

# THE FLIGHT

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ABSTRACT</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>DESCRIPTION OF THE CONTENT (HISTORICAL &amp; SOCIAL)</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>THE VIETNAM WAR</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>OPERATION BABYLIFT</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>CANADA’S INVOLVEMENT</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>THE ORPHANS</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>DOCUMENTARY RELEVANCE</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>CHALLENGES AND CONCERNS</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>INFLUENCES</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>METHODS</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>CRITICAL ANALYSIS</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>WORKS CITED</b>	<b>28</b>

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the Canadian operated flight that evacuated a group of Vietnamese children from Saigon during the final days of the Vietnam War (April, 1975) in what became known as “Operation Babylift”. These children were flown from Saigon to Hong Kong, and then eventually to Toronto, Canada. Adopted by local families many of these children came with no records. These children eventually reconnected and had a reunion 30 years later. Operation Babylift and the people who were affected are the main focus of my final Masters Research Project (MRP) which was formulated into a 20-minute documentary film. The focus for the film was to explore the lives of three of the orphans, shed some light on the significance of the flights, and also discuss the lack of proper documentation practices at the time. Controversy surrounded Operation Babylift and its motivations and continues to this day

I first began to explore and study this subject in September of 2015 after meeting with one of the orphans who was flown to Canada as part of the Canadian efforts in the Operation Babylift project. Trent Kilner and his story fascinated me. The Vietnam war was never a topic of study in school nor was I aware how orphans were flown to Canada out of Vietnam in the last days of the war. It was Trent’s story that stimulated the concept to create a documentary to share and educate others on this subject. The exploration of how our society and culture address foreign refugees and the process of adopting refugee children is something that is still a topic of conversation and relevant today.

During the time of Operation Babylift there was much controversy about how the Western world was handling these children. Some people saw Operation Babylift as child-napping, while others saw it as a rescue mission. The purpose of this research paper is to explore the historical, political, social and controversial events that surrounded the orphan flights,

drawing on scholarly literature, newspaper/media articles, archival footage, as well as other documentary films. I will show how this research impacted the production of the documentary and offer an analysis of the final project situating it within the wider realm of contemporary documentary film.

## INTRODUCTION

Unlike the United States, Canada was not an active participant in the Vietnam war. To this day there are many people from all countries who felt that the Americans had no right to be involved in the Vietnam war. Although Canada did not send troops to fight in the war they were engaged as peacekeepers and tried to help with diplomatic matters. The years of the Vietnam war saw much political unrest and conflict between countries who did not support the U.S. involvement in the war. In the discussions with Cliff I learned a lot about the Vietnamese War. During the war the American government became very critical of Canada for allowing draft dodgers and war resisters to immigrate to Canada and Cliff surmised that this could have been the reason that there weren't as many organized flights to Canada. I think it is important that it be acknowledged that although the Vietnam War was a colonial war with different foreign allies fighting for both sides that Canada did not ever become involved in active combat. There is so much complicated political history involving the Vietnam War that I had absolutely no knowledge about before starting this documentary that I could have researched for months and still not have learned the half of it.

At the end of the Vietnam War, which lasted roughly 20 years (1955 -1975), the United States military exercised a humanitarian mission called Operation Babylift. Operation Babylift made efforts to have Vietnamese children airlifted out of Saigon during the dying days of the

Vietnam War, before the collapse of that city in April of 1975. These babies were taken from Vietnamese orphanages and were distributed to adoptive families overseas, mostly in America, but also in Australia, Canada and Europe. This paper explores the very last orphan flight out of Vietnam, that was destined to Canada. For those children on the flight their story does not end with their adoptions by Canadian families, but continues on to the reunion of the adoptees roughly 30 years later. This specific flight and the people who were affected is the main focus of my MRP, both the film and paper. This paper discusses the historical and social context of the Vietnam War, Operation Babylift, with a main focus on the lives of these orphans and the history of the flight as found in the archives. It also considers the relevance of this thesis MRP as a documentary media project. It explores how this project addresses and challenges documentary concerns, as well as looks at the methods used in the creation of this film.

