



Cinema & Território

Revista internacional de arte e antropologia das imagens

N.º 9 | 2024

Cinema (no) Feminino

The commitment of women through the production of a creative documentary about Indochina

Natacha CYRULNIK

OJS - Edição eletrónica

URL: <https://ct-journal.uma.pt>

DOI: [10.34640/ct9uma2024cyrulnik](https://doi.org/10.34640/ct9uma2024cyrulnik)

ISSN: 2183-7902

Editor

Universidade da Madeira (UMa)

Referência eletrónica

Cyrulnik, N. (2024). The commitment of women through the production of a creative documentary about Indochina. *Cinema & Território*, (9), 60-75.

<http://doi.org/10.34640/ct9uma2024cyrulnik>

18 de novembro de 2024



Este trabalho está licenciado com uma Licença Creative Commons Atribuição-Não Comercial 4.0 Internacional.

The Commitment of Women Through the Production of a Creative Documentary about Indochina

Natacha CYRULNIK

MCF HDR, UMR PRISM, Aix-Marseille University – CNRS
natacha.cyrulnik@univ-amu.fr

Abstract: The documentary *La belle d'occident, en quête de l'Indochine d'hier et d'aujourd'hui* (2023, 47') discusses the place and investment of women in research and in the way that they see others, whether from an anthropological, artistic (particularly cinematographic), literary, gendered, post-colonial (i.e. historical) or involved point of view. The starting point for this research is the novel *The western nice woman*, by Mrs Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa written in 1927, a love story between a French woman and a Vietnamese man. This novel is based on a true story that praises the place of women and denounces certain colonial behaviours. Thi Phuong Ngoc Nguyen, a teacher-researcher at Aix-Marseille University, translated the novel in 2021, so that it could be used in the field to find clues about the customs of the period in relation to the soldiers involved. A teacher-researcher also at the University of Aix-Marseille, and as a documentary filmmaker, I accompanied her to Alsace and Verdun in France, and Vietnam, to make this documentary about this adventure and capture current realities while, at the same time, searching for traces of the colonial era. It takes now the form of a creative documentary. Its strength lies in the fact that it bears witness to a reality by taking on a view of the world. In this way, it commits itself in the image of these women.

Keywords: documentary, commitment, women, Vietnam, post-colonialism

Résumé : Le « film de recherche » « *La belle d'occident, en quête de l'Indochine d'hier et d'aujourd'hui* » (2023, 47') traite de la place et de l'investissement des femmes dans la recherche et dans le regard porté sur l'autre, que ce soit d'un point de vue anthropologique, artistique (notamment cinématographique), littéraire, genré, post-colonial (i.e. historique) ou engagé ! Le point de départ de cette recherche est le roman « *La belle d'Occident* », de Mme Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa, écrit en 1927, une histoire d'amour entre une Française et un Vietnamien. Ce roman est basé sur une histoire vraie. Il fait déjà l'éloge de la place des femmes et dénonce certains comportements coloniaux. Thi Phuong Ngoc Nguyen, enseignante-chercheuse à l'université d'Aix-Marseille, a traduit le roman en 2021, afin qu'il puisse être utilisé sur le terrain pour trouver des indices sur les usages de l'époque au sujet des soldats engagés. Et, en tant qu'enseignante-chercheuse également à l'Université d'Aix-Marseille et en tant que documentariste, je l'ai accompagnée en Alsace et à Verdun en France, ainsi qu'au Vietnam, pour réaliser ce documentaire sur cette aventure et capturer les réalités actuelles tout en recherchant les traces de l'époque coloniale. Il prend la forme d'un documentaire de création. La force du documentaire de création réside dans le fait qu'il témoigne d'une réalité en posant un regard sur le monde. Il s'engage ainsi à l'image de ces femmes.

Mots-clés: documentaire, engagement, femmes, Vietnam, post-colonialisme

Introduction

This research is based on a novel, *La belle d'occident* by Mme Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa: a woman who wrote in 1927, a love story between a French woman and a Vietnamese man who enlisted during the First World War to fight for France. This novel, written by a woman, in the Western style during the colonial era, and based on a true story as stated in the three prefaces, of a romance between a French woman who travels to Vietnam to look for her husband who has been sent back to Indochina, praises the place of women and denounces certain colonial behaviours. The novel's heroine, Bach Lan, is also renowned for her commitment, as she does not hesitate to travel all the way to Indochina, pregnant and with her first daughter, to look for her "native" husband. It is in recognition of her courage that the novel bears the title *La belle d'occident*.

Phuong Ngoc Nguyen, a lecturer and researcher at Aix-Marseille University in France, translated and published the novel in 2021, and included it in an ANR project entitled *Coolibrokers 2021-2024*. It was used as a tool to find clues about the customs of the period in relation to the soldiers involved. As a documentary filmmaker and teacher-researcher at the University of Aix-Marseille too, I accompanied her to Alsace, Verdun and Vietnam to make a documentary about this adventure that I entitled *La belle d'occident, En-quête de l'Indochine d'hier et d'aujourd'hui* (2023, 47'). The film captures current realities while at the same time searching for traces of the colonial era. It takes the form of a creative documentary, matching form to substance, as we shall see. It raises the question of how to compose a story from images and sounds captured to reproduce an atmosphere, while articulating the sound and visual realities of Vietnam at the service of the story of the novel. At the same time, it contributes to the investigation based on the novel.

It is through these four women (the heroine, the novelist, the researcher in sociology and literature, and me as a researcher and documentary filmmaker) that women's commitment to Vietnam will be questioned in books and films.

