



Trinh T. Minh-ha

SEEN YET UNSEEN

Filmmaker, writer, literary critic and composer, Trinh T. Minh-ha (Hanoi, 1952) is one of the key figures in understanding the development of contemporary film practices. Her films challenge the exoticising gaze of traditional anthropological documentary and introduce avant-garde experimentation and poetry. This is her first retrospective exhibition in Spain.

29.10.2025 – 01.03.2026

SEEN YET UNSEEN

Manuel J. Borja-Villel

Trinh T. Minh-ha states that everything begins with two.¹ There is no binary opposition in her work, because it is not exclusive, but rather relational. It is open and shaped by a multitude of knowledges and stories. Text and image, sound and silence, testimony and invention fold and unfold without being reduced to one another. Her films do not propose a single narrative, nor are they framed within a closed structure.

Trinh's films do not adhere to the conventions of documentaries. The voiceover does not necessarily explain what the images reveal. They sometimes converge with the narration, while at other times they diverge to establish a twofold movement: from the outside in (what is captured from reality) and from the inside out (what could be described as fabulation). These two categories are not mutually exclusive; they are intertwined. *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989) would be a clear example of this. The identity of the country where Trinh was born is presented here as a construction. The real and the fictional become blurred, exposing the cracks in language and its artificial nature. Trinh does not seek to convince us of the authenticity of what is shown. Her films do not depict or describe the other. They are not "about" others; they are made with or near by them.² This "near by" requires acknowledging both the intimacy and the distance between the filmmaker and those appearing in her films. The author never speaks on their behalf.

Trinh works from a feminist perspective. The presence of women advocating a non-heroic view of our relationships is integral to her practice. In *Forgetting Vietnam* (2015), she challenges reducing history to a dialectic of winners and losers. Feminism is about raising awareness of those who have been silenced, attempting to give voice to multiplicity. Not by imposing it on others, but rather through shared listening.

Feminism is also about emphasising the everyday, a place where time overlaps in layers, where there is no room for the "linguistic self", that figure of authority associated with Eurocentric reason that

¹ Trinh T. Minh-ha, *The Twofold Commitment*, New York, Primary Information: 2023, p. 71.

² "I do not intend to speak about; just speak nearby", *Reassemblage*, 1982, 40 min., 16mm, colour.

demands the universality and veracity of abstract knowledge. There is no linear narrative in Trinh's films. Her time unfolds in spirals. The past tense may be what is yet to come. There is a memory of the past, as well as of the future. But evoking lies not solely in recovering what has already happened. It resides in digging into history, bringing it into the present, acknowledging the close relationship that exists between memory and forgetting.

The sounds of trains and drums feature in *The Fourth Dimension* (2001), a film dedicated to Japanese culture. The rhythm of both indicates that which happens daily and yet goes unnoticed by us. For Trinh, the encounter that occurs between traditional instruments and contemporary machines, its cadence, is a way in which Japanese society negotiates the tensions occurring between the world of its ancestors and the present. It is a way of transcending the constraints of routine and discovering infinity within finitude.

Trinh uses colour very consciously. She plays with its symbolic component. Red is associated with life and joy. It is likewise the colour of antagonism and revolution. White embodies both mourning and purity. There are as many colours as there are gradations in their tones, or uses that have been made of them. Trinh circulates within these nuances, in the interstices that can be found between definitions and things. Her work is situated at a permanent crossroads, forcing viewers to choose.

Trinh's cinema is expanded. It is screened interchangeably in theatres and exhibition spaces. In both cases, the sensory experience is key. A dense combination of text and images envelops viewers. But it is not overwhelmed by the work as a whole, because the distance between author, screen and viewer is maintained. The medium does not fade away. Everything begins with cinema, but it does not end there. It is "decreated" in the act of creation. This is why Trinh is concerned about delving into the process of receiving the work so that viewers can take ownership of and transform it.

Her films are anti-climactic. They give the impression that nothing happens in them. There is no main story to modulate the narrative, nor a hierarchy to order it. No one meaning prevails over another. According to her, one sees with one's eyes open as much as with one's eyes closed.³ The task of sound likewise does not involve making the image seem more realistic. Her films are never illustrative.

³ *The Twofold Commitment*, p. 109.

Silence is as eloquent as sound, and it is governed by its own independent logic. There are no "empty voids" in them; everything is substantive. It is in this paradox that their beauty resides. *Seen Yet Unseen* is the title chosen by the artist for this exhibition. Another way of looking emerges through this interplay of what is revealed and what remains hidden.

The function of any ideology in power is to show a unified world in a positive manner. Challenging the regimes of representation that govern society means conceiving of a politics capable of altering reality and not merely ideologising it. The conflict this creates leads to a repositioning of subjectivities and practices. Trinh has always been sceptical of so-called "political art" because it ultimately changes nothing. In order to carry out any radical subversion, it is essential to transform the way we perceive the world.

Although closely tied to her films, her writings have a life of their own. We have therefore decided to include three of her essays in this publication: "Outside In Inside Out" (1988), "She, of the Interval" (1987) and "Don't Stop in the Dark" (2009). They contain some of the key directions in her work. They deal with challenging the anthropological focus of documentaries, with feminism, and the poetic drive of her cinematography.

OUTSIDE IN INSIDE OUT

Trinh T. Minh-ha

Paper delivered at the Conference "Third Cinema: Theories and Practices," Edinburgh International Film Festival, August 1986. First published in *Questions of Third Cinema*, ed. J. Pines and P. Willemsen (London: British Film Institute, 1988).

An objective constantly claimed by those who "seek to reveal one society to another" is "to grasp the native's point of view" and "to realize *his* vision of *his* world." Fomenting much discord, in terms of methodology and approach, among specialists in the directly concerned fields of anthropology and ethnographic filmmaking in the last decade, such a goal is also diversely taken to heart by many of us who consider it our mission to represent others, and to be their loyal interpreters. The injunction to see things from the native's point of view speaks for a definite ideology of truth and authenticity; it lies at the center of every polemical discussion on "reality" in its relation to "beauty" and "truth". To raise the question of representing the Other is, therefore, to reopen endlessly the fundamental issue of science and art; documentary and fiction; universal and personal; objectivity and subjectivity; masculine and feminine; outsider and insider.

