Regret to Inform
Barbara Sonneborn
72 minutes, film and video, color
New Video; New Yorker

Description
The film opens on a closeup of a creaking oar handle, lashed to the upright of a river boat with a piece of burlap. There is only the sound of water, as we see the oar paddling in the water of a green river; the scenes opens out to river boats, green fields, and distant mountains. A woman's lamenting voice sings in Vietnamese, there are lap dissolves to a woman struggling against a punishing wind in a harsh landscape, then people hoeing in a field. Closeup on woman, who is clawing the ground. The words of the song appear in subtitles: Oh husband, where are you?...your children are calling for you. The scene ends with a closeup on the clawing hand, as she sings, What love is deeper than ours? Even the love of country is not deeper. Lap dissolve to a traveling shot of green fields, as the sound of a train becomes audible.

Filmmaker's voice-over: On my 24th birthday I got the news that my husband, Jeff, had been killed in Vietnam. We see her seated in a train compartment, looking out at the moving landscape. The view from the train will be a continuing motif of the film. Continuing in voiceover, she says they had been sweethearts since she was 14, had tried to put his death behind her, but on the twentieth anniversary of his death she knew she had to go to Vietnam. She says she has remarried and feels good about her life, but her feelings about the war and her first husband's death, and about the war, are not resolved.

In what will be a recurring motif, an oar dips into the water, followed by traveling shots of the river, green fields, women rowing boats, and passing landscape. We hear a woman singing a lullaby. String music rises, as the voiceover returns, this time over black and white family photos of Sonneborn with her husband. She says she feels the need to talk to other women who had lost their husbands as she had; perhaps their stories will make her understand her own more deeply. The next sequence establishes this story, not as that of a single American widow, but of a group of a dozen widowsAmerican and Vietnamese. Several American women, over photographs of happy couples and on camera, describe meeting and falling in love with their husbands, and their decisions to go to war. Lula Bia remembers how proud her husband was of being an American and a Navajo Indian, and how they felt this was a patriotic duty. Norma Banks describes how her husband, an African American, went in place of his brother, thinking he had a better chance to survive. These interviews are intercut with archival footage of GIs shaping up, cuts to GIs walking through jungle, and then to the sandalshod feet of Vietnamese walking over a rubbly path. Phan Ngoc Dung, on camera and voice-over photographs, talks about her husband's expectation that life will be normal after the war. We see military planes swooping in dramatic formations, trailing smoke. Diane van Rensselaar says her husband thought of himself as a member of the team; another says that her husband enlisted because he wanted his son to be proud of him. April Burns says she thought of smashing her husband's hand, to delay his departure, but couldn't. Dr. Nguyen My Hien, seen later in the film as a doctor treating children suffering the wounds of war, speaks of her husband's matteroffact decision to fight.

The train travels past green fields; women on the train are preparing food, feeding children.

Sonneborn, in voice-over, says she asked Xuan Ngoc Nguyen, a Vietnamese friend now living in California, to join her on this trip as translator. We see Xuan in the train compartment with Sonneborn. She had lost her Vietnamese husband in the war, and left for the U.S. in 1972 with her American soldier husband. Sonneborn explains that she feels she has to go to Khe Sanh, to see where her husband Jeff died. For her, Sonneborn says, Vietnam is land of fantasy, she says. For Xuan, it is land of memory.

Slow motion shots of people working, child, dissolve to archival images that evoke the war: tanks in river, burning fields. Xuan looks out at the train window; we see wartime footage of burning houses and jungles, tanks moving across rice paddies, as we hear the sound of a helicopter. In closeup, intercut with archival footage of houses burning and people fleeing, Xuan describes how her house was bombed. Why did they burn down my house? she asks. From then on, nothing is black or white, all grey. Like smoke. This is followed by archival footage, impressionistically scanned jungle fighting, CU on the faces of American troops. Sonneborn says, We call it the Vietnam war. But Xuan, and everyone else I meet here, call it the American war.

Xuan, voice-over and on camera, continues her story. Over archival war footage of bombing, burning villages, and fleeing people, and flames, she describes going to a bomb shelter, and how her thirsty fiveyear old cousinwho left the shelter to get waterwas killed by a young American soldier. She remembers the horrified look in his eye, and says she when she sees American men who could have been in Vietnam, she still looks to see if she can find that look again. He was as horrified as she was.

