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Trinh's Surname— Between 'Nam and A Hard Place

BY DAVID CRANE

Flowing water says something about both time and location. You know that it's moving in one direction, and yet it seems to stay in the same place, eternally, despite the speed of the current and the long-term erosion.

Berkeley based filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha's new film, *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (showing 7:30 p.m. Friday Oct. 27, in room B-91 Mitchell Hall on the UWM campus) begins with the sound of water—or at least it sounds like water. In this film, sounds and pictures are never what they seem to be.

The water-like sound accompanies footage of what later turns out to be a Miss Vietnam contest in California. The image has been "stepprinted," giving it the same strange, dreamy, nostalgic quality of the stock footage in Michelle Citron's *Daughter-Rite*. That manipulation freezes bits of movement in the endless motion of the image—like that flow of water or the old paradox of Zeno.

All this, though, might not really have anything to do with the film. In fact, it's often hard to determine what images are "real" and which are not. As soon as you think you know what's happening, your position is shifted. And the question everyone wants answered in a review—"what does it all mean?"—can't be answered because the film is about the production of meaning.

Of course, to say "the film is about..." is as impossible as saying what it means, though

the demand to do so is hard to deny. It is about women, culture, translation, resistance, Vietnam, America and memory. And things in between—*especially* things in between. But saying this is almost meaningless, since that in-betweenness is where meaning is produced, altered and undefined.

The film plays with different meanings and in between those meanings; it makes clear the difficulty—the impossibility—of being in two places and two times at once.

The first part of *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* is made up of interviews with women in Vietnam (taken from Mai Thu Van's *Vietnam, un peuple, des voix*) as dramatized by Vietnamese "refugees" in California. The problem with saying "refugee" is that it assumes there is a location of true culture and one of foreignness where similar people belong and those who are different do not. Amidst all her film's formal and ideological complexity, the issues of sameness and difference—sexual and cultural—are the ones Trinh faces head on all the time.

Later the film switches to interviews with the actresses, this time performing as themselves while the narrator (Trinh perhaps?) says that the "most spontaneous form she finds is closer to fiction." The later settings are more "natural" than the stylized sets used earlier. But the actresses still evoke the memory of their previous

scenes, their past incarnations, their roles in performing the rit-



overlapping voices, subtitles, repeating dialogue and images—is highly musical, which isn't surprising considering Trinh's ethnomusicology background. Sometimes spoken monologues are anticipated by their printed transcriptions, or the other way around. "There is form and there is content," the film states at one point. "Truth is not always found in what is visible. Our reality is inhabited by silent tears and sorrow." As viewers, we constantly reassemble the multiple elements with our memories of the earlier events and their refrain.

Surname Viet Given Name Nam is Trinh's third non-ethnographic film. Her first two, *Reassemblage* (1982) and *Naked Spaces: Living is Round* (1985) were shot in West Africa, and she is working on a new film "about" China. She also guest edited two issues of *Discourse*, a theoretical journal of media and culture put out by UWM's Center for Twentieth Century Studies, and her newest book *Woman, Native, Other* will be available soon.

At almost two hours, the unsettling nature of this film may not be for everyone. But its difficulty should be more of a reason to see it. Hollywood films "about" Vietnam—that is about white men in Vietnam—try to give the viewer a sense of resolution, and cultural absolution. Not so here.

ual of cultural memory. And even as the second, "real" set of interviews begins, the soundtrack offsets the manipulative directness of the form: "Interview: an antiquated device of documentary; truth is selected, renewed, displaced—and speech is always tactical."

The film's technological complexity—

Film Capsule

BY KEVIN J. WALKER

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