Knowledge about often gives the illusion of knowledge.

Zora Neale Hurston wrote years ago how amazed she was by the Anglo-Saxon's lack of curiosity about the internal lives and emotions of blacks, and more generally speaking, of any non-Anglo-Saxon peoples. Although this still largely holds true today, one is more inclined to restate this differently by saying that one is presently more amazed by the general claim of Western "experts" to be interested just in that aspect of the Other's life and in not much else. The final aim now is "to uncover the Javanese, Balinese, or Moroccan sense of self", supposedly through the definitions they have of themselves. Things often look as though they have radically changed; whereas they may have just taken on opposite appearances, as they so often do, to shuffle the cards and set people on a side track. The move from obnoxious exteriority to obtrusive interiority, the race for the so-called *hidden* values of a person or a culture, has

given rise to a form of legitimized (but unacknowledged as such) voyeurism and subtle arrogance—namely, the pretense to see into or to own the others' *minds*, whose *knowledge* these others cannot, supposedly, have themselves; and the need to define, hence confine, providing them thereby with a standard of self-evaluation on which they necessarily depend. Psychological *conflicts*, among other idiosyncratic elements, are thus equated with *depth* (a keyword of Occidental metaphysics), while *inner* experience is reduced to subjectivity as *personal* feelings and views.

How it Feels to Be Colored Me¹

How Does it Feel to Be White You?

A good, serious film about the Other must show some kind of conflict, for this is how the West often defines identities and differences. To many scientifically oriented filmmakers, seeing ironically continues to be believing. Showing is not showing how I can see you, how you can see me, and how we are both being perceived—the encounter—but how you see yourself and represent your own kind (at best, through conflicts)—the Fact by itself. Factual authenticity relies heavily on the Other's words and testimony. To authenticate a work, it becomes therefore most important to prove or make evident how this Other has participated in the making of his/her own image; hence, for example, the prominence of the string-of-interviews style and the talkingheads, oral-witnessing strategy in documentary film practices. This is often called "giving voice", even though these "given" voices never truly form the Voice of the film, being mostly used as devices of legitimation whose random, conveniently given-as and taken-for-granted authority often serves as compensation for a filmic Lack (the lack of imagination or of believability, for example). Power creates its very constraints, for the Powerful is also necessarily defined by the Powerless. Power therefore has to be shared ("shared anthropology" is a notion that has been tossed around for a try), so that its effect may continue to circulate; but it will be shared only partly, with much caution, and on the condition that the share is

¹ Title of an article written by Zora Neale Hurston. It was most likely a response to a question Hurston felt her white acquaintances were always burning to ask her. In Alice Walker, ed., *I Love Myself* (Old Westbury, NY: The Feminist Press, 1979), pp. 152-55.

given, not taken. A famed anthropologist thus voiced the crisis existing in his field when he wrote: “where are we when we can no longer claim some unique form of psychological closeness, a sort of transcultural identification with our subjects?”² Surely, the man has to keep his role alive. And, after all, there is always some truth in every error.

The matter is one of degree, not polar opposition... Confinement to experience-near concepts leaves an ethnographer awash in immediacies, as well as entangled in vernacular. Confinement to experience-distant ones leaves him stranded in abstractions and smothered in jargon. The real question, and the one... in the case of “natives”, you don’t have to be one to know one, is what roles the two sorts of concepts play in anthropological analysis.³

However, “to put oneself into someone else’s skin” is not without difficulty. The risk the man fears for himself as well as for his fellowmen is that of “going over the hill”. For this, he takes on the task of advising and training his followers for detachment in the field so that they may all remain on the winning side. Giving, in such context, should always be determined “with reference to what, by the light of Western knowledge and experience tempered by local considerations”, *We think is best for them*.⁴ Thus, make sure to take in Their secrets, but don’t ever give up Ours.

The trick is not to get yourself into some inner correspondence of spirit with your informants. Preferring, like the rest of us, to call their souls their own, they are not going to be altogether keen about such effort anyhow. The trick is to figure out what the devil they think they are up to.⁵

The natural outcome of such a rationale is the arranged marriage between “experience-distant” and “experience-near”, between the scientist’s objectivity and the native’s subjectivity, between outsider’s

input and insider’s output. To get at the most intimate, hidden notions of the Other’s self, the man has to rely on a form of (neo-)colonial interdependency. And since sharing in this framework always means giving little and taking more than little, the need for informants grows into a need for disciples. We have to train Insiders so that they may busy themselves with Our preoccupations, and make themselves useful by asking the right kind of Question and providing the right kind of Answer. Thus, the ideal Insider is the psychologically conflict-detecting and problem-solving subject who faithfully represents the Other for the Master, or comforts, more specifically, the Master’s self-other relationship in its enactment of power relations, gathering serviceable data, minding his/her own business-territory, and yet offering the difference expected.

THE “PET” NEGRO SYSTEM

(by Zora Neale Hurston)

And every white man shall be allowed to pet himself a Negro. Yea, he shall take a black man unto himself to pet and to cherish, and this same Negro shall be perfect in his sight. Nor shall hatred among the races of men, nor conditions of strife in the walled cities, cause his pride and pleasure in his own Negro to wane... when everything is discounted, it still remains true that white people North and South have promoted Negroes—usually in the capacity of “representing the Negro”—with little thought of the ability of the person promoted but in line with the “pet” system.⁶

Apartheid precludes any contact with people of different races which might undermine the assumption of essential difference.⁷

An Insider’s view: the magic word that bears within itself a seal of approval. What can be more authentically “other” than an otherness by the Other him/herself? Yet, every piece of the cake given by the Master comes with a double-edged blade. The Afrikaners are prompt in saying “You can take a black man from the bush, but you can’t take the bush from the black man.”

² Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1983), p. 56

³ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁴ Evelyn Baring, Lord Cromer, *Political and Literary Essays, 1908-1913* (1913 rpt., Freeport, NY: Books for Library Press, 1969).

⁵ Geertz, *ibid.*, p. 58.

⁶ Hurston, *I Love Myself*, pp. 156, 160.

⁷ Vincent Crapanzano, “A Reporter At Large”, *The New Yorker*, March 18, 1985, p. 99.

