be the missing factor in the equation, but, nothing if not self-conscious, *Surname Viet* is a construction about a construction. Trinh match-cuts American-Vietnamese beauty queens with more traditional entertainers, juxtaposes an apparent folk dance (shot down the peninsula in San Jose) with images of "modern" women marching in People's Vietnam. She dramatizes, annotates, and orchestrates monologues by five Vietnamese women. Made in Vietnam in 1982 (not by Trinh) and dramatized in California (by Vietnamese exiles) some five years later, these studied, long-take portraits are augmented with all manner of refilmed archival and family footage, as well as an audio track that mixes folk ballads with the culture's traditional admonitions for women.

Deliberately staged and painfully acted, the interviews—grimly meek accounts of rote solidarity and everyday paranoia, official glorification and casual dismissal—include a Vermeer composition of a woman cutting vegetables and explaining that "a foreigner in principle is always a spy"; a doctor overcome by the memory of her husband's term in a prison camp; a lifelong communist bitterly pointing out that, for all the official celebration of patriotic heroines, "there is not a single woman at the political bureau"; and a second, older doctor decrying the absence of any doctor/patient intimacy.

Meanwhile, as if to underscore the incomplete or artificial aspect of their discourse, Trinh fragments her subjects, offering a closeup of a mouth or a pair of

hands in lieu of a talking head. She has her subjects speak their lines while pacing on and off camera (or turning their backs on it), and concretizes the notion of women struggling to find their voices by having her performers speak English in "Vietnam" and Vietnamese in America. The mode is willful but democratic: Not only does Trinh discuss her criteria for the interviews she used; two of the actresses explain why they took roles in the film in the first place.

Although Trinh's title suggests that Vietnamese women are married to the state, her movie demonstrates that the vaunted grace and compliance of Vietnamese women are the fruits of a patriarchal order that far predates Communist rule. Nor does the filmmaker entirely escape this regime. Dealing as she does with issues of translation, authorship, and narrativity, Trinh draws heavily on the authority of French poststructuralism. (A hurried paraphrase of Baudrillard's ideas on the Vietnam War appears late in the film, almost as an afterthought).

Still, *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* is one movie well-acquainted with its own contradictions. It is with a deeply exquisite tact and a boundless irony that the final acknowledgment in the end credits thanks the husbands of the women for their "patience."