Over a traveling shot from the train, Sonneborns voice-over describes talking to Jeff about going to war, but they never talked about what he would have to do, that he would have to kill people. They never talked about what war means. Over presentday footage of townspeople, she imagines how suspicious soldiers and Vietnamese must have been of each other. The next sequence brings to life the reality of those times.

Over mournful gong sounds, a slow pan to aerial footage of bombing and destroyed villages, dead children is intercut with the Vietnamese doctor describing her husband being buried alive in bombing debris. An American widow of a pilot, on camera and intercut with pictures of her husband and child, as well as aerial shots of bombing raids, says that when she visited her husband in Hawaii on leave, he said he thought his number was coming up.

We hear the wailing voice of a Vietnamese woman, and see archival images of destruction, burning, and a weeping woman. Xuan, over archival footage of burning and devastation, describes how she couldn’t stop to help an elderly neighbor crying for help; she had to decide who would live even if others died. She even took her dying girlfriend’s food, in order to live. She was only 14 years old; why should she have to decide who is going to live and who is going to die?

To the strains of Asian music, we see archival footage of US soldiers rounding up old women, children, frightened people. Cut to rice fields today, oxen plowing, woman laboring under poles of grain. The Native American widow says her husband wanted to be patriotic, but when he saw

people in Vietnam who looked like him, he wondered what he was doing there. The African American widow says that her husband didn't like the idea of having to kill, but he had no choice.

Over scenes of green landscape and women working in rice fields, as seen from the moving train, Sonneborn says it took her 20 years to gather courage to listen to an audiotape that Jeff sent her from Vietnam. She tries to read between the lines of his spoken words, to glean his deeper meaning. To the background sounds of helicopter blades, we hear his voice-over contemporary aerial views of green landscape and people working in rice paddies. Jeff describes how his team was out watching for artillery, but it was hard to tell whether someone was holding a hoe, rake, or weapon. He declares he would want to be sure before killing someone. Cut to wartime footage of Vietnamese cowering in field as a helicopter shines a spotlight downward, and the wind created by the rotor blades sweeps the field, uncovering their hiding places. Image cuts to families harvesting rice.

In the next sequence, widows memories of the war are intercut with archival footage of children watching US troops walk through a village, frightened mothers and children, weeping women, and fleeing people. An old woman turns around in fear. A Vietnamese woman says that her husband died in the war, and one of her children was shot by Americans. She tells how women ran for fear of rape. She weeps. Lula Bia says her husband said he would only write about the weather. What did he mean? She weeps. What did he have to do? A Vietnamese woman remembers how her sister, protecting her baby, mingled with dead bodies to conceal herself from shooting. If you weren't dead, you weren't safe, she says. One Vietnamese woman describes how everything that was alive was killed, including ducks, pigs, trees. Another weeps as she describes how nine people in her family were taken from their home and killed.

To elegiac Asian string music, we see archival footage of figures in a green field, carrying dead bodies slung between poles. Pan to a slowturning water wheel, then shots of a slowturning water wheel, a zoom into the moon, and a boat silently glides through dark water. Lap dissolve to a dreamlike sequence in a tenderloin district in Vietnam, and archival of GIs in a nightclub. Xuan describes being a prostitute, and how some American soldiers just wanted to yell, cry or hit her. She says she smoked marijuana to steel herself to do what she had to do. We see archival footage of girls in nightclubs. Xuan looks out of the train window at passing villages as they travel to Danang. She says she had no choice.

Lively populated areas and bicycle traffic are now seen from the train. Sonneborn, in voice-over, says she keeps imagining walking in the places where Jeff walked. Cut to archival footage of an anxiouslooking GI holding and patting a bandaged baby on the back, close up on GI in the jungle. We hear Jeff's audiotaped voice: Pretty soon I'll be going out into the field. GIs are seen carrying a dead body to a waiting helicopter, as he says he thinks he'll be fine.