The place of the native is always well-delimited. “Correct” cultural filmmaking usually implies that Africans show Africa; Asians, Asia; and Buro-Americans, ... the World. Otherness has its laws and interdictions. Since “you can’t take the bush from the black man”, it is the bush that is consistently given back to him, and as things often turn out, it is also this very bush that the black man makes his exclusive territory. And he may do so with the full awareness that barren land is hardly a gift, for, in the unfolding of power inequalities, changes frequently require that rules be re-appropriated so that the Master be beaten at his own game. The conceited giver likes to give with the understanding that he is in a position to take back what he gives whenever he feels like it and whenever the acceptor dares or happens to trespass on his preserves. The latter, however, sees no gift (can you imagine such a thing as a gift that takes?) but only debts that once given back should remain his property, although (land) owning is a concept that has long been foreign to him and that he has refused to assimilate.

Through audiences’ responses to and expectations of their works, non-white filmmakers are thus often informed and reminded of the territorial boundaries in which they are to remain. An insider can speak with authority about his/her own culture, and she is referred to as a source of authority in this matter—not as a filmmaker necessarily, but as an insider, merely. This automatic and arbitrary endowment of an insider with legitimized knowledge about his/her cultural heritage and environment only exerts its power when it is a question of validating power. It is a paradoxical twist of the colonial mind: what the Outsider expects from the Insider is, in fact, a projection of an all-knowing subject that this Outsider usually attributes to himself and to his own kind. In this unacknowledged self-other relation, however, the other would always remain the shadow of the self, hence not-really-not-quite “all-knowing”. That a white person makes a film on the Goba of the Zambezi or on the Tasa-day in the Philippine rain forest seems hardly surprising to anyone, but that a Third World member makes a film on other Third World peoples never fails to appear questionable to many. The question concerning the choice of subject matter immediately arises, sometimes out of curiosity, most often out of hostility. The marriage is not consumable, for the pair is no longer “outside-inside” (objective versus subjective), but something between “inside-inside” (subjective in what is already designated as

subjective) and “outside-outside” (objective in what is already claimed as objective). No real conflict.

Difference, yes, but difference
Within the borders of your homelands, they say
White rule and the policy of ethnic divisions.

Any attempts at blurring the dividing line between outsider and insider would justifiably provoke anxiety, if not anger. Territorial rights are not being respected here. Violations of boundaries have always led to displacement, for the in-between zones are the shifting grounds on which the (doubly) exiled walk. Not You/like You. The Insider’s subjectivity (understood as limited affective horizon—the personal) is that very area for which the objective (understood as unbiased limitless horizon—the universal) Outsider cannot claim full authority, but thanks to which he can continue to validate his indispensable role, claiming now his due through “interpretive”, but still totalizing scientific knowledge.

Anthropology is the science of culture as seen from the outside.
(Claude Levi-Strauss)⁸

Thus, if the natives were to study themselves, they were said to produce history or philology, not anthropology.⁹

It is only a representative of our civilization who can, in adequate detail, document the difference, and help create an idea of the primitive which would not ordinarily be constructed by primitives themselves.¹⁰

Interdependency cannot be reduced to a mere question of mutual enslavement. It also consists in creating a ground that belongs to no one, not even to the “creator”. Otherness becomes empowering critical difference when it is not given, but re-created. Defined with the Other’s newly formed criteria. Imperfect cinema is subversive—not

⁸ Claude Levi-Strauss, “Anthropology: Its Achievements and Future”, *Current Anthropology*, 7 (1966): 126.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Stanley Diamond, “A Revolutionary Discipline”, *Current Anthropology* 5 (1964): 433.

because science is contributing to the “purification” of art as it “allows us to free ourselves from so many fraudulent films, concealed behind what has been called the world of poetry”¹¹; not because “the larger the grain, the better the politics”; or because a shaky blurry, badly framed shot is truer, more sincere, and authentic than a “beautiful”, technically masterful shot (shaking the camera can also be a technique)—but more, I would say, because there is no such thing as an (abso-lute) imperfection when perfection can only construct itself through the existence of its imperfect Other. In other words, perfection is produced, not merely given. The values that keep the dominant set of criteria in power are simply ineffective in a framework where one no longer abides by them.

Non-Westerners mayor may not want to make films on their own societies. Whatever the choice, the question is certainly not that of setting an opposition to dominant practices, since “opposing” in the one-dimensional context of modern societies usually means playing into the Master’s hand. For years, They have been saying with much patronizing care: “Africa to Africans”; “We should encourage those from the Third World to make films on their own people”; “We would like to see Asians as told by Asians”; or We want “to teach people with a culture different from ours to make motion pictures depicting their culture and themselves as *they* saw fit” (so that We can collect data on the indigenous ethnographic filmmaking process, and show Navajos through Navajo eyes to our folks in the field).¹² Again, this is akin to saying that a non-white view is desirable because it would help to fill in a hole that whites are now *willing* to leave more or less empty so as to lessen the critical pressure and to give the illusion of a certain incompleteness that needs the native’s input to be more complete, but is ultimately dependent on white authority to attain any form of “real” completion. Such a “charity” mission is still held up with much righteousness by many, and despite the many changing appearances it has taken through the years, the image of the white colonial Savior seems more pernicious than ever since it operates now via consent. Indigenous an-

¹¹ Julio Garcia Espinosa, “For an Imperfect Cinema”, in Michael Chanan, ed., *Twenty-Five Years of the New Latin American Cinema* (London: BFI and Channel 4 Television, 1983), pp. 28-33.

¹² See Sol Worth and John Adair, *Through Navajo Eyes* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972). Quoted lines are on p. 11.

thropology allows white anthropology to further anthropologize Man.

Anthropology is today the foundation of every single discourse pronounced above the native’s head.

The “portraits” of a group produced by the observer as outsider and by the observer as insider will differ, as they will be relevant in different contexts. This awareness underlies the current cry “You have to be one to understand one”.¹³

The question is also not that of merely “correcting” the images whites have of non-whites, nor of reacting to the colonial territorial mind by simply reversing the situation and setting up an opposition that at best, will hold up a mirror to the Master’s activities and preoccupations. (It has been, for example, the talk of some French anthropologists, not long ago, to train and bring in a few African anthropologists-disciples to study the cultural aspects of remote villages in France. Again, let Them—whom We taught—study Us, for this is also information, and this is how the anthropologizing wheel is kept rotating.) The question, rather, is that of tracking down and exposing the Voice of Power and Censorship whenever and in whichever side it appears. Essential difference allows those who rely on it to rest reassuringly on its gamut of fixed notions. Any mutation in identity, in essence, in regularity, and even in physical place poses a problem, if not a threat, in terms of classification and control. If you can’t locate the other, how are you to locate your-self?