We are going to investigate what happened to the Vietnamese soldiers during the First World War through Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa's novel. This novel is considered as a research object, but also as a research tool insofar as it introduces a research method. Reading it along NGUYEN's work and my own film, opens a whole interdisciplinary field. It is an opportunity to emphasise the place and investment of women in research and in the way we look at others, whether from an anthropological, artistic (particularly cinematographic), literary, gendered, post-colonial (historical and sociological) or involved point of view.

Thierry Paquot explored the origins of what would later be called an ecological conscience in his book *L'Amérique verte, portraits d'amoureux de la nature* (2020). He describes the pioneers of a way of thinking about our environment, particularly through their interactions and the evolution of their thinking. Questions emerged at almost the same time and developed more or less in tandem. This concerns us here because with these first "amateur naturalists", "walkers and observers" (Paquot, 2020) were developing a way of approaching the world. And, in this ecological framework, the place of women and the critique of colonialism also came through it was as if there was a link between an affirmation of ecology, of the place of women in society and decolonisation. This vision, which is open to the world in general, links "ecology", "feminism" and "decolonisation" right from our introduction. By developing the place of women over the course of a century, from 1917 (the date of the novel's story) to 2023 (when the documentary is completed), the link with the environment in an ecological and political vision will also be asserted. That's our bias here.

The four women are our common thread. But each in its own way also allows us to address questions of literary and cinematographic creation, and to move from colonialism to post-colonialism as we are making progress in implementing this research. The question becomes more epistemological.

Although the final subject is the documentary, all the upstream presentations of these women will help to develop these research questions. They will develop as the investigation progresses, and they will appear fully in the documentary, which aims to tell the whole story. So, there's a progression in this text (and in the film) that draws out the thread of this research as it unfolds. Without falling into the kind of suspense that would not suit the form of the creative documentary, I'm trying to show how the creative documentary makes it possible to tackle many of the questions previously raised by all these committed women (who work on soldiers who were also committed during the First World War, incidentally). Ultimately, commitment and its analysis are at the heart of our approach (Agamben, 2007).

The aim of all this is to witness the research carried out in the field, the discoveries made at the time and open it up as much as possible to other questions, both academic and social. The strength of the creative documentary lies in the fact that it witnesses a reality by taking on a view of the world-with a commitment in the image of these women.

The Woman Inside the Novel

To talk about women in relation to this novel, it makes sense to start by talking about its heroine. *La belle d'occident* is called *Bach Lan*. This could correspond to *Blanche* in French, evoking both her status and her dress as a nurse when she met and treated the Vietnamese soldier who was to become her husband, but also the uprightness of her behaviour. The codes and rules of decorum are very much in evidence in the novel. They reflect an era and reveal the social codes of the early 20th century, both in France and in the colonies, as we will see. It reflects as well as the values of the time, the novel written in 1927 and those of the story set in 1917.

Before going any further, the back cover of the book sets the scene for this epic love story:

Tuấn Ngọc, a young man from Indochina, leaves his country to join the colonial army. He fights under the French flag in the Great War. Wounded on the battlefield, he meets a beautiful French Red Cross volunteer in hospital. Love was born. But in a conservative society, this union between a “native” soldier and a French woman is not to everyone's taste [...]. (Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa, 1927)

All the questions raised in this novel, which are already present in the back cover, will be explored further, with the work undertaken by the other women mentioned. The value of this novel is significant: firstly, because there are no longer many traces of this period in Indochina, regarding what happened in Vietnam in the years that followed; and secondly, because in France all the colonised people were not properly recorded. As researcher Phuong Ngoc Nguyen says in the documentary, they were often noted with a capital “I” in the battle book (which records everything that happened), for “Indochinese”, or even for “Indigenous”. This novel invites us to tell the story of Indochina and France.

Colonialism

It should also be pointed out that the difficulty of producing novels at the time, when some say that what was to become Vietnam was a country of literati, also stemmed from the fact that the official language of the time was Chinese. Because it severed the link between the Vietnamese language and the Hán-Việt matrix that formed its foundation, the abandonment of the ancient script in favour of the latinised national language of quốc ngữ constitutes an additional difficulty in identifying the culture specific to what was to become Vietnam. This makes research into this period even more difficult, and this novel becomes even more valuable: “Not content with simply destroying, wishing in this field as in others to substitute its own logic and assert its superiority, the colonial apparatus was keen to assert its credo in science, and in the case before us, to apply its methods to the Indochinese case.” (Le Failler, 2013, p. 164).

A great deal of work went into finding information. But here again, these accounts are often from colonists rather than from Indochinese, and even more so from Annamites (residents of Annam) (Nguyen Phuong Ngoc, 2012). Colonialism is therefore present on several levels. Firstly, because these young Annamite were enlisted because they were hungry. Joining the army meant that the family could have a bit of money to live on. In the novel, the characters Tuấn Ngọc and his brother enlist for these reasons. They are then separated as soon as they arrive in Marseille, France, because one of them was considered unsuitable for battle for being physically weak, and was sent to Toulon to build weapons, while the other went to Verdun. Nevertheless, documents found prove that the Indochinese were not valued in the same way as the Senegalese riflemen, for example: rather, they were assigned to more menial tasks such as collecting bodies from the battlefields, driving lorries or building roads. In the novel, again taken from a true story, Tuấn Ngọc is wounded while on guard duty. This corresponds to what historical researchers have identified about the Indochinese. In the beginning of the story, women are represented more as the mother who needs money to feed her family; it is only later that Bach Lan appears.

It is more the colonial hold that is important to us in this part. It is denounced in this novel from the moment the soldiers are recruited from remote villages (Tam Ky was a village at the time, even though it is a large town today where we were filming) to come and fight in the north of France.

Colonialism is the main theme of the rest of the narrative: a hardly conceivable, both in France and in Indochina, love story between a French woman and a Vietnamese man, their struggle to be together and the twists and turns they must deal with bear witness to the manipulations of colonialism against a mixed marriage.