## DESCRIPTION OF THE CONTENT (HISTORICAL & SOCIAL)

### THE VIETNAM WAR

The Vietnam War started in 1955 and ended in 1975. The collapse of Saigon occurred on April 30<sup>th</sup>, 1975 and even though the fighting had ended Vietnam remained two countries with two governments. The two countries were Hanoi in the north and the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) in Saigon in the south. Vietnam would be officially reunified on July 2, 1976. The US government became involved in the Vietnam War in 1961. In 1961 South Vietnam signed a military and economic aid treaty with the United States which led to the arrival of U.S. support troops that year and the formation of the US Military Assistance Command in 1962. At the beginning of 1965, ten years into the war, the “United States began

air raids on North Vietnam and on Communist-controlled areas in the South. by 1966 there were 190,000 US troops in South Vietnam” (Vietnam War US Involvement, 2012). The initial goal of the United States was to prevent Vietnam from falling under the power of a Communist government. The War and its aftermath received a great deal of media attention during and after the war, however academic researchers of the Vietnam War rarely mention Operation Babylift, and if they do it is merely in passing. Most of the early scholarly literature about the war simply focused on Vietnam’s political and militaristic framework. While researching the war, there were many articles discussing America’s involvement, however the scholarly works frequently leave out Operation Babylift. Canada’s involvement in Operation Babylift is also missing in academic literature in the archives. The discovery that taking children out of their homeland and flying them to a foreign country has not been considered a critical topic for discussion or area of focus in academic literature is troubling.

## OPERATION BABYLIFT

Operation Babylift was a term that was used to identify flights into Vietnam during the Vietnam War to take children orphaned by the war to other countries to be adopted. This term was used to describe private and military flights sent to remove the children. Many of these flights touched down on Vietnamese runaways and were quickly loaded with babies and children before taking off for safety.

In the article *Refugees, orphans and a basket of cats: The politics of Operation Babylift*, Joshua Forkert examines the history of the Vietnam War. This article states that “as North Vietnamese troops advanced towards Saigon in early 1975, United States President Gerald Ford announced that, in conjunction with South Vietnamese officials, thousands of children who were

awaiting the completion of adoption proceedings overseas would be granted exit visas, and their movement to homes abroad would be facilitated by the US government” (Forkert, 2012, p. 427). The approval for the airlifts was made on April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1975 by US President Gerald Ford. Documentation was not thorough and numbers vary but it appears that at least three thousand children were flown to the United States and approximately one thousand three hundred children were flown to Canada, Europe and Australia” (Williams, 2002, p. 3).

Canada only had two main rescue flights from Vietnam but there were cases where social workers from Canada would arrange to bring small numbers of children out of the country. In Yen Phan’s article *"Family Ties": Operation Babylift, Transnational Adoption, and the Sentimentalism of US and Vietnam Relations (1967-2002)* the American historical context as a major factor is examined. Phan states that “when the Babylift officially ended on May 1st, it transported 2,894 Vietnamese and Cambodian children to America to be adopted into white American homes. The process was described as a humanitarian mission despite the fact that it was under the control of the US Air Force” (Phan, 2012, p. 3). Yen Phen examined the period before, during and the aftermath of the Babylift. His main focus was to examine the language that was used by the Americans during the rescue and how the media portrayed this event. He argues that the sentimental wording, such as rescue efforts, used by the Americans in the media coverage of Operation Babylift obscured purely military goals tainted by issues of racial bias. Yen Phan’s article was used to acquire historical information as well as to learn about the controversy that was going on at the time and still exists today. The idea of the white man, as “American heroes” coming into a third world, developing country to attempt a mission of saving these people is troubling because of the political reasons behind their motives.



In Kristen Lovelock's article *Intercountry Adoption as a Migratory Practice: A Comparative Analysis of Intercountry Adoption and Immigration Policy and Practice in the United States, Canada and New Zealand in the Post W.W. II Period*, (2000) she states that in "the United States, 3,267 children were adopted between 1963 and 1976, and in Canada approximately 700 children were adopted in the same period" (Lovelock, 2000, p. 924). Throughout my research I discovered that this number was hugely exaggerated. This confusion arose due to lack of record keeping and documentation that was taking place at the time of these flights. The evacuation process was not an easy one and was obstructed by the chaotic war that was taking place, which could also account for the lack of documentation of an exact number of children who were flown out of Vietnam. In many cases children would be taken from orphanages and off the streets by the military or appointed social service workers. Another theory I have is that there was no mandatory or monitored system of how these children were to be documented, accounted for, and processed for transfer. A lot of the scholarly work done on this subject is inconclusive and raises many questions as to why there was no system in place to properly record the removal of children from Vietnam.

