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Individual Final Project:

Orphans of War in a Foreign Land: Securing a home for found orphan Vietnamese documentary films

Introduction to Moving Image Archiving and Preservation

H72.1800

Fall 2010

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The metaphor could not be more precise. Orphan films, despite being broad in definition within public policy¹, has a succinct emotional resonance that leads it to be easily understood². Like orphans, films are abandoned, neglected and lost by their owner and/or caretaker. Whether it is outright neglect or brought by the inability to provide care, there are various different reasons why an orphan ends up being one. Displaced, an orphan lose its sense of identity, value and importance. A displacement brought about by trafficking dynamics whether managed by man or disrupted by natural causes. Consequently, the hope is of course to name and bring a face to these orphans and provide them a safe home.

In September 2010, New York based documentary filmmaker Deborah Shaffer wanted an inventory of her collection. It was a collection primarily composed of her films and their production elements. There were however 10 reels of 16mm films that she noticed were not hers. Based on the labels on some of the cans, it looked like the films were from Vietnam shot during the Vietnam War. And though she knew people who probably used footages from these films back in her days in Newsreel, she was not familiar with these films and knew for a fact that they were not hers. Furthermore, Shaffer was not interested in keeping these films in her collection let alone her care.

The objective of this project is to identify these orphan films and secure a new home for them. It begins with an initial inspection of the films resulting to a rudimentary inventory then later proceeding with physical and intellectual inspection and analysis. There is then a need to contextualize these films further to understand its content and trace its provenance and underlying rights. With all of these in place, the next phase is finding an institution that will keep these films safe. This is either bringing them back to their rightful cultural owner or handing them over a body that will equally take care of these films.

Discovery: Initial Inspection

Ten reels of 16mm films were found along the hallway outside of Barbara Shaffer's loft in SoHo, New York. One of them was contained in a box, the other nine were in film cans. At first look, the films were not in horrible conditions though obviously abandoned and not taken care of. Shaffer was not aware how long the films were in her premises or how exactly they ended up there.

An inventory was made by inspecting the inside and outside of the cans/box and the leaders of the films. Three of the reels were identified as Cuban productions. One of which was a Newsreel work entitled *Historia de Una Batalla*, while the other two reels were two-part prints of *Herminde de la Victoria*. Another reel was a film from Mexico dated 1976 entitled *Virikuta: La Custombre*. Shaffer was familiar with these films and consequently contacted their respective filmmakers. At the moment, Shaffer is currently in coordination with them in deciding what to do with these prints.

On the other hand, the six remaining reels were not familiar to Shaffer. Upon inspection of the containers and leaders, the films seem to be from Vietnam. The inspection yield the following initial information / inventory:

REEL #1 Print
Going Up The Line – Supplying the Front
NLF, 1969
inside the container were two pages of text in english and another two in french

REEL #2 Print
The University in Times of War: Polytechnic – Hanoi
DRV Studios, 1968
inside the container were 2 pages of text in vietnamese

REEL #3 Print
PRG Founding Conference
NLF Films, 1969

REEL #4 Print
Children's Film – Exp
DRV, 1969
inside the container was a page of text in vietnamese

REEL #5 Print
Puppet Film

REEL #6 Magnetic Track
Puppet Film

The initial inspection provided possible titles, production dates and producers of the film. Shaffer then figured that these films, given the date and the possible content based on the titles, were most likely used by her Newsreel colleagues back in the 70s.

These primary information provided possible leads in doing further research with regards to the content, context and provenance of these films. But prior to these, further close physical inspection of the films provide more clues and clear the films for projection.

State: Physical Inspection

The films were taken out of Shaffer's premises and were brought to the MIAP laboratory for closer physical inspection. Following the film inspection report form of the Barbara Goldsmith Preservation and Conservation Department at NYU Libraries, each reel was inspected to identify its physical characteristics and elements and determine its physical state and condition. The reel by reel inspection report can be seen in a spreadsheet attached as *Appendix A*.