In a sequence intercut with letters written in English and Vietnamese, as well as archival footage of GIs in the field, wives describe how they heard about what was happening to their husbands, through letters, dreams, telegrams. A Vietnamese woman says she and husband agreed to write each other once a month. We see actual letters, as an American woman reads the last letter she received from her husband. Another describes receiving no letters, while one woman gave up

after waiting two years for mail. We see an eerie silhouette, accompanied by the sound of a plane, moving slowly against a blue background. On camera and intercut with scanned footage of a battle site in the jungle, Grace Castillo describes seeing her husband in a dream, in danger, saying to him, Don't go any further. Then, she says, there was an explosion. The next night, she received a telegram that her husband had been gravely wounded. Her doctor, given the description of the wounds, tells her to pray that her husband dies. The eerie shape returns, now seen to be part of a US plane onto which litters from a battle site are being hoisted. It is followed by a medical chart of the mortar wounds that killed Sonneborn's husband. She imagines how it may have been. Was it like an explosion of razors? Or did it blow one great big hole in him?
A Vietnamese woman, over family photographs and archival footage of Vietnamese with hands tied behind their back and men being kicked and hit, describes how American advisors came to her house, arrested her husband and small daughter, and sister, and tortured and killed her husband.

We again see the image of the creaking oar and the river. A Vietnamese woman, Nguyen Thi Hong, talks about how, during the war, women worked on farms during the day and joined the fighting forces at night. Over black and white archival footage shows presumably VietCong with bikes walking along a jungle trail, she describes how she and other women, disguised as maids, spied on Americans for the VietCong, and, intercut with images of barbed wires and jails, goes on to say that she was discovered and tortured with electric shock, suffering pain deeper than an ocean, higher than a mountain.

Against tranquil traveling river shots, especially of women rowing boats, women try to link past and present. April Burns, the widow who received no mail, holds her husband's wallet and says it means a lot to her to get this close to what he experienced. Lula Bia says her husband's body was identified only by his dental plates; she received his scant remains in a plastic bag. A Vietnamese woman says she knows American women suffered pain, but she lived in the midst of horrible death and destruction and hopes no one will ever have to endure that, especially women and children. Archival footage of terrified children and adults, hands up, running from gun fire, bloodied, dead children, scene of massacre, GIs at burial ceremonies. Sonneborn, in voice-over, says, All I knew was what I saw on television. But that was not the war. I could never have imagined what was happening. Jeff's voice is heard over scenes of dead men in a muddy field, I tried to tell you in my letters how detached I feel. As though he was a bystander at his own life, calming doing things he never expected or desired to do. We see archival footage of GIs capturing a barefoot Vietnamese boy, dead bodies in a muddy field. Sonneborn, speaking over a traveling shot of green landscape, says what haunts her that Jeff had to be part of this.
We see the river today, a shot of the sun behind clouds, with a soft gong. A sequence of children's drawings of war, a school room, a child drawing planes and parachutists, is followed by a contemporary scene of neighbors, women and children watching a bride and groom entering a car festooned with wedding decorations.

Sonneborn says that as she gets closer to her destination, she feels Jeff's presence pulling her on. As we see her leaving the train station and crossing a bridge, she says she dreamed last night about how he might have been killed, and thought of the ways other wives had said their husbands died. What was it like for him when he died? she asks, over a lap dissolve into a medical sketch. A series of women's voices is heard: I always see the arm...reaching out; I kept

trying to tell him, Don't go. A Vietnamese woman says she dreamed that her dead husband told her to stop crying and go on with her life. She is a pediatrician, runs a hospital for children suffering the toxic effects of war. We see her hospital, with children playing, children in wheelchairs. Over archival footage of men rolling barrels of chemicals out of U.S. planes, and scenes of US planes and helicopters spraying toxic chemicals over broad swathes of fields and villages, Norma Banks describes her husband's lingering illness and painful death from multiple cancers caused by Agent Orange, which she describes as a delayed effects of the war. It's not just the war is here and it's over, she says. It starts when it ends.