One’s sense of self is always mediated by the image one has of the other. (I have asked myself at times whether a superficial knowledge of the other, in terms of some stereotype, is not a way of preserving a superficial image of oneself.)¹⁴

Furthermore, where should the dividing line between outsider and insider stop? How should it be defined? By skin color (no blacks should make films on yellows)? By language (only Fulani can talk

¹³ Diane Lewis, “Anthropology and Colonialism”, *Current Anthropology*, 14 (1973): 586-7.

¹⁴ Crapanzano, “A Reporter At Large”, p. 96.

about Fulani, a Bassari is a foreigner here)? By nation (only Vietnamese can produce works on Vietnam)? By geography (in the North-South setting, East is East and East can't meet West)? Or by political affinity (Third World on Third World counter First and Second Worlds)? What about those with hyphenated identities and hybrid realities? (It is worth noting here a journalist's report in a recent *Time* issue, which is entitled "A Crazy Game of Musical Chairs". In this brief but concise report, attention is drawn on the fact that South Africans, who are classified by race and placed into one of the nine racial categories that determine where they can live and work, can have their classification changed if they can prove they were put in the wrong group. Thus, in an announcement of racial reclassifications by the Home Affairs Minister, one learns that: "nine whites became colored, 506 coloreds became white, two whites became Malay, 14 Malay became white, ... 40 coloreds became black, 666 blacks became colored, 87 coloreds became Indian, 67 Indians became colored, 26 coloreds became Malay, 50 Malays became Indian, 61 Indians became Malay..." and the list goes on. However, says the Minister, no blacks applied to become white, and no whites became black.)¹⁵

The moment the insider steps out from the inside, she is no longer a mere insider (and vice versa). She necessarily looks in from the outside while also looking out from the inside. Like the outsider, she steps back and records what never occurs to her the insider as being worth or in need of recording. But unlike the outsider, she also resorts to non-explicative, non-totalizing strategies that suspend meaning and resist closure. (This is often viewed by the outsiders as strategies of partial concealment and disclosure aimed at preserving secrets that should only be imparted to initiates.) She refuses to reduce herself to an Other, and her reflections to a mere outsider's objective reasoning or insider's subjective feeling. She knows, probably like Zora Neale Hurston the insider-anthropologist knew, that she is not an outsider like the foreign outsider. She knows she is different while at the same time being Him. Not quite the Same, not quite the Other, she stands in that undetermined threshold place where she constantly drifts in and out. Undercutting the inside/outside opposition, her intervention is necessarily that of both a deceptive insider and a deceptive outsider. She is this In-

¹⁵ *Time*, March 9, 1987, p. 54.

appropriate Other/Same who moves about with always at least two/four gestures: that of affirming "I am like you" while persisting in her difference; and that of reminding "I am different" while unsettling every definition of otherness arrived at.

It is thrilling to think—to know that for any act of mine, I shall get twice as much praise or twice as much blame. It is quite exciting to hold the center of the national stage, with the spectators not knowing whether to laugh or to weep. (Zora Neale Hurston)¹⁶

The coloured are a very emotional people, and you can't trust the Bantus. A farmer here asked his Bantu foreman once, "Tell me, Johnny, would you shoot me?" "No, baas, I wouldn't shoot you", Johnny said. "I'd go to the neighbor's place and shoot the baas there. And his man would shoot you." (An Afrikaner)¹⁷

The theory behind our tactics: "The white man is always trying to know into somebody else's business. All right, I'll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he sho' can't read my mind. I'll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I'll say my say and sing my song." (Zora Neale Hurston)¹⁸

The only possible ethnology is the one that studies the anthropophagous behaviour of the White man. (Stanislas S. Adotevi)¹⁹

Whether she turns the inside out or the outside in, she is, like the two sides of a coin, the same impure, both-in-one insider/ outsider. For there can hardly be such a thing as an essential inside that can be homogeneously represented by all insiders; an authentic insider in there, an absolute reality out there, or an incorrupted representative who cannot be questioned by another incorrupted representative.

¹⁶ Hurston, *I Love Myself*, p. 153.

¹⁷ Dora Hertzog, quoted in Vincent Crapanzano, "A Reporter at Large", II, *The New Yorker*, March 25, 1985, p. 93.

¹⁸ Hurston, *I Love Myself*, p. 83.

¹⁹ *Négritude et négrologues* (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1972), p. 182 (my translation).

The most powerful reason why Negroes do not do more about false “representation” by pets is that they know from experience that the thing is too deep-rooted to be budged. The appointer has his reasons, personal or political. He can always point to the beneficiary and say, “Look, Negroes, you have been taken care of. Didn’t I give a member of your group a big job?” White officials assume that the Negro element is satisfied and they do not know what to make of it when later they find that so large a body of Negroes charge indifference and doubledealing. The white friend of the Negroes mumbles about ingratitude and decides that you simply can’t understand Negroes ... just like children.²⁰

In the context of this Inappropriate Other, questions like “How loyal a representative of his/her people is s/he?” (the filmmaker as insider), or “How authentic is his/her representation of the culture observed?” (the filmmaker as outsider) are of little relevance. When the magic of essences ceases to impress and intimidate, there no longer is a position of authority from which one can definitely judge the verisimilitude value of the representation. In the first question, the questioning subject, even if s/he is an insider, is no more authentic and has no more authority on the subject matter than the subject whom the questions concern.

This is not to say that the historical “I” can be obscured or ignored, and that differentiation cannot be made; but that “I” is not unitary, culture has never been monolithic, and more or less is always more or less in relation to a judging subject. Differences do not only exist between outsider and insider—two entities—, they are also at work within the outsider or the insider—a single entity. This leads us to the second question in which the filmmaker is an outsider. As long as the filmmaker takes up a positivistic attitude and chooses to bypass the inter-subjectivities and realities involved, factual truth remains the dominant criterion for evaluation and the question as to whether his/her work successfully represents the reality it claims would continue to exert its power. The more the representation leans on verisimilitude, the more it is subject to normative verification.