The Place of Women at the Time

It is only with the appearance of this young Frenchwoman who works for the Red Cross treating soldiers in Verdun that the beginnings of emancipation appear. However, at the turn of the century, the heroine is discreet and caring. She is not the one who leads the action for the time being. She is true to the image of the well-bred young girl of the century. It is only after Tuấn Ngọc saves her life when she is being attacked by a German on the banks of a river, that she fights to marry him, despite the social attitudes of the time. This was her first major commitment. The second came when the young Annamite was sent back to his country because the war was over, and the state, without taking the marriage into account, considered that it no longer needed him. Bach Lan finally decided

to go and get him herself in Indochina when he is unable to return, while pregnant and accompanied by their first daughter.

She was then more determined to find him in the region of his village Tam Ky, which appears in the letter her husband sent her, when he told her that she could regain her freedom since he was unable to return to France. Bach Lan's commitment went as far as to attempt suicide in a colonial building, because the French colonial administration was not helping her enough (in fact stopping her) from finding her husband. Faced with this commitment, which she carried on for months without giving up until that moment, some Indochinese people, impressed by her love for her native husband, finally helped her to find him.

As mentioned in the introduction, the title of the novel *La belle d'occident* praises this commitment by going to get it, which was recognised by the Indochinese themselves, and which the colonial administration was also obliged to consider. We're still describing the novel here, but if we take a rhetorical approach that takes into account the context in which it was written, the facts set out in it reveal a great deal about the administrative, social and amorous workings of the time. We can measure the commitment of the author herself, who dared to praise the struggle of a woman to find her husband, a *native* moreover, despite the obstacles put up by the colonists, and the Indochinese too, for that matter, who ran the country. We'll come back to the author's own commitment later, but the romance that could appear simply as a beautiful love story, already integrates the arising times of feminine demands.

A Romance to Reflect Reality

This novel is a testimony of the reality. Insofar, as two out of three of the prefaces' states, the fact that this novel is based on a true story takes the book on another dimension. Fiction can transport the reader; the knowledge that the story existed encourages a rhetorical approach (Soulez, 2011). In documentary cinema, Jean-Luc Lioult (2004) explains that there is a tacit contract between the filmmaker and the viewer: the former certifies that what is shown is reality, while the latter decides to believe it. This understanding of a documentary approach has an impact on the way the film is received. Here, the reading of the novel can be seen in the same light. If two of the preface writers felt the need to justify the reality of this story, it is undoubtedly because this dimension offers another reading of the romance. It is no longer just the love story that matters to us as readers, but everything that is described around it, which bears witness to a way of life at the time and under a colonial regime. This novel has a truly documentary dimension, and that is precisely why it is taken as an object of research. That is what we are going to develop, but it is important to make it clear now that the power of fiction here will help us to understand the world from a documentary point of view. This link between fiction and documentary is questioned from the outset (documentary approach to novel and historical indices). The relationship between the novel and the essay is established as a parallel between fiction and documentary. To speak of the novel as an object of research is already to problematise the fact that it will be treated in a documentary. So now we have to ask how a novel (or fiction) suggests the reflections of an essay (or documentary). And yet, as we shall see later, documentary is still a narration of the world that has something to do with fiction, if only to tell a story. William Guynn, in *Le cinéma de non-fiction* (2001), explains that fiction and documentary are not opposites, but that instead they are composed of each other. In our case, the novel and then, the documentary, are the objects of research that will show how reality and fiction are linked.

On a philosophical level, Jean-Marie Schaeffer, in *Qu'est-ce que la fiction* (1999), emphasises the connection between mimetic activities and the arts, based on anthropological foundations, in order to analyse the primary sources of attraction:

I propose to reaffirm the links (real, but too often forgotten) between everyday mimetic activities and fiction (and therefore also the mimetic arts). For it is the importance of mimetism (both playful and serious) in the lives of human beings that helps us to understand why the representational arts so often (though not always) tend towards an exacerbation of the mimetic effect. Only an adequate understanding of the anthropological underpinnings of mimetic activities can enlighten us as to the common underpinnings of the mimetic arts and point to the primary source of the attraction they have had for human beings since time immemorial. (Schaeffer, 1999, p. 13)

This is the logic behind the novel. It is a source of anthropological foundations on the workings of the colonial world in Indochina and the place of women at that time, both in France and in Indochina. It is also a source of documentary information. Jean-Marie Schaeffer (1999) suggests looking at imitative techniques, such as resemblance, naturalism, the effect of reality and *trompe-l'œil*, which reinforce the mimetic “illusion”. Here, the fiction of the novel offers data that will enter into a documentary registration. It is in this sense that the novel is studied.

Jean-Marie Schaeffer’s proposals for approaching fiction will enable us to analyse the functions and uses of the documentary representation that can be made of it. The cognitive and pedagogical scope (Niney, 2000 & 2002) of documentary is a driving force behind this film genre. According to Le Robert dictionary of the French language, the word *documentary*, from the Latin *documentum*, means *example, model, lesson, teaching, demonstration*. Its modelling function, its representational relationship with the world and its uses appears to be the acquisition of possible knowledge, in fiction as in documentary.

The creative documentary is not only a representation, but also an artistic act. The point of view and the bias of the director automatically position’s her/him as an author. How do you create a representation of reality? What is the process of creating a representation of reality? Is associating creation and reality, at a time when we are questioning mimesis, a feint or a reliable imitation? It is not the principle of truth that is being questioned, but that of the use of possible derivatives of this imitation: “to imitate, reproduce, represent, resemble, feign” (Schaeffer, 1999, p. 62).