We are in California, on the street where Xuan lives. In her home, she describes how her second husband became unpleasant when she arrived in US with her son, but as a mother she decided to stay in a bad situation in order to survive. On her TV set, we see war images from Vietnam. This section, which opens with flowers and young people in a Vietnamese market, highlights the continuing impact of the war. A Vietnamese woman says that her son asks why his father died, and she couldn't find an answer. Over a photograph of her husband, she asks, Do sons and daughters in America ask why their fathers didn't come home? A photograph of his unit segues into photograph of a GI pilot, waving at the camera. His wife says she doesn't think her husband wanted to be an aggressor, that he was cast in that role. Over a picture of her husband and baby, she asks, Is your husband a hero? Is he a murderer? Did he kill people? Yes, he probably did. Were these people a threat to his country? Probably not. She says he wasn't a murderer, but what he did was murder. Was it justifiable? A Vietnamese woman says that when she was young, she felt hatred on behalf of her country, but now she sees that people here and there are the same. Archival footage shows people cowering and bombs dropping, their silhouettes appear as symbols of death. We see flames and rubble, and hear a rising chorus of lamenting voices accompanied by the sound of bells and a gong. We see artificial legs being made and tested. In war footage, an old woman sifts through rubble.

The train is seen on a curve; people are leaning out its windows. We see Sonneborn inside the train, looking out as the train nears Khe Sanh. In voice-over she says she feels suddenly afraid. The camera pans the landscape. We see her with her guide, who she says took her hand as she told Sonneborn that she was a Vietnamese soldier, and that Sonneborn is the first American she has met since the war. Sonneborn speculates that she could have been the person who killed Jeff. She says that Jeff said it was dense jungle, but now only the metallic smell of Agent Orange lingers over a denuded landscape. Over a hundred villages were burned to ground; the area was a free fire zone, anything that moved could be shot. We see children along the road.
Jeff was killed on Feb 29, 1968. The guide takes her to the battle place on the anniversary of his death. Over a slow zoom into the landscape, Sonneborn says, This is where you died, Jeff.... Who else died here that day? Lap dissolve into shots of children, a water buffalo, water lilies in the wind. A gong sounds softly.

The guide invites the film group back for tea, to make an offering to honor everybody who died in war. Closeup on the incense sticks they light. The guide says she hopes it will help Vietnam heal, but it's a long road. She tears up. Close up on shrine, Buddha figure. Xuan, in her own home, lights a candle. She says her scar is not visible, but so deep that she sometimes shuts down.

The closing sequence is one of mourning. Pan of Vietnamese cemetery, burning leaves. Xuan says she is sometimes ashamed to cry, asking, What makes my pain greater than my neighbor's? We see flagdraped coffins moved across a runway and Lula Bia tending her husband's grave. Then to the Vietnam Memorial Wall in Washington, D.C., where Sonneborn says is trying to comprehend the loss behind each name. Woman weeping says her husband's name should be on the wall: He left his soul in Vietnam, but it took seven years for his body to catch up. He shot himself because of flashbacks. A scroll shot of American names on the Wall dissolves into Vietnamese names on an unidentified wall, and then we see the river, with the oar dipping into the water that we saw at the opening.

The film ends with a poem, text on screen: For all who have suffered from war, for all the lives lost...they say: Our deaths are not ours; they are yours; they will mean what you make them. Archibald Macleish, The Young Dead Soldiers.

Style/Structure

This is an elegiac record of a journey in search of the meaning of one soldier's death, and by extension, the meaning of the Vietnam war. The poetic use of river scenes, green fields, and distant mountains set a contemplative, healing backdrop for this quest for reconciliation in a place once turned hellish. The music blends Asian and Western tones that suggest both sadness and tentative cultural harmony. The film is structured as a healing journey to a site of tragedy, during which a narrative is woven of many voices and memories, and which concludes with a ceremony of remembrance.

This story about suffering and loss in war inverts traditional patriotic war stories by describing the horrors of war as seen through the eyes of widows on both sides. While director/writer Barbara Sonneborn is the narrator, she tells a collective story, as she seeks to understand her own experience more fully through the stories of American and Vietnamese widows. (The words of all the Vietnamese women in the film, with the exception of Xuan, appear in English subtitles.) The centrality of women as storytellers is mirrored in the dominant visual images of the film: women working in fields, rowing boats, caring for children, surviving, rowing boats, recounting the past, etc. They are the voices of authority, seen against war scenes in which their houses are burned and they flee for their lives. Men fly bombing raids, carry machine guns, and spray Agent Orange. They are represented by technology and destruction. Women protect children, tend to the fields, row boats. They represent life, survival, and healing. But, the film makes clear, many of these men are trapped in situations from which they cannot escape.