For the Inappropriate Other, however, the questions mentioned above seems inadequate; the criterion of authenticity no longer proves pertinent. It is like saying to an atheist: “How faithful to the words of God are yours?” (with the understanding that the atheist is

²⁰ Hurston, *I Love Myself*, p. 161.



Surname Viet Given Nam, 1989





Naked Spaces – Living is Round, 1985



What About China?, 2021



Reassemblage, 1982



Forgetting Vietnam, 2015

Shoot for The Contents, 1991





What About China?, 2021



A Tale of Love, 1995

not opposed, but *in-different* to the believer). She who knows she cannot speak of them without speaking of herself, of history without involving her story, also knows that she cannot make a gesture without activating the to-and-fro movement of life. The subjectivity at work in the context of this Inappropriate Other can hardly be submitted to the old subjectivity/objectivity paradigm. Acute political subject-awareness cannot be reduced to a question of self-criticism toward self-improvement nor of self-praise toward greater self-confidence. Such differentiation is useful, for a grasp of subjectivity as a “science of the subject” makes the fear of ethnographic self-absorption look absurd. Awareness of the limits in which one works need not lead to any form of indulgence in personal partiality, nor to the narrow conclusion that it is impossible to understand anything about other peoples since the difference is one of “essence”.

By refusing to naturalize the “I”, subjectivity uncovers the myth of essential core, of spontaneity, and of depth as inner vision. Subjectivity therefore does not merely consist of talking about oneself, be this talking indulgent or critical. Many who agree to the necessity of self-reflectivity and reflexivity in filmmaking think that it suffices to show oneself at work on the screen, or to point to one’s role once in a while in the film, and to suggest some future improvement in order to convince the audience of one’s “honesty” and pay one’s due to liberal thinking. Thus, there is now a growing body of films in which the spectators see the narrator narrating, the filmmaker filming or directing, and quite expectably, the natives—to whom a little camera (usually a Super-8) or tape-recorder is temporarily handed out—supposedly contributing to the production process. What is put forth as self-reflexivity here is no more than a small faction—the most conveniently visible one—of the many possibilities of uncovering the work of ideology that this “science of the subject” can open unto. In short, what is at stake is a practice of subjectivity that is still unaware of its own constituted nature (hence the difficulty to exceed that simplistic pair, subjectivity and objectivity); unaware of its continuous role in the production of meaning (as if things can “make sense” by themselves, so that the interpreter’s function consists only of *choosing* among the many existing readings); unaware of representation as representation (the cultural, sexual, political inter-realities involved in the making; that of the filmmaker as subject; that of the subject filmed; and that of the cinematic apparatus); and, finally, unaware of the Inappropriate Other within every “I”.

My certainty of being excluded by the Blacks one day is not strong enough to prevent me from fighting on their sides. (A South African writer)²¹

What does present a challenge is an organization that consists either in close association or in alliance of black, white, Indian, Coloured. Such a body constitutes a negation of the Afrikaans' theory of separateness, their medieval clannishness. (Ezekiel Mphahlele)²²

The stereotyped quiet, obedient, conforming modes of Japanese behavior clashed with white expectations of being a motivated, independent, ambitious thinker. When I was with whites, I worried about talking loud enough; when I was with the Japanese, I worried about talking too loud. (Joanne Harumi Sechi)²³

When I hear my students say "We're not against the Iranians here who are minding their own business. We're just against those ungrateful ones who overstep our hospitality by demonstrating and badmouthing our government", I know they speak about me. (Mitsuye Yamada)²⁵

²¹ Breyten Breytenbach, "L'Aveuglement des Afrikaners", *Le Nouvel Observateur*, June 20-26, 1986, p. 48 (my translation).

²² *The African Image* (1962; rpt., New York: Praeger, 1966), p. 73.

²³ "Being Japanese-American Doesn't Mean 'Made In Japan'", in Dexter Fisher, ed., *The Third Woman* (Boston: Roughton Mifflin Cie, 1980), p. 446.

²⁴ *The Woman Warrior* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977).

²⁵ "Asian Pacific American Women and Feminism", in Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back* (Watertown, MA: Persephone Press, 1981), p. 75.

SHE, OF THE INTERVAL

Trinh T. Minh-ha

Lecture delivered at the "Viewpoints: Women, Culture & Public Media" Conference at Hunter College, New York, November 1986. First published in *The Independent* (Film & Video Monthly), Vol. 10, No. 4 (May 1987).

Let me start by asking myself: what do I expect from a film? What I expect is borne out by what I work at bringing forth in my own films. The films I make, in other words, are made to contribute to the body of film works I like and would like to see.

Through the way a film is made, the way it relates to its subject, as well as through the viewers' receptions, I expect that it solicits my critical abilities and sharpens my awareness of how ideological patriarchy and hegemony works.

The commercial and ideological habits of our society favor narrative with as definite a closure as possible once the narration is consumed one can throw it away and move on to buy another one.

clear linear entirely digestible.

More and more, there is a need to make films politically (as differentiated from making political films). We are moving here from the making of a genre of film to the making of a wide range of genres of film in which the making itself is political. Since women have for decades worked hard at widening the definition of "political"; since there is no subject that is "apolitical" or too narrow, but only narrow, apolitical representations of subjects, a film does not necessarily need to attack governmental institutions and personalities to be "political." Different realms and levels of institutional values govern our daily lives. In working to shake any system of values, a politically made film must begin by first shaking the system of cinematic values on which its politics is entirely dependent.

never installed within transgression never dwells elsewhere

Patriarchy and hegemony. Not really two, not one either. My history, my story, is the history of the First World/Third World, dominant/

oppressed, man/woman relationship. When speaking about the Master, I am necessarily speaking about both Him and the West. Patriarchy and hegemony. From orthodox to progressive patriarchy, from direct colonization to indirect, subtly pervasive hegemony, things have been much refined, but the road is still long and the fight still goes on.