All of the films are 16mm positive prints in safety nitrate base by film stock company ORWO of East Germany. They have edge codes that are undecipherable. Except for the mag track, all films are black & white with an optical variable area soundtrack. All of the them were 400 feet long except for REEL #5 and #6 that were both 1000 feet long. There are very few tape splices some of which needed repair. Shrinkage ranges from 0.00 - .30 while decomposition level measured by AD Strips is at around 0.00 – 0.75.

There are some physical damage in some of the films, mostly light emulsion scratches and some oil and dirt. No considerable warpage or fading was seen. REEL #1 has an unidentified red rusty spots all over some of its frames.

Taking all of these into consideration, the reels are considered to be in generally good projectable condition.

Browsing through the frames, specifically the first few ones, vietnamese characters / texts were seen. Though it is not an indication that the films are indeed in vietnamese, soundtrack wise, it confirms that they do relate somehow to some Vietnamese subject matter. Projecting the films and actually watching them further confirm the findings incurred so far.

Meaning: Content Analysis

Using an ELMO 16mm projector, the films were projected and watched to identify and analyze their content. Besides from the actual content described briefly per film below, titles were confirmed and crew members were identified, both in vietnamese. The initial inventory was updated to make it look something much like an access/display catalogue seen as *Appendix B*. REEL #4 does not have, however, any sort of an opening or closing credit. Much data and information regarding this particular film is left unknown.

Going Up the Line – Supplying the Front. The film shows how supplies such as food, clothing, medicine and equipments were transported from the NLF's home base to the main Front. Throughout the transport images of war such as fighter jets and guns that were juxtaposed to the beauty of Vietnam seen in flocks of birds and lotuses.

The University in Times of War: Polytechnic – Hanoi. Showcasing various scenes in and around the Polytechnic University in Hanoi during the war, this film presents a seemingly peaceful and progressive North Vietnam amidst such turbulent times. Here the northern vietnamese studied in school, played sports and made music.

PRG Founding Conference. A recording of one of the key moments in Vietnamese history when the National Liberation Front was renamed the Provisional Revolutionary Government in 1969. The film captures the assembly and snippets of speeches given by key PRG leaders.

Children's Film – EXP. Title unconfirmed, film does not have credits. A film that seems to be an experimental work made up of a montage of close shots of Vietnamese children eating and playing and at times staring directly at the camera.

Young Puppeteers of South Vietnam. Teenagers in the NLF areas of South Vietnam construct puppets and toys from scraps of American war equipments / machineries. They then bring these puppets and toys and perform for the children in the area.

The content seen accordingly give clue to the historical and political context of the films, that is of the Vietnam War as seen from the North and South Vietnam Communist movements. Context situates these films in which their meaning, value and importance are brought up.

Value: Contextualization

The films were all made during the last few years of the Vietnam War. It was a war that lasted for about two decades during the mid 50s to the mid 70s mainly between North Vietnam, supported its communist allies and South Vietnam, supported by the US government. It was a drawn conflict between the communist north and democratic south, filled with military, political and ideological warfare. ³

The war was seen to be between Hanoi of the north and Saigon of the south. Film production between the two cities strongly articulated this division and ideological conflict. While the south was making mainly narratives, features and comics the north was concentrating on documentaries and newsreels. Both nonetheless were value laden and propagandistic in nature. Between 1965 and 1973 alone, 463 newsreels, 307 documentaries and 141 scientific films were produced, in contrast to 36 feature films and 27 cartoons. ⁴

North Vietnam was also known as the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and it had a film production arm which made two of the films in the project. The other films were made by the National Liberation Front of Vietnam (NLF), the South Vietnam communist movement also known as Vietcong. NLF was later renamed as the Provisional Revolutionary Government.

These films were propagandistic in nature, made and distributed in and outside of Vietnam to counter possible misrepresentation and/or one sidedness of international media, specifically that of the non-communist supporters of South Vietnam, particularly the US. ⁴

Newsreel, conceived during the progressive social movements in the US that coincided with the Vietnam War, was one of the means that brought this alternative narrative and viewpoint to the US by shooting films in Vietnam and by bringing the films of DRV and NLF to America. Focusing on subject matters such as war resistance, protests and social injustice, Newsreel made documentary films that engaged these issues and challenged perceptions. They were particularly interested with national liberation movements around the world, including that of Vietnam. ⁵

The coinciding Vietnam War in Southeast Asia and the Social Movements in the US sets the context of these films and affirms their value and importance as key historical documents of that time. Furthermore this context points towards a direction in tracing their provenance and underlying rights.