Archival footage, most of it shot by military cameramen and television crews, is contextualized and reframed, so that it is seen from personal perspectives that emphasize the human consequences of war. It is used to show not only the wanton brutality inflicted on Vietnam, but always demonstrates just how distanced and other the Vietnamese were made to seem in U.S. coverage of the war, this film embraces Vietnamese experiences of the horrors of war within the narrative. Thus, the story of the suffering of American and Vietnamese women and families through the war is embraced in a story of a collective us. War footage of burning homes and chemical spraying, for instance, is juxtaposed with personal testimony, to demonstrate the personal experience of suffering, terror, and death that resulted. An American woman talking about her fears for her husband, a young pilot, is heard over footage of bombs raining on women

and children. This draws an connection between the often abstract language of battle and the consequences for actual individuals.

The film highlights the racial aspects of the war and of American society, especially by including African American, Native American and Latino soldiers whose participation is made more complex by their patriotic impulses in a racialized conflict. It also points out the racism that marked American attitudes toward Vietnamese. Xuan's comments on the racism she met when she came to California indicate that the problem continues.

Archival war footage is juxtaposed with personal accounts, to emphasize the distinction made in the film between the consequences of lethal U.S. government policies and the suffering inflicted on individuals. The Viet Cong's depredations are only glancingly mentioned, while the U.S. war machine and the horrors it inflicted on civilians is described in detail.

Finally, the film points out the continuing consequences of the war. Children are left orphaned, mothers are left childless, families grieve, Xuan has her deep internal scars.   Both Norma Banks husband and the children in Dr.Nguyen's clinic suffered the aftereffects of toxic exposure. The field where Jeff died, now denuded, is marked by the lingering metallic odor of Agent Orange.

Background on the Director/Film

Barbara Sonneborn is a visual artist living in the Bay Area. This is her first film. In 1988, on the twentieth anniversary of her husband's death, she told Barbara Abrash, she felt compelled to write a letter to him, at which point she began to think about what had happened to other widows in her situation and to feel she had to connect with them. What could be learned from their stories, to prevent future wars? Vietnam would provide an opportunity to look at the nature of war itself, in a film that would be meaningful to women in other countries and situations.
To Sonneborn, the most important source of data about the war was not history books or journalistic accounts, but rather the experiences and memories of other women, both in the U.S. and Vietnam. Her initial attempts to talk with other American widows of Vietnam soldiers failed because negative public attitudes toward the war and those who had participated in it made these women reluctant to speak. That changed with the Gulf War, which many widows and others saw as another version of the Vietnam war. Sonneborn attended a Gulf War protest in San Francisco bearing the flag that had draped her husband's coffin and a sign saying The New World Order Needs Non-Violent Action, which drew media attention. Sonneborn became something of a public figure, contacted by Vietnam veterans and widows eager to talk. She spoke at the Vietnam Memorial Wall on Veteran's Day in 1991, and at the Vietnam Veterans of America convention. By the time of the film, she had been in touch with 300 widows.

Sonneborn's desire to make a film was encouraged by Daniel Reeves, who had made Smothering Dreams about his traumatic combat experiences in Vietnam. Reeves was a co-applicant on the project's first National Endowment for the Arts grant awarded in 1992 (a second grant was earned by Sonneborn alone). He was also cinematographer on a series of initial interviews with women in the U.S.

Early support for the project came from the California Council for the Humanities (1989) and the National Endowment for the Arts, both of which later provided additional funding. In

1992, thanks to a loan from the Wallace Alexander Gerbode Foundation, Sonneborn, who felt the need to get closer to women's experiences of war, traveled to Vietnam with a female crew, including cinematographer Emiko Omori and line producer Kathy Brew. The team faced some difficulties filming in Vietnam, where the government was willing to allow interviews with North Vietnamese women, but blocked access to women from South Vietnam.