Hegemony is most difficult to deal with because it does not really spare any of us. Hegemony is established to the extent that the world view of the rulers is also the world view of the ruled. It calls attention to the routine structures of everyday thought, down to common sense itself in dealing with hegemony, we are not only challenging the dominance of Western cultures, but also their identities as unified cultures. In other words, we call attention to the fact that there is a Third World in every First World and vice-versa. The master is made to recognize that his culture is neither homogeneous nor monolithic, that he is just another among others.

What every feminist, politically made film unavoidably faces is at once: 1) the position of the filmmaker 2) the cinematic reality 3) and the viewers' readings. A film, in other words, is a site that sets into play a number of subjectivities—those of the filmmaker, the filmed subjects, and the viewers (including here those who have the means or are in a position to circulate, expose, and disseminate the films).

The assumption that the audience already exists, that it is a given, and that the filmmaker merely has to gear her making towards the so-called needs of this audience, is an assumption that seems to ignore how needs are made and audiences are built. What is ideological is often confused with what is natural—or biological, as is often implied in women's context. The media system as it exists may be most efficient for reaching the audience desired, but it allows little direct input from the audience into the creative process (critics and citizen groups are not defined as part of the audience for example).

A responsible work today seems to me above all to be one that shows, on the one hand, a political commitment and an ideological lucidity, and is, on the other hand interrogative by nature, instead of being merely prescriptive. In other words, a work that involves her story in history; a work that acknowledges the difference between lived experience and representation; a work that is careful not to turn a struggle into an object of consumption, and requires that responsibility be assumed by the maker as well as by the audience, without whose participation no solution emerges, for no solution exists as a given.

The logic of reaching “everybody” often encourages a leveling of differences—a minimum of elements that might offend the imaginary average viewer, and a standardization of content and expectations. To work against this leveling of differences is also to resist the very notion of difference, which defined in the Master's terms, always resorts to the simplicity of essences. Divide and conquer has for centuries been his creed, his formula of success. But for a few decades now, a different terrain of consciousness has begun to be explored among marginalized groups. A terrain in which clear-cut divisions and dualistic oppositions—such as counter-cinema versus Hollywood, science versus art, documentary versus fiction, objectivity versus subjectivity, masculine versus feminine—may serve as departure points for analytical purposes, but are no longer satisfactory, if not entirely untenable, to the critical mind.

I have often been asked about what some viewers call the “lack of conflicts” in my films. Psychological conflicts are often equated with substance and depth. Conflicts in Western contexts often serve to define identities. My suggestion to this so-called lack is: let difference replace conflict. Difference as understood in many feminist and non-Western contexts, difference as foregrounded in my film work, is not opposed to sameness, nor synonymous with separateness. Difference, in other words, does not necessarily give rise to separatism. There are differences as well as similarities within the concept of difference. One can further say that difference is not what makes conflicts. It is beyond and alongside conflict. This is where confusion often arises and where the challenge can be issued. Many of us still hold onto the concept of difference not as a tool of creativity—to question multiple forms of repression and dominance—but as a tool of segregation—to exert power on the basis on racial and sexual essences. The apartheid-type of difference.

Let me point to a few examples of practices of such a notion of difference.

The positioning of voices in film: In documentary practice, for example, we are used to hearing either an unified voice-over, or a string of opposing, clashing views from witnesses which is organized so as to bring out objectively the so-called two sides of an event or problem. So, either in unification or in opposition. In one of my films, *Naked Spaces*, I use three different voices to bring out three modes of informing. The voices are different, but not opposed to each other, and this is precisely where a number of viewers have reading problems. Some

of us tend to consume the three as one because we are trained to not hearing how voices are positioned and to not having to deal with difference otherwise than as opposition.

The use of silence: On the one hand, we face the danger of inscribing femininity as absence, as lapse and blank in rejecting the importance of the act of enunciation. On the other hand, we understand the necessity to place women on the side of negativity (Kristeva) and to work in “undertones” (Irigaray) in our attempts at undermining patriarchal systems of values. Silence is so commonly set in opposition with speech. Silence as a will not to say or a will to unsay, a language of its own, has barely been explored.

The Veil: If the act of unveiling has a liberating potential, so does the act of veiling. It all depends on the context in which such an act is carried out, or more precisely, on how and where women see dominance. Difference should neither be defined by the dominant sex nor by the dominant culture. So that when women decide to lift the veil, one can say that they do so in defiance of their men’s oppressive right to their bodies; but when they decide to keep or to put back on the veil they once took off, they may do so to reappropriate their space or to claim anew difference, in defiance of genderless hegemonic standardization. (One can easily apply the metaphor of the veil here to filmmaking.)

Making films from a different stance supposes 1) a re-structuring of experience and a possible rupture with patriarchal filmic codes and conventions; 2) a difference in naming—the use of familiar words and images, and of familiar techniques in contexts whose effect is to displace, expand, or change their preconceived, hegemonically accepted meanings; 3) a difference in conceiving “depth”, “development”, or even “process” (processes within processes are, for example, not quite the same as a process or several linear processes); 4) a difference in understanding rhythms and repetitions—repetitions that never reproduce nor lead to the same (“an other among others”); 5) a difference in cuts, pauses, pacing, silence; 6) a difference, finally in defining what is “cinematic” and what is not.

The relationship between images and words should render visible and audible the “cracks” (which have always been there; nothing new...) of a filmic language that usually works at gluing things together as smoothly as possible, banishing thereby all reflections, supporting an ideology that keeps the workings of its own language as invisible as possible, and thereby mystifying film making, stifling

criticism, and generating complacency among both makers and viewers.

Working with differences requires that one faces one’s own limits so as to avoid indulging in them, taking them for someone else’s limits; so as to assume one’s capacity and responsibility as a subject working at modifying these limits. The patriarchal conception of difference relies heavily on biological essences. In refusing such a contextualization of difference, we have to remain aware of the necessary dialectics of closure and openness. If in breaking with patriarchal closures feminism leads us to a series of must’s and must-not’s, then this only leads us to other closures. And these closures will then have to be re-opened again so that we can keep on growing and modifying the limits in which we tend to settle down.

Difference is not otherness. And while otherness has its laws and interdictions, difference always implies the interdependency of these two-sided feminist gestures: that of affirming “I am like you” while pointing insistently to the difference, and that of reminding “I am different” while unsettling every definition of otherness arrived at.