## CANADA'S INVOLVEMENT

The article *Saving, Kidnapping, Or Something Of Both? Canada And The Vietnam/Cambodia Babylift, Spring 1975* written in 2009 by Veronica Strong-Boag and Rupa Bagga, goes into detail about Canada's involvement and the controversy that came along with taking these children out of Vietnam. Strong-Boag and Bagga discuss how Canada did not immediately take part in the orphan flights and officials were not sure how to feel about Operation Babylift. Canadians were divided and did not fully agree on the intentions of

Operation Babylift. Many questioned whether the operation was sincerely rescuing these children or if they were being taken unlawfully. Strong-Boag & Bagga state that “for some, it offered the opportunity to rescue child casualties of war and to confirm a multicultural country; for others, it constituted kidnapping and evidence of Western imperialism” (Strong-Boag & Bagga, 2009, p. 272). This notion was and still is being debated today. Was airlifting these children out of their war-torn homeland changing their fate and giving them a chance at a better life or was this just an act of the elite white man and Western imperialism treating these children as objects and doing what the West thought was best?

Canadian media outlets began to report that the “Canadian embassy had evacuated Saigon with souvenirs, luggage, and cars but had abandoned local staff” (Strong-Boag & Bagga, 2009, p. 274). Strong-Boag & Bagga noted that when people learned that the Canadian task force were only removing material goods out of Saigon, they objected and the newspapers started to print imagery of desperate Vietnamese adults and children struggling to escape Saigon. As the war continued “many Canadians remained mindful of the unmet needs of children at home, and social workers cautioned about sympathies that were difficult to sustain and children who might be better served in their own nations” (Strong-Boag & Bagga, 2009, p. 275). Canadian Social workers and government officials suggested that removing these children out of their homeland should be a last resort mission and that giving these people money and care items would be much more effective, while also avoiding robbing Vietnam of its youth. However, in the spring of 1975, Ontario announced that there would be an immediate evacuation of 500 Vietnamese orphans. There was a significant amount of interest from families all over Canada who wanted to adopt these children. In April 1975 the “immigration offices in Toronto and Ottawa were reported as keeping longer hours, armed forces aircraft went on standby, and politicians talked of

several thousand arrivals” (Strong-Boag & Bagga, 2009, p. 276). When the time came, however, far less of the initial number anticipated actually arrived in Canada. Victoria Leach, one of the Ontario adoption coordinators was one of the women responsible for bringing these children to Ontario. She was reported to have taken out 11 babies in March 1975 and “one commentator suggested that 43 girls and boys bound for Canada were flown out on Air France and Swiss Air flights. Another 34 apparently destined for the Dominion died in a highly publicized plane crash in Saigon on 4 April” (Strong-Boag & Bagga, 2009, p. 277). On the 5<sup>th</sup> of April, 61 babies were reported to have arrived in Hong Kong. These babies were then flown to Vancouver, where 8 of them stayed while the other 53 were flown to Montreal. These children consisted of “survivors of the earlier crash, and the majority originated in Cambodia rather than Vietnam. Some on this flight were assigned to Canadians in Quebec, Ontario, and New Brunswick; others were in transit to the United States, including a baby destined for the household of the LA Kings’ French Canadian goalie” (Strong-Boag & Bagga, 2009, p. 277). Many of these children to found be very ill on arrival and would require immediate hospitalization. The final flight to arrive in Toronto landed on April 13<sup>th</sup> 1975. This flight allegedly had 57 children aboard and was also accompanied by Victoria Leach. This is the flight that my MRP is based upon. Trent Kilner, Lia Pouli, and Thanh Campbell were all children aboard this flight, with Cliff Zacharias flying the plane out of Saigon to Hong Kong. The chances of additional flights occurring diminished after “a federal–provincial meeting to decide whether Air Canada should be allowed to conduct the airlift failed to materialize” (Strong-Boag & Bagga, 2009, p. 277). Research has determined that Canada only participated in two of the Operation Babylift flights, and really questioned the long and short term effects of removing these children from their native land.