In the end, this is what the novel proposes, as does the documentary in the same logic of creation (Cyrulnik, 2008, p. 306). By addressing the anthropological importance of the mimetic arts, we are questioning the central role of representation in human culture (Schaeffer, 1999, p. 12). Intentional skills enable us to create creative novels and/or documentaries as representations of the world (Schaeffer, 1999, p. 18) (Cyrulnik, 2008, p. 331).

Starting with the involvement of four women in analysing the implementation of a documentary based on a novel, the question of the research method emerges. This could have been the guiding thread for this demonstration, but it is the women who will remain the priority, as a form of claim.

Let’s pick up the thread of the discussion, starting with these women: from the character woman in the novel, we will ask questions about the act of creation (of a novel, research or film) and now move on to the novelist.

The Novelist

Published in 1927 in Saigon, *La belle d'occident* is presented as the first novel written in Vietnamese, and by a woman, Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa, a major figure in Vietnamese feminism between the wars. Her work was translated into a Western language for the first time in 2020 by researcher Phuong Ngoc Nguyen. The date and gender of the author alone are to be noticed. In fact, it was already very rare for a woman to write during the colonial era.

An innovative narrative

The novel is also unique in that it is written in the Western style. Indeed, it is:

In the 17th century, a new script based on the Latin alphabet was developed by European missionaries to serve the needs of evangelisation and the running of the community. French colonisation, which began in 1858, led to wider use of this script in Cochinchina in the south, then in Tonkin in the north and Annam in the centre. [...] In 1917, the General Regulations on Public Education established the Franco-Indigenous teaching system, which would train authors writing in quốc ngữ, as well as readers of stories and novels telling the stories that captivated them. (Phuong Ngoc Nguyen, 2023)

These comments suggest that this type of narrative can be seen as a way of asserting oneself within Western codes. From the way of being of this author Me Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa, we can affirm that she had a voluntary approach to make herself recognized among the Westerners, the colonists at that time. Writing in the Western mode, the fact that it was a woman who was writing, that she was Indochinese to boot, and that she dared to be socially critical, shook-up conventions.

We can say that this novel was written in a Western mode for several reasons:

- it deals with a topical subject (and not heroes from ancient times), which is completely new;
- French women are educated and aware of being citizens of a democratic society critical of colonisation;
- using the Vietnamese language is new;
- there are still traces of the traditional (Chinese) novel, such as the two verses summarising the chapter and the poems in the novel, but overall, the writing is modern (close to the spoken language, few literary references from classical - Chinese - literature);
- and the fact that a woman is publishing (making public) her text is also completely innovative.

For all of these reasons, this novel is one of the first works written on a Western model and marks an important milestone, which also makes Me Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa an exceptional woman for her time, so innovative was her novel.

In the same way that Donna Haraway (2007) uses science fiction with creatures like cyborgs to question possible worlds, the novel rhetorically questions the one in which the author lives. The way she writes and the stories she tells bear witness to realities. Nearly a century later, Donna Haraway quoted the American-Vietnamese filmmaker and

feminist theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha and her term ‘Inappropriate Others’, making the link between feminist demands and forms of racism, as Thierry Paquot (2020) mentioned in the introduction:

Designating the networks of multicultural, ethnic, racial, national, and sexual actors emerging since World War II, Trinh’s phrase referred to the historical positioning of those who cannot adopt the mask of either “self” or “other” offered by previously dominant, modern Western narratives of identity and politics. (Haraway, 1991, p. 69)

These comments testify to the topicality of Me Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa’s novel, linking issues of racism to those of feminism, while also linking them to war, politics and domination reminiscent of colonialism or male power.

A Critique of Colonisation

From a more rhetorical point of view, transliteration quốc ngữ, the spirit of the Enlightenment, the affirmation of individual identity in language, and the demand for civil rights, are all new developments that need to be considered.

This raises questions concerning cultural mixing. The paradox between the situation of colonisation and the universalist values conveyed by French culture is palpable in the novel. Colonial influences are identifiable, as are all the challenges they posed for the time.

The novelist talks about all this more or less directly in the text. This makes it an exceptional work on which to base our further research. Everything that is denounced or highlighted through this love story bears witness to its time. Mrs. Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa takes this on board, and that makes her testimony exceptional. Her willingness to make all this public (with all the risks that it could entail) is a testament to her strength of character. Today her work and her personality help us to better understand what happened at that time. That is why Phuong Ngoc Nguyen has translated her book into French and included it in a research project, the ANR “Coolibrokers 2021-2024”, to explore these issues further.

The Researcher in Sociology and Literature, Another Reading of the Novel

Phuong Ngoc Nguyen is a sociologist who began her research by examining the anthropology of Vietnamese literature from an historical perspective. We can already see here that an interdisciplinary approach is needed to try and understand this part of history. An interdisciplinary approach makes it possible to question research in general and to show how we are groping our way through clues found in the novel. It also raises the broader question of What is research in the human sciences? How does it work? Does it differ from one discipline to another? From specific research in history, literature and anthropology based on a novel, we come to ask questions of an epistemological nature that will inevitably be reflected in the documentary that accompanies this reflection. The film shows the progression from working alone as a translator to working as part of a group on an ANR research project. It is a practical demonstration of the contribution and richness of interdisciplinarity.

If these reflections appear at the very moment of the researcher’s presentation, it’s because this interdisciplinarity exists from the start: in the novel, which can be read on

several levels, and in Phuong Ngoc Nguyen's research, to which we'll return later. It will also develop in its own way throughout the documentary.

