

FILM REVIEWS

Kim's Story

The Road from Vietnam

DIRECTED BY SHELLY SAYWELL
 NEW YORK:
 FIRST RUN/ICARUS FILMS
 153 WAVERLY PLACE
 NEW YORK, NY 10014
 212-727-1711
 48 MINUTES

K*im's Story: The Road from Vietnam* is a moving exploration of the human cost of war. It is sufficiently free of cant and broad enough in focus to be of use in a variety of classroom settings, though it will prove most useful for courses at the secondary level and above that address the Second Indochina War or examine the relationship between women and war. The film opens with a graphic documentation of an air strike on a village in Vietnam west of Saigon in 1972. The montage



South Vietnamese forces follow terrified children fleeing down Route 1, near Trang Bang, South Vietnam, June 8, 1972 after an accidental aerial napalm strike. Girl at center, Phan Thi Kim Phuc had ripped off her burning clothes.

Photo by Huynh Cong "Nick" Ut, courtesy of First Run/Icarus Films.

resolves into an image of a nine-year-old girl emerging from the flames that have already consumed other members of her family. She is running down a road, crying. Napalm has burnt off her clothes and much of her flesh. The girl is Kim Phuc, and a still photograph taken of her that day won combat photographer Nick Ut a Pulitzer Prize.

The film's depiction of the devastation wrought by the air strike and the disinterest in Kim's fate displayed by harried Vietnamese

officials in the aftermath of the attack leaves no doubt as to the appropriateness of the status of Ut's photograph as an icon of the American anti-Vietnam War movement. This picture seemed to say that, howsoever noble a cause was America's effort to save the Vietnamese from communism, it was burning their bodies, destroying their families, and eradicating their culture by means as cruel and as certain as any that could be employed by Stalinist apparachiks. Ut's photo-

graph compelled the late Dr. Benjamin Spock, America's best-known pediatrician and anti-war advocate, to redouble his efforts to stop the Vietnam War.

Yet, *Kim's Story* is anything but a critique of America's longest war. It abruptly shifts from Kim's victimization at the hands of the forces of the Right to her victimization by the forces of the Left. It demonstrates that after the war was over, a slowly recovering Kim was made a poster-child for the new Socialist Republic of Vietnam's campaign to win broader international acceptance. Her government forced her against her will to move from her rural home to the city of Tay Ninh to be more accessible to Western reporters.

She was even taken away from her school to give interviews to journalists, who inevitably became sensitive to her exploitation. If the film is rather heavy-handed in this section (after all, the SRV fulfilled Kim's postwar dream of becoming a doctor by sending her to medical school in Cuba), it does not gloss over

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Kim's subsequent struggles as a defector and a penniless Asian immigrant in capitalist Canada.

Having established that in war there are no winners and losers, only victims, the film examines Kim's emergence as an angel of peace and a healer of hearts and minds shattered not only by her war, but all wars. The film concludes dramatically with her visit to the national Vietnam Veteran's Memorial in Washington, D.C. and her reunion with an American soldier who worked with the Republic of Vietnam's Air Force, who told her that he personally called down the fire and resultant pain from which Kim still suffers.

This advisor, Jim Plummer, explained to Kim that he had sought and received multiple confirmations from local Vietnamese officials that Kim's village was abandoned. The village was not even the target, which was a bunker to its front. Yet, he was consumed by guilt from the moment he saw Kim's photograph (in the Army's newspaper, *Stars and Stripes*) the day after the air strike he believed he ordered.

Plummer maintains that this incident may have played a role in his subsequent plunge into that vortex of alcoholism and social isolation that is not universal, but also not uncommon, among veterans of all sides in that war. Like Kim, Plummer was able to channel his pain into a devotion to a higher calling, in this case literally; he became a minister of God. Yet, his relief upon receiving Kim's gestures of forgiveness and comradeship at their first meeting is palpable.

As a piece of documentary filmmaking, *Kim's Story* is inferior in many respects to an American Broadcasting Company's special report distributed nationally to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of Nick Ut's photograph. The ABC program has a



Phan Thi Kim Phuc
Photo courtesy of First Run/Icarus Films.

fuller historical frame, a clearer narrative line, superior production values, and a more fulsome treatment of Kim's reunion with Plummer. However, *Kim's Story* is a more personal account, and its human touch may render it a superior selection for classroom use.

In one scene, Kim is shown addressing students who are visibly shaken by her testimony as a witness to war. This is sure to strike a chord among students viewing the film, particularly those cynics among them that might be unmoved by the ABC report's didacticism. The challenge to instructors is to turn the film's personal and emotional material into discussions not merely of the cost of war, but of the complexity of its causes and impact. *Kim's Story* possesses enough nuances of its own to ensure that this task will be an easy one. ■

Marc Gilbert

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Confucianism— The Wisdom of Faith Series

AN INTERVIEW OF HUSTON SMITH BY BILL MOYERS
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Huston Smith has said, "Trying to understand the human story without religion would be like trying to explain smoke without fire." Smith is interviewed in the film, *Confucianism*, by Bill Moyers for the series, *The Wisdom of Faith* which was first shown on public television in 1996. Smith's look at the Chinese view of the universe is not only concerned with Confucianism but also Taoism and Buddhism. Since philo-

sophical discussions can be at times amorphous, the film also touches on Smith's practice of Hatha Yoga and the viewpoints of the people in South Asia.

This documentary interview is not a good introductory survey about the religions of Asia but rather an excellent supplement to be used after a preliminary understanding of the Asian belief structures is in place.

Huston Smith first came to wide notoriety in 1958 after writ-

VIET NAM Face to Face



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