## THE ORPHANS

The orphans are a big part of my documentary and I spend time focusing on three of the orphans directly, Trent, Lia, and Tahan, who were all aboard the last flight arriving in Toronto. The exact numbers of children who were a part of Operation Babylift and left Saigon in 1975 is still unknown. I became aware of the inconsistencies in the numbers of children reported who were actually flown out of Vietnam, clearly an indication of poor record keeping and the result of the chaotic nature of the mission. New information is surfacing about these flights and what became of these children after they arrived in Canada. Some of the children who were part of Operation Babylift feel that if they had not been taken out of Vietnam they would not be alive today. Some of the children who were taken out of the orphanages actually had biological parents, who had only placed their children in the orphanage for safekeeping during the war. We do know that the final count of children who were flown out of Vietnam was small and not near what was initially anticipated. According to the article written by Strong-Boag & Bagga, there were “no more than 150 Vietnamese and Cambodian youngsters” that landed in Canada in total. With the media coverage and local families aware of the children coming to Canada, these children were quickly adopted within the first few weeks after their arrival. The majority of children were very young, some as young as a couple of months and some as old as early adolescence. The children on the last flight out were made up of Cambodian and Vietnamese children, apparently from the “Families for Children orphanages in Phnom Penh and Saigon” (Strong-Boag & Bagga, 2009, p. 281). This flight was not a pre-arranged adoption flight, which means that they did not have an assigned family to go home with, so with help of newspapers, radio and television newscasts, and social workers, these young girls and boys were adopted into families all over Canada, some even going to the U.S.

These children came with little to no documentation of their identity and there was some evidence, based on physical appearance, that some of these children had white or black American fathers, making them a mixed-race group. Once these children had landed they “found their initial home in Canadian hospitals, suffering from scabies, malnutrition, and dehydration, as well as more serious conditions” (Strong-Boag & Bagga, 2009, p. 281). Once the children were healthy enough they were placed with their adoptive families. The couples who were assigned children usually had previous experience with adopting children. For example Trent’s adoptive parents had two biological children of their own, and had 10 adopted children, who were various ages and ethnicities, etc. This often made it easier for the children to adapt to their new communities as the adoptive parents knew what to expect from people welcoming their new family members. Strong-Boag & Bagga indicate that for the most part these children were placed with families that were equipped to deal with the challenges of having a child from a different ethnic background. The voices of these children did not surface until the early twenty-first century as well as the contributions from the group associated with Victoria Leach and Helen Allen. It was not until adult adoptees Trent and Thanh met and decided that if they could find each other, what could stop them from finding the rest of the orphans from their flight? The media and advancements in technology, social media and communications played a big role in reopening the accounts of Operation Babylift.

In 2005, which marked the 30th anniversary of Operation Babylift something very remarkable happened. Thanh Campbell and Trent Kilner, both originally from the Go Vap Orphanage, organized a 30th anniversary reunion in Toronto. Trent and Thanh had come into contact via a mutual connection and made it their mission to find the rest of the children on their flight. Since social media and the use of the internet was only in its early stages, the search for

their fellow flight mates involved putting advertisements in newspapers, radio and television segments, and the use of Speaker's Corner which was a popular MTV show in which people could go into a booth at the Much Music building in Toronto and post a short message. This reunion consisted of roughly 40 of the original Vietnamese children, Victoria Leach, Helen Allen, the two pilots who flew the Canadian Hercules plane, some of the nurses, the media and several of the volunteers from 1975. Cliff Zacharias was one of the pilots who attended this reunion and he was the one responsible for flying the plane out of Saigon to Hong Kong. Another reunion was held in 2006 in Oakville, Ontario.

These reunions and the process of finding each other gave the group a sense of community and belonging. Trent ended up meeting his wife, Lia Pouli, who was only five months old when she came over to Canada on the same flight. Trent and Lia both believe it was fate that they met, got married and now have three children. Thanh on the other hand was a very different case and "thirty-one years after he arrived, and owing to the publicity of the reunions, he was contacted by his birth family and spoke to his father and brothers" (Strong-Boag & Bagga, 2009, p. 282). Thanh was one of the few children who came with documentation and birth records. He learned that his mother had passed away but his father was still alive and he truly was not an orphan at all. While he was growing up he was always so curious to find out where he really came from and details about his biological family. It appears that "rescue may have been the intent of his removal from his birthplace, but his original family, who never gave up the search for him, clearly considered it closer to kidnapping" (Strong-Boag & Bagga, 2009, p. 282). In May 2009, Thanh made the trip of a lifetime to reunite with his Vietnamese family in Vietnam and has since written a book titled "Orphan 32" after the identification number he was given at the time of the flight.