The (post-)colonialism

The strength of the hypotheses found in the novel is amplified by the fact that the prefaces state that the content of the narrative is based on a true story. There are clues as to what happened, even though there are no longer many traces in Vietnam of these soldiers, and even fewer in France, where at the time they were only considered to be from one of the many nations that offered *natives* to come and fight. So, the question of colonisation is always underlying. It even lies at the heart of the novel. It is present through the social criticism portrayed. But it's not just the French, the colonists, who are the *villains*. The novel also takes the trouble to show certain Annamites who are close to power in a bad light, while others help this Frenchwoman who is in love and full of beautiful values. These details are there to show the complexity of the situation. The colonial system did not bring out the best in everyone, to say the least, if only because of the lengths to which the beautiful Bach Lan went to try and find her husband in Annam. The novel portrays colonialism with a critical spirit that is a credit to its author.

The fact that we are questioning it today through this research, with years of hindsight, calls to mind Franz Fanon (1910), for example, or Benjamin Stora (2012), who have worked extensively on post-colonialism, particularly in relation to Algeria, from both a historical and psychological point of view. The link with the Algerian War is easy to make, as many of the soldiers who fought in Indochina were also on the front line in Algeria afterwards. But if the questions are psychological, historical and geographical, they are also from the point of view of post-colonialism, which is dealt with in a more contemporary way, today.

It is also important to mention here that the film bears witness to an investigation that led to the discovery of Indochinese graves in the cemetery above the town of Thann in Alsace and in the necropolis at Verdun. Even the people who live or work there didn't realise it; it's in the film that this discovery was made. This theme could be the subject of a thesis or other type of historical research. It is an important discovery made possible by the making of the documentary.

Arjun Appadurai (2005), in particular, questions post-colonialism in relation to the media, insisting on a globalised world in which expression through film or video in more generic terms ultimately allows another possible form of narration of what is experienced. This is, in its own way, what Mrs. Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa did, and what Phuong Ngoc Nguyen is doing through her research. The act of creation, more than the film, makes it possible to create a shared culture and at the same time a personal identity (Cyrulnik, 2015, p. 171). "The issues raised by cultural cohabitation also provide an opportunity to revisit the relationship between identity and minority" (Wolton, 2003, p. 95). This is also what is being questioned here. "Basically, cultural diversity is a normative ambition as much as a functional obligation. We would like to put it in the storehouse of fine humanist ideals, when it is one of the practical conditions, and the most prosaic, for avoiding additional risks of war." (Wolton, 2003, p. 117). We will extend this, in particular by taking the creative documentary as an appropriate form in which to question this.

Feminism

Phuong Ngoc Nguyen is director of the Irasia laboratory at the University of Aix-Marseille. She works on Vietnamese language and culture and promotes general knowledge of the country through her research. By choosing to work more specifically on this novel, she is declaring her commitment, as a woman working on the novel, of a woman who values another woman as a French-Vietnamese woman, and of an Indochinese woman who praises the will of a French woman. The place of women and the blending of cultures are present everywhere.

The term “feminism” is a term that was not used as such during the time of Mrs. Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa and Phuong Ngoc Nguyen makes little use of it other than to associate it with the author, which is precisely what she wishes to develop in the future. As she explains at the end of the documentary, she would like to produce a biography of Mrs. Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa in order to highlight all that she has opened up as a field of reflection in what will be Vietnam.

The Power of Interdisciplinarity

Phuong Ngoc Nguyen blends literature with anthropology. This approach makes it clear that literature provides us with knowledge about the world in general. This relationship with reality is reminiscent of our considerations on the link between fiction and documentary mentioned above. Here we are dealing with a choice in terms of research which, from the outset, extols the cross-fertilisation of different disciplines, which we are going to develop by also approaching it through the *medium* of documentary film.

Indeed, in her research, Phuong Ngoc Nguyen brings together literature, anthropology and history in her own research. At the end of the film, she also discloses the extent to which these interdisciplinary cross-fertilisations help her to move her research forward.

The help of real history researchers, as is the case with the ANR *Coolibrokers 2021-2024*, and their painstaking work in searching archives (notably Anom in Aix-En-Provence, but also in Hanoi and Ho-chi-minh-ville in this case) are essential to feed our fieldwork. We can see this in the final documentary. Cross-referencing information, or translating documents from Chinese into French or Vietnamese, for example, which is necessary for understanding the documents of the period, also involves other disciplinary skills. This interdisciplinarity is present throughout our investigation. It is all the more apparent at the end of the film when Phuong Ngoc Nguyen expresses her enthusiasm for all this cross-disciplinary work and how it has benefited her both personally and as a researcher. Making a documentary film based on this research extends this interdisciplinary approach.

The Documentary Filmmaker and Researcher, a Filmic Re-presentation

What are the reasons for using documentaries to support such project? Interdisciplinarity has something to do with it. It allows for a wealth of viewpoints, so that the complexity of the world (Morin, 1990) can be experienced through film. Documentary is both an object and a tool for research. As a tool, it accompanies the search for traces of Indochina that can still be found; as an object, it fully accompanies this investigation through its form, which is both aesthetic and rhetorical (Soulez, 2011).

Traces of Indochina and Post-colonialism

The intention in making this documentary was to investigate based on the novel, but also to attempt to bear witness to what remains of Indochina, particularly through its landscapes. Part of Vietnam still contains this, in the geography and in the behaviour of the inhabitants at times, if only when Vietnamese ride their bicycles with their pointy hats in the countryside, for example. This classic image is still very much alive but, to go beyond simple clichés, it is also the atmosphere of the place that will be present to punctuate the words of the investigation from the book.