DON'T STOP IN THE DARK

Trinh T. Minh-ha

First published in *Printed Project*, núm. 11, 2009. («Farewell to Post-Colonialism: Querying the Guangzhou Triennial 2008»), ed. S. Maharaj & D. Albrecht.

Trans-event, boundary event: perhaps this is how I could situate my work. For me, what is cinematic, poetic and political *thrives* at the boundaries of cinema, poetry, and politics. Yet few art works deal with the boundaries of art rather than constituting a mere instrument for self-expression or for information. Films and installations, as I conceive them, are all experiences of limits—or of the boundless within the bound. Each is realized at the borders of several cultures, genres, or realms (visual, musical, verbal, for example); each constitutes in its own way a questioning of these borders.

The Politics of Forms and Forces

Power relations lay at the core of normative representations.

The politics of form can neither be reduced to the series of “-ism”s that mark social and artistic movements, nor equated with questions of genres, styles and composition, or representation. Form in its radical sense should address the formless as it ultimately refers to the processes of life and death. Affirming form is recognising the important contribution of each vibrant life as a continual creative process. All the while, letting form go is acknowledging our own mortality—or the necessity to work with the limits of every instance of form.

In these times of ending and returning postcolonial struggles, postmodern recovery and “green sustainability” (to use some trendy terms), artists working in third intervals, at the margins of mainstream productivity would have to be at once very primitive and very cultured. Awkwardly, efficiently “low” and competently, unfittingly “high”; shuttling effortlessly between the *avant-* and *arrière-garde* and surfing in and out from the middle, between all fixed extremities. Socially marginalised groups could thus be both provocatively and defiantly vernacular.

“Remember the rules of night passage. Don't stop in the dark or you'll be lost. Move to the rhythm of your senses. Go where the

road is alive”, said a character in *Night Passage*, a feature film I co-directed with Jean-Paul Bourdier in 2004. The crossroads are where the dynamics of film events lies. They are empty centers thanks to which an indefinite number of paths can converge and part in a new direction. Inter-, multi-, post- and trans-: these are the pre-fixes of our times. They define the before, after, during, and between of social and ethical consciousness. Each has a history and a seemingly precise moment of appearance, dis-appearance and re-appearance. Although bound to specifics, they are, in fact, all related as trans-event.

In ancient African and Asian “arts”, if composition, legibility or resemblance never really constitutes the criteria for true artistic work, it is mainly because rather than abiding by form or content, emphasis is laid on the “breath” that animates a work and brings it to life. In my practice, such a work remains attentive to its own “nature”, to the movement of its unseen undercurrents, and to its continual processes of formation and de-formation. Highly attuned to moments of transition and to the transience of visible realities, it is free to move between genres, between the photographic realism of mainstream films, the materiality of experimental films and the anti-photographic of virtual reality.

As it is known from analyses of the film world, there are two distinct Western avant-gardes: one based on the tradition of the visual arts, and the other, on the tradition of theater and literature. Working at hiding the stage, mainstream narratives are all theater; and it is with money power (in buying locations and expertise) that they naturalise their artifices. (It suffices to listen to these narratives without looking at the pictures to realise how much they remain entrenched in “acting” and theatrical delivery.) Whereas experimental films borrow so heavily from painting and plastic arts that they're often conceived in negative reaction, against anything considered to be impure to their vision—such as the verbal dimension and other non-visual concerns.

In playing with both traditions of the avant-garde, my work continues to raise questions about the social and political dimension of form. Not only is it at odds with classifications such as documentary, fiction, or film art, it also explicitly explores the fluid relation to infinity within the finite. To use an image, it is not only the shape or the flowers and fruits of a plant that matter, it's the sap that runs through it.

Every visual manifestation is experienced as being at once definite in its structural condensation and indefinite in the fluidity of its spirit. In the tuning in with the forces of a life event, one can say that form is attained only to address the formless. Working with an ear and eye for the empty field of possibilities and potentials allows one to remain in touch with the infiniteness of a form that is also no form. Rather than merely speaking of production of images or of meaning, one can approach image making as a net of under- and crosscurrents—a manifesting of forces.

When reality starts speaking to us differently, it leads to what I've called *an elsewhere within here*. My films and installations are made to shift our perception of reality and to experience images as immersed in the whole of our body. This is aesthetics radical force. Indeed, without an awareness of its social and existential dimension, aesthetics remains largely conventional and normative. In realising an installation or a film event, I work less with digital per se than with the way of the digital. It is not a question of producing a nonhuman, automated vision, nor that of turning every live action image into data for manipulation and special effect purposes. Understanding what is radical to digital imaging allows one to work differently with the experience of film and imaging, while soliciting from the viewer *a new seeing*.

Seeing Sounds Hearing Images

Experimenting with words, images, and sound I find myself constantly struggling with the limits of both language and image. Certain viewers have related to my films and installations as to musical scores, others have repeatedly used the terms “poetic”, “sculptural”, “spatial and architectural” to describe them. The film *Naked Spaces—Living is Round* (1985) has, for example, been compared to an Indian musical raga, while *Reassemblage* (1983) was said, in its use of silences, to induce in the viewers a state where “they see sounds and hear images”. Form and content are inseparable in my work, for they are *both* equally historical and plastic. Here, reality in its social and historical dimension is not a material for artistic reflection or political commitment; it is what powerfully draws one to cinema and yet cannot be captured without dissolving itself in its fragile essence when one approaches it without subtlety and vul-

nerability. As stated in *Reassemblage*, but realised in all aspects of my film practice, “I do not intend to speak about, only [to speak] near by.”

The making of each work transforms the way I see myself and the world around me. Once I start engaging in the process of making a film or in any artistic excursion, I am also embarking upon a journey whose point of arrival is unknown to me. The work here is a gift. Whether it is worth passing it on or not depends on whether it succeeds in taking me elsewhere than where I started out. Because my work has often proven to be disturbing in the way it unsettles old viewing and thinking habits, and because of the ensuing hostility it has encountered, I have had to learn to speak lucidly about it. But, for me, intentions and preconceived ideas have a very limited role in the creative process. Most fascinating are the impasses, the blind procedures, the magical accidents, the unwanted discoveries, as well as the time wasted, the useless moves, the resonances generated despite one's wishes and unknown to oneself in advance, hence unforeseeable to the performers and to the viewers during the unfolding of time on screen (film or video).