Since the United States ended up becoming home to the majority of Vietnamese refugees and orphans in the 1960s and 1970s, its scholars are also beginning to produce longitudinal studies that will give more information about outcomes. As mentioned earlier in this paper, many academics and professionals were concerned about the long term effects these children may face by being taken from their homeland and adopted into a foreign culture. Strong-Boag & Bagga discuss briefly how some of the early research that was conducted suggests that many of these children feel a strong desire to reconnect with their biological relatives and to visit their homeland. There is also evidence that there are “feelings of inferiority, displacement, and discrimination on the basis of both race and adoption. Such sentiments resonate with explanations for removal that favor kidnapping rather than rescue” (Strong-Boag & Bagga, 2009, p. 282). My subjects speak to how difficult it is to answer the the question as to whether they feel like they were rescued and given a better life or if they feel like they were perhaps abducted and taken away from the life they should have lived. Thanh, Trent and Leah’s feelings and memories of their childhoods with their adoptive families are positive, as they were all accepted into their new families, schools and the North American culture. Trent and Lia especially never felt as they were any different than other children and they only see themselves as being Canadian. They did not try and learn the Vietnamese language or adopt any of the Vietnamese cultural norms and values. Even though they may look Vietnamese on the outside they are truly Canadian and feel no guilt towards the situation they were dealt.

## DOCUMENTARY RELEVANCE

This section examines the relevance of my MRP as a documentary media project. It explores the challenges and obstacles encountered while doing written research. Various influences, both written and film based will be discussed. This section will be concluded with a discussion of the documentary methods that were implemented.

## CHALLENGES AND CONCERNS

There were challenges, obstacles, and ethical concerns that arose while planning and producing my documentary film, *The Flight*. One of the biggest issues that arose was trying to give the viewers an honest and accurate recollection of events that took place. With the academic research I completed it is evident that the number of children taken out of Vietnam and flown overseas is inconsistent. An exact documented record of how many children were on each flight or even the number of rescue flights that took place was not found. This is an important plot line in my film and the discussion of lack of documentation is critical. I did not want to give inaccurate information, so I decided to structure this film around the memories of each of my film's participants and what they have been taught about the history of the flight. The flight pilot, Cliff Zacharias, gave an interview that was very concise and powerful. The way he spoke about and described events enabled me to really put credence into what he was saying. Cliff was in his forties when he flew the plane out of Saigon with the orphan's so his memory of this time was still reliable and he had a lot of knowledge on the history and events that were taking place at that time.

The controversy surrounding the American plane crash that occurred during Operation Babylift was difficult to understand and wasn't really relevant to my film. I choose to not discuss



this crash in my film, as I would have had to show both sides of the story and acknowledge that there are two different accounts of what actually happened to this plane. No one really knows whether the rescue plane was shot down or crashed due to a technical malfunction. Including this in my film would have taken up too much time and does not directly relate to the direction I took with the film. I wanted to spend most of the time focusing on the story of how the three orphans came to Canada and then ended up reconnecting many years later.

Another concern I had was that each subject in my film may tell events that took place differently and cause confusion and disconnect. For example, Cliff, who was 40 years old at the time of the last flight out of Saigon is now in his 80s and may not recount and remember the events that took place during and after the flight because of his age and it had been so long since the flight took place. Cliff was a crucial person in my film because he was old enough to experience and live through these events, however maybe with the amount of time that has passed, specific details may be left out or skewed. Trent, Lia and Thanh are only able to grasp the magnitude of the events that took place through word of mouth and literature. They were so young while traveling aboard the flight to Toronto that they have no memories of the flight or of the situation they left in Vietnam. The people of this flight may also have had different views regarding whether they consider themselves to be stolen from their homeland or if they look at being transported to Canada as benefit to their life.

