

A synopsis of the documentary regret to inform essay



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“ Our deaths are not ours they are yours; they will mean what you make them. ”—Regret to Inform “ The terrible price of that nobility is one that nobody should have to pay”—Barbara Sonneborn In 1968, the director Barbara Sonneborn was informed that her husband, Jeff Gurvitz, had been killed in a mortar attack in Vietnam. The words “ We regret to inform you” appeared on the telegram, and the message arrived on her 24th birthday. Sonneborn is the director, writer, and producer of the notable documentary film Regret to Inform.

Although she remarried and has a lovely new life, she was haunted by the lost of her beloved husband and had strong, begrudging feelings about the war. After twenty years, on the date of Jeff’s death anniversary, she decided to follow her ex-husband’s footsteps in Vietnam and film a documentary about the influence of the Vietnam War on American and Vietnamese women. Through the film, the memory of the loss is relived by her again. This film was an Academy Award nominee in 1998, and won the Independent Spirit Award in 1999. It also won Best Director, Best Cinematography, and Feature Documentary awards at the Sundance Film Festival in 1999, and several others prestigious awards.

1 The Vietnam War, also known as the Second Indo-China War, is also called the American War by the Vietnamese. It had its beginnings in 1957, subsequent escalation in 1960, and finally ended in 1975. The war was fought between the North Vietnamese government and US-supported South Vietnam. It concluded with the defeat and dissolution of South Vietnam. A total of 1, 230, 000 Vietnamese died in the conflict, and 330, 000 people were reported missing.

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On the American side, a total of 58, 209 Americans died, and about 2, 000 American were missing in action and never accounted for. ² A critic from the New York Times Magazine stated, “ Every documentary film has an agenda, and the interviews that make up the bulk of Regret to Inform add up to a damning indictment of war in general and in particular the Vietnam War, which it portrays (without actually coming out and saying it) as a disastrous miscalculation. ³ Elsewhere, Anthony McCosham wrote of Regret to Inform: “ A common complaint about filmic representations of the Vietnam war, particularly those produced in Hollywood, is that the films tend to focus too narrowly on the personal relationships of the characters involved, ignoring not only the political context of the war but also the viewpoint of its Vietnamese participants. ” ⁴ McCosham criticized commercial films of the Vietnamese War without reservation, and at the same time he pointed out that Regret to inform presented a key point, the women’s point of view. Moreover, Lindsay Anderson commented that Regret to Inform shows the personal truth about war, and one comes away with the conviction that the only way to really understand war is on this personal, experiential level.

No one who really knows this truth can ever mouth platitudes about glory and honor in war again, or advocate the necessity of war without a grave and conscientious acknowledgment of its devastating cost. ⁵ This critique enhances Regret to Inform’s argument and appeal against the war. In other words, the commentator also provides a sincere advice for the people who have ever been to the war because only the people who really came through from the war can really understand its destructive influence. Sonneborn’s Regret to Inform is a documentary that argues against war by presenting the

personal stories and grief experienced by women on both sides of the conflict. She focuses on women, unlike so many other war films, and provides a uniquely feminist take on the Vietnam War.

She effectively employs interviews, letters home, Jeff's notification, Jeff's reflection, music, and historical portraits to convince the audiences to rethink their support of war. In the beginning of *Regret to Inform*, Sonneborn introduced herself to the viewers and gives the reason for her journey to Vietnam. She wondered how and where did her husband died; therefore, she decided to find out the truth by herself. During the journey, she also interviewed many war widows who were influenced by the war and shared the same experienced. The interview is one of the key elements of this film, and those heart-wrenching stories bring the audience to re-inspect the war and find no difference in the pain experienced by both sides' war widows.

For example, Xuan Ngoc, a war victim and the director's translator, recalled the bombing of her village in South Vietnam when she was 14. She witnessed her 5-years-old cousin being shot to death by an American soldier when he went out from their hiding place in search for water. During the war, she also witnessed her neighbor dying without helping him. She also took her girl friend's food in order to live since her friend was seriously injured.

Terrifyingly, during the war she had to decide who was going to live or die.

On screen she was choking up and tearful when she spewed out those bitter memories. Then, she continued stating that she fled from her village and survived for a time by prostituting herself to American soldiers sometimes half-a dozen a night. Some of them were just yelling at her, crying in front of

her, and sometimes hitting her. Subsequently, she explained that at that time she was only 14 years old and why she had to face that choice.

The director did not use simulation and dramatic narration to present the Vietnam War; instead, she revealed the physiological harm and plight on the war widows by interviewing from female standpoint. From Xuan Ngoc's facial express and statement, the viewers can understand she is still suffering for those memories after the war ended. She revealed that she was prostituting herself in order to earn money and live; indeed, she also stated that she used marijuana a lot otherwise she could not have taken off her clothing in front of strangers. Asian culture is conservative about sex, and women are told that they should not have sex before they marry. Therefore, Xuan Ngoc was not only facing physiological suffering but also conflicts with her moral code.