From the start, Sonneborn had seen a parallel between the Vietnam War and the wars of annihilation against Native peoples in America. For that reason, she thought it was essential to include the presence of Native American soldiers in the story. A grant from the Arizona Humanities Council in 1994 funded a shoot with a Navajo widow, Lula Bia. According to Sonneborn, crucial long-term guidance and support came from Cora Weiss and the Samuel Rubin Foundation.

The Bay Area cultural community, with its tradition of social issue filmmaking, provided rich creative resources for the film. Daniel Reeves was artist in residence at the Capp Street Project, a non-profit experimental art gallery of which Kathy Brew had been executive director, when the project was gestating. Cinematographer Emiko Omori, whose own film Rabbit in the Moon was completed at the same time as Regret to Inform, editors Ken Schneider and Lucy Massie Phenix, and executive producer Janet Cole are all longtime members of the independent filmmaking community in the region. Janet Cole joined the project in 1997 and continued to work on the distribution phase. Sonneborn received a Rockefeller Film/Video/Multimedia Fellowship in 1998. Final support came from the National AsianAmerican Telecommunications Association, CPB, and the MacArthur Foundation. The project has evolved into a social action non-profit organization to sponsor further art work about peace and women.

Production Context

Sonneborn's film is a legacy of the anti-war movement of the late 1960s and 1970s, which challenged the official purposes of the Vietnam War and declared its destructive effects on American soldiers and society as well as on Vietnam. The grieving message of Regret to Inform is that the war was not only pointless, but was a cruel and corrosive sacrifice of American lives and families, and one that reinforced racist inequities. Regret to Inform, which was being developed as anti-war sentiment was reawakened by the Gulf War, may also be seen as a continuing voice of that earlier movement. It is also part of an evolution of public artistic representation of the war in Vietnam (Aufderheide, 2000, 45-71). This discussion is taken forward in Marita Sturken's Tangled Memories, which takes for granted the widow's right to a public voice, something won by the feminist movement. This film, which subverts the conventions of patriotic narratives by including both American and Vietnamese women, presents a fundamental political challenge to nationalistic assumptions. Finally, the film claims a therapeutic role, looking to the healing powers of women as redress for the wounds of war. Screenings and national broadcast of Regret to Inform stimulated public discussion, which was provided a continuing forum www.pbs.org/pov; www.regrettoinform.org; and www.warwidows.com (see below).

Reception/Distribution

Regret to Inform premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 1999, where it won prizes for best nonfiction director and cinematography. In addition to wide festival distribution, it was

released theatrically to critical acclaim. Critic Stephen Holden called it an eloquent, subdued howl of grief that is so exquisitely filmed, edited and scored it is the documentary equivalent of a tragic epic poem (NY Times, June 25, 1999). It was nominated for an Academy Award as best documentary feature, and won the Independent Spirit Truer Than Fiction Award. In January 2000, it was nationally broadcast on POV, the PBS showcase for independent nonfiction film, in a copresentation with the National Asian American Telecommunications Association. Following the broadcast, a dialogue about the film was launched at www.pbs.org/pov. A multimedia resource guide on issue related to the film, as well as a facilitator's guide, are available at www.regrettoinform.org.

Sonneborn spearheaded an effort to create www.warwidows.com, an online memorial where, she hoped, widows from around the world would register their names, share their stories, and launch a campaign for international understanding and peace.

Discussion

Is this a typical war story? How is it different? Who are the heroes?
How are women portrayed? How are they shown to be active agents in their lives? How do they contribute to society more broadly?
How does the film portray the impact of government policies on the lives of ordinary people?
What does the film, in which people are clearly identified as either Vietnamese or American, say about nationalism?
How is reconciliationfor individuals as well as between enemiesshown?
In the film, Norma Banks says, It's not just the war is here and it's over. It starts when it ends. What does she mean? How does the film show the continuing effects of the war on people today?

Further Reading

Visit www.regrettoinform.org
Aufderheide, P. (2000). The Daily Planet. St. Paul: University of Minnesota Press.
Sturken, M. (1997). Tangled memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS epidemic, and the politics of remembering. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

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