Some issues to be worked through were of how to represent the subjects, how to best edit the film to portray what is nearest to the truth, what areas of interest to include and how I was going to cut down the hours of footage I collected into a concise 20-minute film. The lives of the orphans, who are now adults is a very sensitive area. I was fortunate to have access to and a well-established relationship with the people being interviewed, which made it a lot easier to capture

them on film. The participants felt comfortable with me and this helped them to share their thoughts, feelings and stories. By no means did I want it to seem as if I were speaking for these people, so I allowed the film to be an outlet for them to express themselves. Trent was very helpful in giving me access to Cliff, who I had never met before I traveled to Seattle to conduct my interview with him. Even though this was the first time meeting Cliff, I was fortunate that he was very charismatic, comfortable with the subject, and a great story teller. Telling Thanh's story needed more sensitivity and careful questioning. Thanh was one of the few children on the flight who was technically not an orphan. Thanh was one of the few children who had a birth certificate and records with him when he came to Canada. He had a very hard time growing up knowing that he may have biological family still living in Vietnam. Thanh's story was a very important facet of my film because it confirms that not all of the children who were taken out of Vietnam were really orphans. His story is important in showing some of the unique struggles that these children must have faced.

Initially the budget for my film was a bit of a concern, however I was fortunate to not have had to spend a great deal of money. The only expenses I incurred were travel costs to Seattle to interview Cliff and the cost to hire a sound artist and colour correction specialist. I did not have to purchase any of the archival footage that I used so this helped keep the budget down. A substantial amount of my film relied on the archival footage that I incorporated throughout the film. I used archival footage that was free to the public for educational purposes.

Creating a focused narrative was probably the greatest challenge I encountered. It was really difficult to create a concise film about a controversial and sensitive topic given the many subtopics and directions that I could have taken in this film. I needed to be able to tell the orphans' stories, while focusing on the controversy of the lack of documentation, the

discrepancies in literature, and the conflict surrounding whether these children were saved or stolen. There are many stories I could have explored in greater detail or expounded upon at greater length. After really listening to the interviews I was able to create a narrative that worked. Many attempts were made at the beginning of the editing process to find the direction that I was going to take the film. However, once I organized my narrative by transcribing the interviews and archival footage, things started to become more clear. Creating a paper edit was imperative to really creating a tight narrative because it allows one to lay out and organize each sequence of the film. Once I had my paper edit completed the editing process was much simpler and I was able to really see what needed to be discussed within the film and it became clear that some of the things I was previously planning on including should be cut out as they no longer fit within the narrative.

Overall, I believe that the challenges and concerns that arose were manageable and I was able to overcome them with the right tools and direction. The help of my supervisors Alexandra Anderson and Brian Damude, was greatly appreciated as they were able to steer me in the right direction.

## INFLUENCES

The main source of influence and inspiration for the film was Trent Kilner. He introduced and educated me on a subject, which was totally new to me. He also introduced me to other children on the flight, along with the pilot who flew their plane out of Saigon. Once I began to research Operation Babylift, I found both film and written influences which became a big part of my film.

One of the first films I watch was titled *Daughter from Danang* directed by Gail Dolgin and Vicente Franco in 2002. This film is about about a Vietnamese ‘Americanized’ women, Heidi Bub (a.k.a. Mai Thi Hiep) and her birth mother, Mai Thi Kim. Heidi was separated from her mother during the end of the Vietnam War as part of Operation Babylift. Heidi’s mother gave her up for adoption during the war in hopes she would have a better life outside of Vietnam. This film shows a disturbing interpretation of the consequences Operation Babylift had on affected children. Twenty-two years later Heidi travels back to Vietnam and reconnects with her birth mother and other relatives. Even though “Heidi's experience is singular and the film attempts to frame her story through the reigning trope of "culture clash" and as a privatized family melodrama, it also reveals how her adoption is part of a larger history of collective imperial violence that refuses to be assimilated within or sutured to contemporary discourses of "healing" and reconciliation in the prolonged aftermath of America's war in Vietnam” (Kim, 2009, p. 871). This film explores her mother’s decision to give her daughter up, Heidi’s memories of separation from her mother, and her experiences being forced to grow up as an American citizen. The imagery in this film of Heidi and her mother are used with archival documentary footage of the war with the focus on Operation Babylift. This film fueled my research and inspired me to learn about the children affected by Operation Babylift. This film does not have a happy ending and demonstrates how many years of separation can take a toll on the potential rekindling of family bonds.

The book titled *Last Airlift: A Vietnamese Orphan’s Rescue from War* written by Marsha Forchuk Skypuch is another influence used for my film. This is the story of Thi Anh Tuyet, who was also one of the orphans on the last flight out of Saigon. She shared her story and had a book written about her journey and recollections of the flight that took her from Saigon to Toronto.