In addition, she was forced to decide who would live and die, which is against all human morality since she wanted to stay alive. Xauan Ngoc asks how we could have allowed such conditions to occur why we did not try to prevent it. Here, the viewers can see the interviewee's emotional and mental anguish. Above all, from her expression, Xuan Ngoc challenges the audience so they can rethink about their support of the war. In another interview, we meet one American widow who said her husband left her a note to tell her that he loved her so much, but he could not take the flashbacks anymore, and then he went into garage one day and shot himself after he returned from the war.

Sorrowfully, in another interview, a Vietnamese widow relates how she watched nine members of her family herded out and killed. Many Vietnamese women revealed the same experiences that during the war they were afraid of being raped, so they hid themselves in order to avoid the danger. Another Vietnamese woman stated, " If you weren't dead, you weren't safe. Everything that moved was murdered.

" 6 Vietnamese women revealed some ruthless torture at the hands of South Vietnamese and American soldiers not only for men but also for women. In addition, both side's children questioned their mothers why their fathers had not come home yet. By facing those painful situations, the widows expressed their hopeless and powerless feelings toward the war. The widows of both sides were given a fair voice to express their feeling and thoughts about the war. Many widows suffer for the war even after the war.

There have been many movies that tried to investigate the Vietnam War, but most of them were made by marketing purpose since they are exciting and interesting. However, they are fiction after all. In *Regret to Inform*, there were no scenes of heroic deeds and no citation for soldiers' bravery, only thing the presentation of the widows' heartbreaking experiences. Indeed, even though women may not have a major role in the battlefield those who lost their families or suffered during the war were as profoundly influenced by the war as the men were.

Xuan Ngoc concluded that she knows she is a good person. Because if she had another choice, then she would not have done what she did. From those statements and recollections, the movie uncovers the truth of the war and

provides the audiences another angle on the war, and thus they could resist the war. Gadamer writes, " Language is the universal medium in which understanding occurs.

Understanding occurs in interpreting. " 7 Through the interviews, the widows' descriptions of truth help the audience interpret the war, and by revealing their own wounds, the audience gains a better understanding of how the war forces people to do things they normally would not do. Their stories keep those important memories alive. " Truth" is always more elusive than we think it is. When seeing the widows' struggles, the audience would objectively realize that deep grief caused by the war happened to both Americans and Vietnamese. In the film, some American widows questioned the justification of the war and did not understand the necessity of war since those people did not threaten their country.

They also stated that they do not consider their husbands to be murderers, but at the same time people need to look at it for what it is and it is murder. From the question of justification, the viewers would start to think about " is the war justifiable? " Indeed, from those information the audience would realize that the war is an illegal activity because it would only take innocent lives, cause people' suffering, and test human moralities. Above all, once the viewers become aware that an American widows and the director could listen, interview, and truly record those Vietnamese widows' voice and not treat them as enemies, they would be deeply moved and feel sorry for the victims. Fairly reporting both sides' dilemmas, Sonneborn used those interview as a vehicle to move the audiences into the forgotten history and re-interpret the psychological impact for war victims.

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The interviews also increase this film's reliability, validity, and persuasiveness. In addition to the interviews, Sonneborn used much different scenes as the evidence to argue and reveal the influence of the war such as letters home from both sides, Sonneborn's husband's notification, and the tape which records Jeff's voice to reveal the brutality of war. Due to the war, most of women were using mail to communicate with their husbands, and through the mail they would know if they husbands were still alive.

Sonneborn presents letters home through scenes to the audience, and these letters contain many moving sentences to express their feelings of loving and missing family members such as, I love you or I miss you. These letters were written in the Vietnamese language and English, and these scenes again demonstrate that even though Americans and Vietnamese have different races and cultural backgrounds, their sufferings and grief were all the same. Also, both sides' victims loved their husbands and families profoundly; indeed, this love no difference on either side.

Similarly, the director offered her husband's notification in the film and showed the points where gunfire entered Jeff's body. By seeing the scene, the viewers could imagine what it looks like and how it feels when someone you love is killed by war. " Mutilated", " blast damage fractures", and several other words appear on the notification, and those words present a concept for the viewers about what kind of price they would have to pay once the war occurs. Moreover, Sonneborn provides us with an opportunity to hear Jeff in his own words, when she plays an audio cassette he recorded. She was able to bring herself to play a tape that arrived in the mail shortly after twenty years of Jeff's death.

Jeff reflects, " I feel I were a bystander at my own life, calmly watching myself to things that I never expected or desired to. " He felt suffering toward to the war because he might have to do something that he did not want to do, perhaps burying dead bodies or killing people. During this scene, the voice was along with Vietnamese landscape to present Jeff's testimony. From the tape, he expressed his feeling to Sonneborn, and it is clean that he was suffering for his moral code.