Trace: Provenance and Rights

The films for certain are from Vietnam, in particular originally from the DRV and NLF studios. Several prints of these films were probably made and were distributed within and outside Vietnam through allies and supporters of the communist and liberation movements. Newsreel, as researched and mentioned by Shaffer, most likely brought the films in the US either for direct screening or to work into new documentary films.

Norm Fruchter and John Douglas, makers of the Newsreel film *People's War* (1969) confirm this. Fruchter and Douglas went to Vietnam during that time to shoot and gather footages for their film. Clips from REELS #1, #2 and #3 were used in their film, while the film *Young Puppeteers of South Vietnam* was screened as is in Vermont according to Douglas. They attained the films from DRV and brought it to Shaffer's apartment, that was then one of the makeshift production base of Douglas and

Newsreel. The filmmakers eventually left the films in the loft after getting the clips they needed. Shortly after, Shaffer occupied the space and made it her apartment. The films were then unknowingly integrated to her collection.

Shaffer has already expressed that she is not interested in keeping the films. Fruchter and Douglas who took the films from Vietnam and brought them to the US are also not interested in claiming ownership and responsibility.

DRV and NLF are long gone and copyright law in Vietnam remains unclear in handling past productions and identifying rights retroactively. The DRV films can be seen as government productions, while the NLF can be seen the same way as well as the PRG ruled over a unified Vietnam during a year of transition. Counterarguments of course can be made as well.

Culturally speaking, the Vietnamese people has the right to claim ownership of these audiovisual documents that recorded a key point in their history. Though the Vietnamese government is not actively pursuing them, films of similar nature have been repatriated back to Vietnam from different countries such as France, China, Cambodia and Germany throughout the years.

These set precedence to current and future actions taken regarding the care and direction of these orphan films.

Current and Future Actions

The films are currently in foster care. Tape splices have been repaired. The films are placed in new cans while the old cans and box are stored properly as well. The accompanying pages of texts found inside of the cans are straightened out and placed in acid free folders. The films are in a box stored in a cool and dry environment inside a cabinet. Though the environment is not fully controlled and consistent, it is deemed better than their previous location in Shaffer's corridor. Photos of the cans and screenshots from the films are taken for reference and documentation. Further research on these films, specifically REEL #4 which remains unknown, is on going with the help of Vietnam Cinema scholars.

Contact has been made with Third World Newsreel (TWN) and the Vietnam Film Institute (VFI). The former is an offshoot of Newsreel and has an arm that distributes documentary works of similar nature. Given the history of the films and their subject matter, TNS might be interested in acquiring these films.

Priority is given though to VFI if they would be interested in repatriating these films back to them. Given their cultural right over these materials, they deserve to have these orphans back to their home country.

It has been said already though that chances are these films are but one of many remaining copies all over the world. VFI and TWN are currently checking if they have them in their collections. If such is the case, then these copies will end up not having much value. Nonetheless, unless proven otherwise, these films will be taken care of greatly as if they are rare copies until they are given back to their rightful owner. For if there is one thing worse than being an orphan, it is being an orphan in a foreign land.

Footnotes

¹ Lukow, Gregory. (1999). *The Politics of Orphanage: The Rise and Impact of the 'Orphan Film' Metaphor on Contemporary Preservation Practice*. Delivered at Orphans of the Storm, University of South Carolina.

² Cherchi Usai, Paolo. (1999). *What is an Orphan Film? Definition, Rationale and Controversy*. Delivered at Orphans of the Storm, University of South Carolina.

³ Tucker, Spencer. ed. (1998). *Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War: a Political, Social and Military History*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.

⁴ Wikipedia. *Cinema of Vietnam*. Retrieved December 8, 2010, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cinema_of_Vietnam#cite_ref-1

⁵ Third World Newsreel. *History*. Retrieved December 8, 2010, <http://www.twn.org/twnpages/about/history.aspx>