She was eight years old at the time and the book supplies a lot of information about how she was feeling at the time of the flight and how she looks at life today. This book takes an ethnographic biographical approach and “helps to humanize a war that, for most readers, may seem like ancient history, and the tight focus on the airlift and Tuyet’s first days with the Morriszes reminds readers that they are sharing the experiences of an age-mate” (Bush, 2012, p.533). This book also contains black and white photographs that were taken inside the aircraft during the flight.

Another significant film titled *Operation Babylift: The Lost Children of Vietnam* released in 2009, directed by Tammy Nguyen was also used as inspiration. This documentary is all about Operation Babylift, exploring the American history and controversy. It recounts the events that took place. The volunteers, organizations, parents, and orphans themselves are the ones telling their stories and recounting the memories in this film. It is more than a historical piece and attempts to give a voice and viewpoint on international adoptions.

The inspirational references I came across in the production phase of this film made me feel confident that the film I was creating, with the people I was creating it with, was truly bringing something new and unique to the topic of Operation Babylift. My film was able to shine light on concerns, controversies and stories that have never been told before in documentary film.

## METHODS

The completion of this film relied heavily on scholarly research and the archives. This research is a part of my film’s foundation and without the proper research it would have been very difficult to understand and describe the history of the Babylifts. Trent and Thanh provided me with a great deal of the archival video and still photos that I used in my documentary. They

both had boxes of newspaper articles, home movies, photo albums and DVDs that they had collected over the years. As I began interviewing and filming I realized that many of their stories had corresponding documents in the boxes of memorabilia that they had given me. The stories they recounted in their interviews, combined with the documents and home movies helped me source out various scholarly articles, movies and films that I would use in making this film. I learned the most from listening to the participant's stories and the memories they have of past events. I was also able to talk to Trent's adoptive mother on the phone and she was able to describe the events that had taken place before the flights started, what happened when the children were brought to Canada and what it was like to raise Trent. This personal account really helped me understand what this flight and Operation Babylift meant to these orphans and their families.

The title I chose for the film was *The Flight*. Another title that was considered was *Saved or Stolen*. Both of these titles seemed appropriate and fitting with the described subject matter, however while editing my film it became less about the topic of whether it was a positive or negative mission taking children out of their homeland and having them adopted into a foreign culture. For this reason I decided to choose *The Flight* as my title because my film shaped itself into a story that was really based upon the one special flight that Trent, Thanh and Lia were on and what transpired after this flight.

*The Flight* would be labeled as a historical documentary with an expository style of documentary film making. Expository documentaries are founded on explaining an argument using images and are associated with the classic forms of documentary film. The verbal storytelling is more important than the visuals and is aimed directly at the viewer. Bill Nichols explains in detail in the article *What Types of Documentary Are There?* all about the various

styles of documentary films. He states that the mode of expository films assembles “fragments of the historical world into a more rhetorical or argumentative frame than an aesthetic or poetic one” (Nichols, 2001, p.105). I decided not to use text to guide the viewer through the film as a strategy to help emphasize an idea or argument, but have the participants and archival footage describe the events that took place instead. I did however use text at the end of the film to share the story of how Thanh ended up traveling back to Vietnam in 2009 to reconnect with his blood-related family.

This film deals with a tragic, sensitive issue that resulted from the Vietnam War. The orphans were innocent victims of the war that either got left in war torn Vietnam or were rescued and flown thousands of miles from their homeland, culture and families to start new lives with new families. My film touches on the history of the Canadian flights and adoption process that brought children like Trent, Leah, and Trent to Canada. Their stories of growing up with their adoptive families in Ontario and reconnecting with other orphans from their flight thirty years after they arrived in Canada helps to educate us on the different ways these children assimilated into a different culture in a country very different from their native lands.

