

AS THE MIRROR BURNS

A 60 minute Australian documentary film about Vietnam.
Filmed entirely in colour in Vietnam.



PHOTO 1



PHOTO 2



PHOTO 3

SUITABLE FOR

Asian Studies • History • Cultural Studies • Women's Studies
Geography • Australian Studies • Media Studies
Social Studies • Politics • Peace Studies

AUSTRALIAN FILM INSTITUTE

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■ 49 Eastern Road, South Melbourne VIC 3205 Ph: (03) 696 1844 Fax: (03) 696 7972
■ PO Box 522 Paddington NSW 2021 Ph: (02) 332 2111 Fax: (02) 331 7145

POINT OF VIEW

Who is the "teller" of the this story? Many documentaries have a "voice over" narration by a person we do not see. They seem to know all there is to know about the subject, and to be telling us what we "need to know". (This is often called the "voice of God" style of narration.)

- Who is our "guide" on the trip to Vietnam which this film presents?
- What do you think is her point of view towards Vietnam, and towards Vietnam's history?

How does Di Bretherton's narration compare to the voice of God style? What is the effect of her style of narration? What do you think might be the difference in the attitude to the audience of each of the two styles?

How does Di Bretherton seek to find out about Vietnam?

Discuss Bretherton's opening remarks: "Travelling in the land of the enemy is like looking in a mirror. The reflection I see of myself and my own culture is not always comfortable."

- What do you think these remarks mean?
- What do you think she is looking for in Vietnam?
- What do you think is her point of view of Vietnam?

Later (at Vung Tau) she says "What you see depends on where you're looking from". Discuss this comment in relation to the film's view of the war, and of contemporary Vietnam.

What are the first images of Vietnam we see in the film? What expectations do these set up in your mind? How do these compare to the image you had of Vietnam before seeing the film?

Bretherton says: "Our stories about Vietnam are written by the men who were here during the war". To whom does Bretherton go to get her stories about Vietnam? Why do you think this is?

There are a number of types of stories about the past in the film. Two of these could be seen as folklore and memory. Do you think these are "history"? Are they more or less credible than other sources of historical information?

EVIDENCE

What types of evidence does the film provide to support the view of Vietnam and its history which the film constructs?

- How does this evidence compare to other types of historical evidence?
- How reliable do you think the evidence Bretherton gathers would be?

Discuss such comments as "the women say that early society was matriarchal...". What does the wording of this statement tell us about the nature of the evidence the film presents? How would it have been different if it had simply said: "Early society was matriarchal"?

What are the main elements in the style of the film? You could consider such issues as:

- The structure of the film – does it tell a story which progresses in a straight line? If not, how does the film progress? What is the effect of the structure?
- What is the role of the contending spirits of Tinh and Linh in the structure of the film? How does this metaphor shape our view of Vietnam?
- List the major sequences in the film. What issues does each major sequence deal with? How is each issue presented? How are sequences connected to one another? How would the film change if the order of the major sequences was changed?
- The pace of the film. The mood constructed by the film.
- The role of the narrator. The way the audience seems to be addressed.

What image of Vietnam, and the women of Vietnam, is constructed by the visuals?

What image of Vietnam, and the women of Vietnam, is constructed by the soundtrack?

The film features interviews with the following women:

- Nguyen Thi Dinh (President of the Women's Union and former Deputy Leader of the Revolutionary Forces)
- Tran Thi Nho (former leader of a female guerilla group in Cu Chi)
- Du Ngoc Nu (mother of Kim Phuc)
- Dr Phuong (Director, Women's Hospital, Ho Chi Minh City)
- Dr Hoa (Director, Children's Hospital, Ho Chi Minh City)

Discuss the women who act as "witnesses" or "informants" in the film.

- What impression do you have of them?
- Of their personalities?
- Of their lives in the past, and now?

What areas of life do the interviewees talk about? What areas are not talked about?

- Frame a question you would like to have asked any one of the women, if you had the chance.
- What impression of life in Vietnam do they present: in the present, in the recent past? Have women's lives changed?

What do you think, from what we are told in the film, are the major problems facing women in Vietnam now?

What do you think are the main strengths of Vietnamese women in facing the future of Vietnam?

What impression are you left with after viewing the film? Is this different from the impression you had before watching the film?

PHOTO ANALYSIS

There are three photographs on the front of this guide. These are production stills taken as the film was made, and used for publicising the film in the media. Look closely at each one and then consider the following questions:

If you had only these three photos to go by, what impression of the film would you be likely to have? What do they suggest it is about? Where is it set? How would you know?

Look more closely at each photo:

Photo 1.

Where is the film set? How do you know? What are the elements of the photo that you immediately associate with the location in which it is set?

- What image of Asia does it present? How does this image compare to your preconceptions about Asia?
- What would be the difference in the meaning of the photo if the people were only in the background?

Photo 2.

The image is ambiguous. What do you think is happening? What is your first impression of what the photo is about? How do you relate to the woman?

- With the benefit of having seen the film, what is the situation? How do you relate to the woman now?

Photo 3.

Who are these two women? What is their relationship to one another? What impressions of the setting do you have? What elements in the photo enable you to form an impression?

- From the photo alone, can you say with any confidence where the photo was taken? What additional information would you need to be sure what the photo was about?

Write a caption for each photo which you think sums up what the photo is about and how it relates to the film.