The atmosphere of a place will thus allow the film's viewer to immerse themselves and experience Vietnam in a different way at certain moments. Under the aegis of sensory anthropology (Pink, 2009), it is the apprehension of a territory through the feeling of its atmosphere that is depicted in the film (Samurtojo & Pink, 2015). This approach, which may seem original, exists here in the context of what is called a creative documentary. This form of media (to quote Arjun Appadurai (2005) on the subject of post-colonialism) allows us to experiment with the images and sounds captured in ways other than the usual formatting of television. The question of atmosphere has already been experimented with in the series *Sortir de la carte postale*, which relates the atmosphere of tourist sites through their daily life. Several articles testify to their reception (Cyrulnik, 2020, 2022, and several to be published in 2024), the strength of its immersion and the critical spirit it arouses in the viewer (Cyrulnik, 2015). This aesthetic commitment to atmosphere makes documentary a genre that is suited to a sensitive approach to Vietnam. It also affirms this film genre as an alternative to the images usually offered in the media.

Does this film genre reveal a gendered practice? Does the choice of a sensitive, atmospheric approach reflect a form of feminine sensitivity? Iris Brey (2021) explains that the female gaze is to be valued. In any case, the fact of proposing a sensitive point of view from the moment the documentary approach to this territory is chosen (Samurtojo & Pink, 2019; Cyrulnik, 2017) affirms a desire to approach a reality, differently. It is this question of the *Other* that Donna Haraway (2007) also asserts in her cyborg manifesto. Here too, questions of gender and racism (post-colonialism) are linked.

The aim of the documentary is to offer a filmic representation of Vietnam that bears witness to the research, the novel, but also to the traces of Indochina in present-day Vietnam. We are still in the cultural melting pot we have already mentioned. The series of short documentaries entitled *Sortir de la carte postale* follows on from two previous series: one entitled *Habiter le territoire* about housing estates in the South of France (places where people from previously colonised territories often live on a daily basis) filmed over a period of fifteen years; and another entitled *Les traces Algériennes* about the intimate links between France and Algeria, treated in a contemporary way. The film *La Belle d'occident, En-quête de l'Indochine d'hier et d'aujourd'hui* is a kind of extension of these films through the prism of post-colonialism.

The Creative Documentary as Re-presentation

The form of the creative documentary allows a form of freedom, if only through the choice of recounting the atmosphere to punctuate the moments of investigation. The artistic dimension of the creative documentary is an asset here. This is reminiscent of Arjun Appadurai's (2005) questioning of audio-visual forms in the light of post-colonialism. The choice of this artistic form which bears witness to a reality seems appropriate to this subject. The form is in keeping with the substance of the research.

This artistic dimension also makes it possible to question in a different way the link between the fiction of the novel and the documentary form of the film, which captures images and sounds from reality to capture the atmosphere. In this respect, the documentary is a filmic representation of Vietnam. Daniel Bounoux (2006) explains that what is important is the “re” in “representation” (p. 53), because it allows us to stand back, to distance ourselves from the subject and the images we see. Once again, the form is consistent with the content.

The choice of creative documentary was born on the fact that it favours a form of popularisation of research that is transformed into knowledge (Niney, 2000 & 2002) through this sensitive approach: the strength of the atmosphere of the distant country and the empathy generated by immersion in Phuong Ngoc Nguyen’s research are experienced by the viewer in a fully phenomenological approach. This is by no means a caricature of exoticism, but rather an experience of a distant country that is shared with the viewer in the tradition of Victor Segalen (2018) who, as early as in 1918, valued difference when speaking of *exotes*. These phenomenological games at different levels are part of the point of view asserted by a director making a film. In this way, the whole process of creating a documentary is questioned.

The Documentary Creation Process

The process of creating a documentary is re-examined on several levels. The way in which a territory is represented is a real research question, which was also the subject of my HDR entitled “Representing the territory, filming the housing estate” (2017), and based more specifically on fifteen years of films made in housing estates. The question of how to represent a territory through documentary film arises from areas close to home in France that are linked to distant countries, linked to immigration, as well as those that are further away, such as Vietnam. In all cases, they are steeped in history and evoke an elsewhere. Testifying for a territory therefore calls for geographical references, but also sociological and cinematographic ones in our case.

But to look at this film in detail, the creative process is analysed in terms of what Pierre Paillé and Alex Mucchielli (2005) have called the *situational stages*: preparation, filming, editing, screening and the debate that follows.

Preparation. For this film, production was granted by CNRS Images, ANR, the Ministry of Culture and UMR Prism, I am associated with. This means that a grant application had to be drawn up beforehand in order to obtain the CNRS Images funding, but they didn’t have to describe in detail everything that was going to be filmed, as is now the case in France with all the funding bodies for creative documentaries. As it was not possible to do any location scouting in Vietnam beforehand, the fact that the funding was granted without the usual cumbersome paperwork meant that I was able to return to a spontaneity at the time of filming that was a real pleasure as well as a necessity, given that I didn’t know the country. This production situation encouraged an openness to the world, required a sharp eye, and made filming a particularly intense moment, rich in experience, which should be felt by the viewer. This way of filming should be logical for a documentary, but applying for funding has become such a cumbersome stage in France that there is a risk too losing the spontaneity. Here, in any case, it was all about discovery.

Having said that, while it is now more the norm in France to think about the film beforehand in order to prepare it properly (which was nevertheless the case, even if it wasn’t as thorough as usual, but perhaps that’s more accurate in terms of capturing a

reality...), the novel was a solid foundation on which to envisage the film's narrative. There was never any question of transposing the novel into fiction, but rather of using the novel as the basis for an investigation. This basis determined the places where we had to go: Verdun and Thann in France, Danang (called Tourane in colonial times) which was the port where the soldier embarked for France, Tam Ky his village, and so on. From these places, a storyline took shape. The beginnings of a narrative were emerging.

Filming. The strength of the documentary is that it captures everything that resonates with the film's intentions (during preparation): to help people understand the research and capture traces of Indochina, while at the same time bearing witness to contemporary Vietnam.