## CRITICAL ANALYSIS

There can be a lot of obstacles that documentary practitioners encounter during the creation of a body of work. There can be tension between the artist’s personal artistic perceptions and motives, that may conflict with the responsibilities that accompany the task of working with real lives. There are always ethical implications and choices that the artist must make, for example the issues that can arise when the artist is speaking on behalf of a group or individual. As the producer of the film it is my responsibility to appropriately represent each participant and

accurately recount the events that took place. In the article *The Problem of Speaking for Others*, written by Linda Alcoff, the issue of speaking for others and speaking about others is discussed. She discusses the ambiguity of the two phrases and how “both the practices of speaking for and of speaking about raise similar issues” (Alcoff, 1991-2, p.8). Alcoff states how “when one is speaking about others, or simply trying to describe their situation or some aspect of it, one may also be speaking in place of them, that is, speaking for them” (Alcoff, 1991-2, p.9). To avoid misinterpretations or any sort of speaking for my subjects, I choose not to have my film narrated. I posed questions to my subjects that were direct and focused, and let them tell their stories. I was careful when editing their interviews that I let their stories come through with the pertinent details in order to not change the message or meaning. Trent, Thanh, and Leah served as the voices for their individual stories as well as the voices for the group of orphans from their flight. After hearing how different Trent, Thanh, and Leah’s childhood experiences were, it could be argued that they were speaking for the other orphans and that their stories were very credible but that many of their group did indeed have different childhoods and upbringings. I was not a part of this group and had little to no knowledge of the subject matter when I started my documentary so I took on the role of a conduit to best tell their stories.

Scholarly and archival research was critical in the development of my film. The archives became a very important component and tool. I used the photographs and footage that I obtained to support and give the viewer a visual of what was being described to them by the individuals in their interviews. This footage was interlaced throughout my film as a way to guide the viewer through the narrative. Using the archival footage became a strategy that I used to be able to bridge thoughts together and a way to lead into the next scene or topic.



Documented evidence of an event, subject or individual is subject to interpretation and argument. When archival footage is incorporated into the framework of a documentary film to support or contradict an argument about a particular historical event, it becomes artistic proof. As the director of this film it was up to me to decide what was going to be shown on screen. Jaimie Baron in her article *The Archive Effect: Found footage and the audiovisual experience of history* (2013) discusses how the contents within “the archives have long been venerated as the solid and objective evidence upon which factual accounts of the past can be built. Over the years the faith in the archive as a comprehensive source of objective “evidence” has become problematic, the distinctions between archives, libraries, collections, and other gatherings of objects, including virtual objects in digital archives, have increasingly blurred” (Baron, 2013, pg.13).

I had to be creative and resourceful with the imagery that I had, and use it in ways to support what was being described. The flight that my film is based on was not heavily reported on or documented. However previous flights that looked very similar to what the flight that my film is based on were available to me in the archives. There was also a lot of images of what the various orphanages looked like and what the living conditions of these children was like. I decided that I would use this similar imagery of what things looked like at the time so the viewer could get an idea of what was happening. The footage and imagery that I chose had some shock value and was important for the audience to see so that they could connect better to the story and understand what these children went through. “Such images seem to bring us into “contact” with the past, to offer us a glimpse of a world that existed but has been erased and overlaid with different faces, current fashions, and new technologies. Indeed, the past seems to become not only knowable but also perceptible in these images” (Baron, 2013, p.1). It was a way for the

audience to become more invested in the story and provoke the audience's connection and emotion to the individuals in the film.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude this dissertation, it is obvious that the Canadian operated flight that evacuated a group of Vietnamese children from Saigon during the final days of the Vietnam War was an important part of history. This flight and Operation Babylift as a whole has a controversial past. During the time of Operation Babylift there was much debate about how the Western world was handling these children. Some people saw Operation Babylift as child-napping. The topic of whether these children were being saved by this mission or being stolen is an on-going debate to this day, however it did not take precedence in my film. A critical aspect of this MRP that transpired while conducting the research was the inconsistencies in the numbers of children who were actually flown out of Vietnam. The figures stated in academic research varied and it exemplifies how the documentation of these events and figures may have been influenced by different political or media outlets at the time. The purpose of this MRP was to explore the historical, political, social and controversial events that surrounded the orphan flights. With the use of various scholarly literature, newspaper/media articles, as well as documentary films, I was able to describe the events that took place while raising additional concerns. This film also acknowledges the relevance of this thesis MRP as a documentary media project and how it relates to traditional documentary practices.

One of the main issues I faced as the producer of this documentary was telling the stories of Thanh, Leah and Trent in the most concise, factual, factual and real manner. I wanted to capture their stories as individuals as well as their interpretations of Operation Babylift group

of orphans' experiences as a whole. The archival footage chosen to coincide with their stories became a big part of my production and without this capturing the emotions of the audience would have been difficult. Even though I was an outsider of this group of people, I was able to let them capture the attention of my audience and leave them wanting more.

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