It exactly pointed out that the soldiers feeling go unsaid. The scenes in the film provide the audience a chance to look at the war from different perspectives, and the sound effects enhance the movie's persuasiveness and help people to engage in their sorrowful stories and experiences. In fact, music is an inseparable element to express and emphasize the film's main idea. In *Regret to Inform*, a lot of string and percussion instruments were used to create a sorrowful atmosphere that would help the viewers engage with this film emotionally.

The music plays an important role in portraying the tragic truth of the war, and the composer, Todd Boekelheide, combined numerous Vietnamese instruments with Western instrumentation. ⁸ Otherwise, the directors also uses Vietnamese folk songs and ambient noise in the film. The Vietnamese folk songs were used throughout the whole movie to express the pain of losing their beloved ones. Also, the director used ambient noise to present along with different portraits to the audience such as noise of train or Vietnamese women's chatting voice.

Therefore the audiences would feel like that they had experiencing the same trip along with the director. Moreover, string instruments, particularly the viola and cello, produced a variety of sounds with passionate vibrato and glissando. For instance, when the women recalled the time that first they met their husbands, the cellos played the dance-like duet and expressed their happy times together through repetitious simple melodies. In contrast to that, when women recollected the unpleasant memories of the war, then the instrumentation changed. During this time, the gong joined to announce the tragedy.

Most melodies were presented along with historical, responsive photographs with a strong musical track that combines traditional Vietnamese songs and the instrumentation. All of these musical elements create the feeling of catastrophe and making the movie more touching; therefore, even after the film the viewers would still feel the widow's pain and grief. It is obvious that Sonneborn uses music to persuade. Further, the music also opens a space for the audience quietly to catch on different messages from the film.

Indeed, the musical track created a space for people to imagine if they were in those victims' shoes and engaged the audience in their bitter memories.

Additionally, Sonneborn uses many historical, cruel portraits to show how war really is. Many different pictures were presented to the audiences, such as photos of young dead children's bodies, American soldiers searching for innocent civilians, and U. S. soldiers tossing bombs from airplanes. In fact, she employs many photographs of American soldiers spraying chemical defoliants in the South Vietnam, and these chemicals continue to change the

landscape, cause diseases and birth defects, and poison the food chain in Vietnam.

Abusing the use of defoliants hurt not only Vietnamese but also American soldiers. One American widow revealed that her husband suffered for seven years and declined in health. Eventually, he died from multiple cancers after he returned from the war. Besides, some of the images presented many hopeless children bloody and crying. Some children were sitting on the ground around with defenseless innocent eyes. Some children were hurt with blood, and some of them were being hold by the Vietnamese women or soldiers.

Those pictures showed most of the victims as children and women. In addition, photos of U. S. soldiers tossing the bombs from the airplanes in addition to the number of bombs are shocking.

Since bombs lead to huge fatality, many innocent people were harmed. Some photographs are presented in black and white and some are in color, and the similarity of these photos shows the afflictive situation of the war, which is very difficult for the audience to imagine. At the same time, it is an effective way to evoke the viewers' great sympathy for those children and women. Those pictures were presented along the music, and those pictures become a language that enables the audiences to perceive and interpret the war. By those portraits, the audiences realize these war victims' hardships and heartaches that resulted from the war.

Sonneborn manipulates her thoughts effectively by employing interviews, letters home, Jeff's notification, Jeff's reflection, music, and historical, <https://assignbuster.com/a-synopsis-of-the-documentary-regret-to-inform-essay/>

responsive photographs to convince the audience, to move them to believe her antiwar concept, and to act on that opinion. This documentary highlights the ruthless truth of the war, reports widow's plights, and tells us how the war change people's lives thereafter. In fact, the director did not drastically express antiwar concepts in the film, but the audiences still could detect the metaphor of negative feeling of the war. Most importantly, this film points no fingers at specific policymakers. This film does ask question that foreground the war not as an inevitable event, but a conflict that resulted from policies centered around of inhuman and callous ideologies.

The film left us to wonder if the war would only result people's anguish, then why people choose to do so. This film is accessible and engages people to respond the war concept that the film spoke to us in powerful way. Baker stated, " We must listen closely to men and women who became both the victims and the perpetrators of the war, if we want to learn something real about this particular conflict, something real about the human spirit, something real about ourselves. 9 The film talks back to the people who support the war, and it shows both widows' gut-wrenching pain thought its factual interviews within personal narratives and memories, evidence, sorrowful music, and stunning historical photographs.

However, the film is a great lesson to those people who supported in the war, and they should know better that there is no winning when it comes to war. In fact, this documentary is not about one side or the other. This documentary clearly points out that the war is the really enemy. Hopefully, people will start to heed the lectures of the dead and endeavor to cease war that makes no light injury.

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