The comprehensive approach (Winkin, 2001; Paillé & Mucchielli, 2005), which is often a determining factor in making a documentary, combined with participant observation as a method (Winkin, 2001; Paillé & Mucchielli, 2005), was put to the test. Even more so when you don't speak the language. The question of the documentary method (Cyrułnik, 2018) must be reinvented for each film, but this was even more the case for this one. So, when we managed to find the journalist who had published a document testifying the involvement of Annamite soldiers during the First World War in Tam Ky, I was able to film the joy and excitement of this meeting, and I also understood what the present people were talking about as it was the subject of this trip, but I did not understand the words. A voice-over from the researcher was therefore necessary to explain what was going on in the images. Added to this was the noise level, which is sometimes very high in Vietnamese cities, making it impossible to capture more discreet but significant sounds. The voice-over was an essential part of the film: whether it was captured in a research situation or filmed in front of the camera to recount events. The conditions of filming in the field imposed a form of narration that became more and more established as filming progressed. So, the editing was always reinventing itself at the time of filming, as this example shows.

Editing. Faced with these twists and turns, which always aim at adapting the film to the realities that to be captured, the editing of the film therefore took shape. The questions to ask were often: How, using rushes, to (re)examine what links the author to his desire for a film? How can we identify, experience, distance ourselves from what the images reveal? These legitimate questions testify to the *re* of *representation* which requires us to always take a step back: here to ask ourselves how to make the spectator feel the issues and what was happening. It is not about making a travel film that could be a caricature for tourists, but about making a research approach sensitive, while not concealing the fact that it's in such a strong country.

The narration asserts itself at a decisive moment of rewriting that is editing. What we want the film to say must be precise. In the context of a documentary, what can or does want it to testify? It is necessary to answer these questions in order to compose the film's narrative.

The choice to deal with the atmosphere of the place must also punctuate the moments of more intense interactions. This choice of atmosphere must be transcribed here. Jean-Marie Schaeffer (1999) insisted on the importance of action as a driving force of perceptual immersion when watching a film; here immersion must also exist through these moments experienced by the spectator through the atmosphere that a place carry. If it is highlighted at the beginning of the film to set up a situation and bring the viewer into the socio-technical system (Cyrułnik & Zénouda, 2014) of the film, this work on the atmosphere gives a rhythm throughout it.

The screening and the debate that follows. For this film, the screening and the debate that follows in Vietnam and France cannot yet be analysed since it has just been finished. But experience with films previously made show that the process of phenomenological reformulations and syntheses of experience (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2005) contributes to a better understanding and apprehension of the situation filmed, thus bringing together a community of spectators who have experienced the strength of experience (Cyrułnik, 2015).

Interdisciplinarity

We see, through all these considerations, to what extent interdisciplinarity exists at the level of the film, since the spectator will be able to acquire knowledge at different levels. From a literary point of view, the novel bears witness to an era and innovative behaviours, notably thanks to the romantic, social and/or political commitment of the young French woman and the Annamite soldier. From a literary point of view again, the novelist's commitment is also present through her Western-style narration and her criticism of society, colonial or not. From a historical point of view, the documentary also makes us feel what remains of Indochina in Vietnam, particularly through its landscapes; and the film also recounts highlights of the investigation carried out, and even discoveries such as the confrontation with Indochinese tombs in France. From a political point of view, colonization is also questioned. From a cinematographic point of view, the creative documentary offers itself as a method, a tool, to develop all of this. And from an epistemological point of view, historical research in cinematographic research allows us to distance ourselves from all of this. Interdisciplinarity therefore poses a possibility of questioning research epistemologically. And this interdisciplinarity which is important to us here also promotes a better understanding of Vietnam today.

Conclusion

This text and this documentary ultimately offer the possibility of a demonstration which develops with themes that take shape. From the evolution of women's rights arise over a century to that of the country Vietnam is now, the presentation of several themes has made it possible to better understand this country. It is a start but in no way a means to understand everything. The educational dimension of the documentary is also revealed. From the story in the novel, the way of telling it by the novelist, the investigation carried out by the researcher to another form of narration through the documentary, the apprehension of the history of Vietnam is experienced by the spectator in a sensitive way.

The documentary involves the viewer, too. Donna Haraway, already mentioned a committed woman, claims:

I think sight can be remade for the activists and advocates engaged in fitting political filters to see the world in the hues offered, green, and ultraviolet, i.e., from the perspectives of a still possible socialism, feminist and anti-racist environmentalism, and science for the people. (Haraway, 1991, p. 64)

The commitment becomes political, anti-racist and feminist. And, even feminine sensitivity, which is sometimes mocked, we can say with a smile is assumed here even in

the treatment of the atmosphere (Samurtojo & Pink, 2019). Sensory anthropology (Pink, 2009) is part of this form of creative documentary. Moreover, the choice of the atmosphere of the place as a way to transcribe the atmosphere of Vietnam is also part of an ecological approach, to the extent that it is the landscapes which are valued. This film therefore presents itself as a cinematographic gesture which is justified in relation to the subject addressed at the level of the key words at the beginning of the text: “post-colonialism”, “feminism” and “ecology”. Words that developed at the same time of the beginning of the 20th century. The form (of the creative documentary) is consistent with the content (evoked in the novel).

But more than a sensitive approach and a creative documentary, we could speak of a research film on all the levels already mentioned. It is a way of combining form with substance, taking on both an artistic and a scientific dimension. The question then becomes: *What is a research film?* This definition could revive an approach that is as much rhetorical as it is aesthetic. New research questions are emerging in cinema as well as in information and communication sciences, since the aim is to examine the human interactions involved. Making a documentary as part of this research opens up yet another disciplinary field for analysis. Can we consider that this cinematographic genre, the research film, is becoming a real scientific support? This experiment would tend to prove it. Other filmic, human and scientific experiments that take advantage of the contribution made by the Art praised by John Dewey (1934) have yet to be invented.