In these works where the boundaries of either film or art are pushed, viewers often find themselves at a loss—in a foreign land that puts them in a state of heightened uncertainty as to what they are *really* seeing or hearing. For example, time, spatial relations, voice, and rhythm, are for me some of the most revealing elements in image and sound work. Whether one is conscious of it or not, rhythm marks one's experience of film. A commentary, a dialogue in film is first viewed and felt as a rhythm, a sound and a color before it takes on a meaning. So in conceiving an image, a shot or a sequence, one is above all working with rhythm. However, for me, rhythm is also not synonymous with action or editing, nor is it a mere aesthetic device. Gertrude Stein wrote about acquiring the rhythm of a person's personality by listening, seeing, and feeling. Rhythm is what determines nonverbally the quality of a relationship—between and within each component of the sound image. It should convey a multiplicity of experiences between what is seen and what is heard; experiences in which neither the word is ruled by the image, nor the image by the word; and hence experiences which can continually shift one's ground in one's perception of people and events.

In the process of visualising reality, if cultural as well as gender, sexual and racial diversities have always been an important part of the criteria for selecting crew and cast, story and subject, location and geopolitical context; they were not upheld for their own sake. What I find infinitely more challenging is to work on and from multiplicity. The term, as used here, should neither be equated with liberal pluralism nor confused with multiculturalism as taunted by the mainstream media. In normalising diversity, multiculturalism remains deceptively colour-blind and utterly divisive. Its bland melting-pot logic denies the racism and sexism that lies at the core of biopower and biopolitics. Rather than having difference treated as mere conflict, in my work difference comes with the art of spacing and is creatively trans-cultural.

Here *trans-* is not merely a movement across separate entities and rigid boundaries, but one in which the traveling is the very place of dwelling (and vice versa), and leaving is a way of returning home—to one's most intimate self. Cultural difference is not a matter of accumulating or juxtaposing several cultures whose boundaries remain intact. The crossing required in the transcultural undermines fixed notions of identity and border, and questions "culture" in its specificity and its very formation.

Multiplicity further defines the time-space in which the different elements of the visual and sonic fabric (images, graphics, words, music, and environmental sounds) are woven. Their expansive relation in my works is not one of domination and subordination. Ear and eye, for example, never duplicate one another. They interact in counterpoints, syncopations, off beats, and polyrhythms—to borrow some musical terms. Rhythm is the base from which form is created and undone. It determines both social and sensual relationships. In the play of hear and see, silence and sound, stillness and movement, the hearing eye and the speaking ear are constantly at play, and form and formless are the two facets of a single process—or of life and death.

The Seismographic Needle

A creative journey cannot in any way be repeated. This is the impasse I've always faced with each project. One experiences a micro-death with the completion and the birth of each work. And it

is this death that allows one to go toward things always as if for the first time.

Aside from wishing to transform and to be transformed in creating—to sensitise people to other ways of experiencing film and art, and hence of letting reality speak—I also hope that the circulation and exhibition of my work will contribute to redefining the notion of "audience", by which people tend to confuse marketing power and standardisation of needs with the ability to speak across boundaries of language, class, gender, and culture, for example. For people working in media networks, the notion of the "general public" has no reality; all is a question of audience-targeting in the process of commodification. There is, therefore, more than one way to understand what a "wide audience" is: in terms of quantity (according to sales opportunities), or in terms of ability to offer different experiences to different social groups among viewers, for example. It is the latter that I continue to explore, for in the context of experimentations, to know or not to know whom one is addressing one's work to can both leave one trapped in a form of escapism; despite one's resistance to the mainstreaming of art, one cannot continue to protect oneself by remaining safely within identified limits.

Each work made is, for me, a bottle thrown into the sea. By threading the limits of known and unknown audiences, I am bound to modify these limits, whose demarcations change with each work and remain unpredictable to me. Unlike commercial work or straight oppositional work, critical artistic work offers neither immediate solution nor immediate gratification. They are not immediately useful or effective but can act in the long term, haunting their viewers, changing their perception of life. As filmmaker Robert Bresson nicely put it, "to be original is to wish to do like everybody else without ever succeeding to do so."

It is said that the artist is like a seismographic needle—one who feels with acute intensity the slightest changes that occur around them, one who remains keenly alert to what tends to go unnoticed or to be taken for granted in daily life. Artists are often threatened by the common opinion that a society can very well do without art and that their activities in urgent political situations are of little value. But throughout the course of history, across cultures and nations, one also knows that the artist's activity is considered suspect because it disturbs the status quo or the comfort and security of stabilised meanings and normalised practices.

I believe one should struggle at the front where one is best. Art is a form of production. Aware, however, that oppression can be located both in the story told and in the telling of the story, an art critical of social reality neither relies on mere consensus nor does it ask permission from ideology. The works I have been producing can be viewed in general as different attempts to deal creatively with cultural difference (the difference both *between* cultures and *within* a culture). They seek to enhance our understanding of the heterogeneous societies in which we live, while inviting the viewer to reflect on the conventional relation between supplier and consumer in media production and spectatorship.

Curator: Manuel J. Borja-Villel

PROGRAM IN ZUMZEIG COOPERATIVE:

Monday 27 October, 7.30 pm

What About China?

Screening and colloquium with Trinh T. Minh-ha and Manuel Borja-Villel.

Tuesday 4 November, 7 pm

Reassemblage

Tuesday 11 November, 7 pm

Naked Spaces - Living is Round

Tuesday 18 November, 9.45 pm

Surname Viet Given Name Nam

Tuesday 25 November, 9.30 pm

Shoot For The Contents

Tuesday 2 December, 7 pm

A Tale of Love

Tuesday 9 December, 7 pm

The Fourth Dimension

Tuesday 16 December, 7 pm

Night Passage

Tuesday 23 December, 7 pm

Forgetting Vietnam

C/ Béjar, 53. 08014 Barcelona

Tickets: www.zumzeigcine.coop

La Virreina Centre de la Imatge

Palau de la Virreina

La Rambla, 99. 08002 Barcelona

Opening hours:

Tuesday to Sunday and public holidays,

11 am to 8 pm

Closed holidays: December 25 and 26 and

January 1

Free entry



#TrinhTMinh-ha

@lavrreinaci

barcelona.cat/lavirreina