References

- Agamben, G. (2007). *Qu'est-ce qu'un dispositif?* Rivages Poche, Petite Bibliothèque. ISBN: 978-2-7436-2868-0
- Appadurai, A. (2005). *Après le colonialisme – les conséquences culturelles de la globalisation*. Petite Bibliothèque Payot / Rivages.
- Bougnoux, D. (2006). *La crise de la représentation*. Ed. La découverte.
- Brey, I. (2021). *Le regard féminin, une révolution à l'écran*. Points.
- Cyrulnik, N. (director) (2023). *La belle d'occident, en quête de l'Indochine d'hier et d'aujourd'hui*. La compagnie des Embruns (prod.).
- Cyrulnik, N. (2022). To identify the evolution of tourism practices in a sensitive way through documentary. In *Urban Tourism, viral Society and the impact of the covid-19 Pandemic*, (pp. 538-555). IGI Global. <https://www.igi-global.com/chapter/to-identify-the-evolution-of-tourism-practices-in-a-sensitive-way-through-documentary/311992>
- Cyrulnik, N. (2020). Documentary narrative for a new understanding of a public space, *Revista Lusófona de Estudos Culturais / Lusophone Journal of Cultural Studies*, 7(1), 227 -241.
- Cyrulnik, N. (2017). «Représenter le territoire, filmer la cité», Habilitation à Diriger des Recherches. In Alain Kiyindou garant, Université de Bordeaux - Montaigne. Laboratoire MICA, HDR soutenue le 06, novembre.
- Cyrulnik, N. (2015). Le documentaire, un espace de liberté pour une nouvelle communauté. *Revue Française des Sciences de l'Information et de la Communication* (7), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/rfsic.1744>
- Cyrulnik, N. (director) (2023). *La belle d'occident, en quête de l'Indochine d'hier et d'aujourd'hui*. La compagnie des Embruns (prod.).
- Cyrulnik, N. & Zenouda, H. (coord.). (2014). La place des dispositifs sociotechniques d'information et de communication (DISTIC) dans les différentes situations de

- recherche. In *Les Cahiers de la Sfsic* (10), 131-224.
- Cyrulnik, N. (2008). «Représenter le monde pour agir avec lui, la méthode du documentaire de création». Thèse sous la direction de Philippe Dumas et Franck Renucci. Université du Sud- Toulon- Var. Laboratoire I3M.
- Dewey, J. (1934). *L'art comme expérience*. Coll. Folio Essais, Gallimard.
- Fanon, F. (1952). *Peau noire, masques blancs*. Essais.
- Guynn W. (2001). *Un cinéma de Non-fiction, Le documentaire classique à l'épreuve de la théorie*. trad. Publications de l'Université de Provence.
- Haraway, D. (2007). Manifeste cyborg: science, technologie et féminisme socialiste à la fin du XXe siècle. In Haraway D., *Manifeste cyborg et autres essais: sciences – fictions – feminisms* (pp. 29-92). Exils éditeurs.
- Haraway, D. (1991). The Promises of Monsters – A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others. In Grossberg, L., Nelson, C. & Treichler, P.A. (Eds.) *Cultural Studies* (pp. 295-336). Routledge.
- Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa, (1927). *La belle d'Occident*. Decrescenzo éditeurs
- Le Failler, P. (2013). «À l'origine de l'anthropologie au Vietnam. Recherche sur les auteurs de la première moitié du xx^e siècle, Nguyen Phuong Ngoc». In *Moussons* (21) (pp. 163-166).
- Lioult, J. L. (2004). *A l'enseigne du réel, penser le documentaire*. Publications de l'Université de Provence.
- Morin, E. (1990). *Introduction à la pensée complexe*. Le Seuil.
- Nguyen, P. N. (2012). *À l'origine de l'anthropologie au Vietnam. Recherche sur les auteurs de la première moitié du xx^e siècle*. PUP, coll. «Sociétés contemporaines asiatiques».
- Nguyen, P. N. (2023). *Littérature en quóc ngữ*. <https://heritage.bnf.fr/france-vietnam/fr/litterature-quoc-ngu-article>
- Niney, F. (2000). *L'épreuve du réel à l'écran. Essai sur le principe de réalité documentaire*. De Boeck Université.
- Niney, F. (2002). *La poétique documentaire comme forme de connaissance*. États généraux du film documentaire.
http://www.lussasdoc.com/etatsgeneraux/2002/sem_poetique.php4
- Paquot, T. (2020). *L'Amérique verte, portraits d'amoureux de la nature*, Éditions Terre urbaine.
- Paillé P. & Mucchielli A. (2005). *L'analyse qualitative en sciences humaines et sociales*. A. Colin.
- Pink, S. (2009). *Doing sensory ethnography* [en ligne]. Sage. ISBN 978-1-4129-4802-9.
- Samurtojo, S. & Pink, S. (2019). *Atmospheres and the experiential world, theory and methods - ambiances, atmospheres and sensory experiences of spaces*. Routledge.
- Schaeffer, J.M. (1999). *Pourquoi la fiction?* Le Seuil.
- Segalen, V. (2018). *Essai sur l'exotisme*. Biblio essais, le livre de poche.
- Soulez G. (2011). *Quand le film nous parle, Rhétorique, Cinéma, télévision*. PUF, Coll. Lignes d'art.
- Stora, B. (2012). *Voyages en postcolonies*. Stock.
- Winkin, Y. (2001). *Anthropologie de la communication – de la théorie au terrain*. Le Seuil.
- Wolton, D. (2003). *L'autre mondialisation*. Flammarion.