

SUSANA BLAS

Trinh T. Minh-ha, on the moving frontier

“Why do we continue to be oppressed and continue to oppress others? It’s all much more complex than the positioning of the sources of power that you get in a certain type of political cinema. The political can be seen from many different angles; it is not enough just to centre on a political theme and then reproduce the entire ideological language of the mainstream and its oppressive mechanisms. All aspects of the film need to be political, even the formal and structural ones, not just the contents”ⁱ.

This was Trinh T Minh-ha’s categorical reply when asked about the ideological commitment from which she builds her films. This clarity of principles is not at odds with the polysemy and breadth of perspective that abounds in her films and theoretical essays; with that creative ambiguity with which she works, with her elegant championing of nomadism from the moving frontier.

“For me the question of hybridisation and cultures has never been a question of eliminating the frontier. Human beings are constantly inventing borders, and these borders, which may be political, strategic or tactical, should not be seen as an end in themselves. The idea of nomadism has taken on a new momentum in our times. Being dislocated or in constant reinvention is the best argument for explaining the changes and the fractures in the construction and destruction of identities and, because of that, we need moving frontiers. What we need to do is change the borders and the limits once they begin to restrict us”ⁱⁱ.

Minh-ha’s filmography occupies an important place within that “other history” of the documentary and of feminist film and video.

Minh-ha shares this quest for fresh air with other female directors working in documentary cinema, cinematic essay, autobiographic cinema, home movies, ethnographic documents, art films and combative video, who have challenged the univocal patriarchal view, making inroads in a variety of areas and re-writing the notions of “fiction” and “reality”, of history and histories. Chantal Ackerman, Agnès Varda, Mira Nair, Ulrike Ottinger and Solveig Anspach, among others, are breaking down the limits between fiction and “reality”; Ivonne Rainer, Lourdes Portillo, Barbara Hammer, Naomi Kawase and Trinh T Minh-ha herself are trying to find new forms of commitment in experimental language.

“Sometimes it annoys me to be called a feminist film-maker—depending who uses the term and in what context. The important thing is what people mean by that label, because it can just be an authoritarian attempt to limit the framework I have to work in as a feminist. At the same time, labels are always being flashed around in our world and sometimes they’re simply a way of understanding each other. When people speak of feminism they’re not always referring to the world of women, but to a consciousness which informs the actions of both men and women in our everyday life. Seen from this point of view, being a feminist means sustaining those actions, that critical consciousness with regard to society and its oppressions”ⁱⁱⁱ.

Playing at absent-mindedness: the combative force of the fragmentary, the lyrical and the unsuspected.

The impact of Minh-ha's first film, *Reassemblage*, has often been remarked on. Shot in Senegal in 1982 in 16 mm, the subject matter came as a surprise to those who expected the film-maker to go in search of her Vietnamese roots, or of some cultural area closer to her own particular biography. But this preference of Minh-ha's for the borders, for the unsuspected, the fringe, has proved to be a constant throughout her career. Part of her working method frequently involves digging into the unknown in order to untangle a web which is ultimately linked to our own. Africa represented that territory "from which to look further".

Reassemblage (1982) and *Naked Spaces-Living is Round* (1985) soon became icons of the "other documentary" cinema. In both films, Minh-ha harshly questioned the scientific pretensions of a supposedly objective comparative anthropology; the ethnocentric western presentations of Africa and African women and the realist pretensions of any documentary film. In contrast to this type of closed, "supposedly neutral" film, which reinforces the colonialist stereotypes of the "primitive", the author uses open textual strategies which are continuously being re-written, without trying to offer totalising explanations. In *Naked Spaces*, the explanatory voice of the narrator is replaced by that of the women from the three cultures studied. In *Reassemblage*, the narrative thread is lost altogether.

In conventional, supposedly informative and educational, ethnographic films, the spectator is turned into a *voyeur*, distanced from the culture being observed and placed in a dominant position with regard to the subjects being filmed.

Minh-ha combines different forms of writing, of narratives: the poetic and the theoretical. Her textual discourse displays a preference for the fragment. *Reassemblage*, for example, uses close-ups, changes in the way of registering and commenting, "repetitions" of key phrases: discontinuity, fragmentation and collage. The verbal repetitions to be found in Minh-ha's films are not exact repetitions fixing the meaning of the image, but quite the opposite. In the "repetition", a word, an intonation, the syntax of the phrase, is changed, converting the meaning of the image into something unstable and polysemous.

At the same time, every new project by Minh-ha is a new formal and structural challenge, a new encounter with a different culture, with a geographical space; a new political challenge.

In *Shoot for the Contents* (102 minutes, 1991), dealing with the relationship between art, culture and politics in China, she opted for a very stylised image (comparing well with that of rural China) and a polysemy of voices, to mark different social scales. In *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* (1989), where she examined national identity and culture through the battles of Vietnamese women, her weapon of choice was monologue, accompanied

again by the use of repetition; she deconstructed the notion of the interview, seen as artifice, and added autobiographical devices, such as letters and diaries.

But perhaps *A Tale of Love* (1995), her fifth film and her first in 35 mm, is my favourite, because of the way in which it interweaves fiction and documentary with an unexpected magic. *A Tale of Love* reflects on the traditional notions of love and of femininity. With an experimental workmanship, the narration follows the tracks of a woman in love with love, in a story inspired by *The Tale of Kieu*, a nineteenth-century Vietnamese poem. In both this film and in *Fourth Dimension* (2001), which examines the rituals of Japanese culture and its concept of time, the lyricism and the beauty of the images never make any concession to the conventions of standard cinematographic language. The same is also true of her latest film, *Night Passage* (2005), which traces a young woman's oneiric and spiritual journey with her best friend and a little boy on a train.

We can see how her works, which develop to a complex and personal formal structure, are constantly being "rewritten" while they are being created, at every stage of the work. Her cinema can combine very profound previous formal and ideological strategies, with a free-flowing attitude to the text and the project during the filming and editing phases, allowing it to be transformed, contaminated, developed and grown through unsuspected labyrinths.

"Although I have published the scripts of my films, they were never written that way before shooting the film. They were re-written during the process of shooting and editing. So they took on their final form after the film was completely finished. For me, the script is a kind of skeleton, something like a dead body which the film leaves behind once it is complete"^{iv}.

How language operates....

It is also true that her work has been called into question by some researchers, who see a contradiction between her theoretical pretensions, as established in her essays, and the real effects of her cinema on the spectator. After analysing *Reassemblage* and *Naked Spaces*, Henrietta Moore^v questions how it is possible that, despite the fact that Trinh T Minh-ha seeks to avoid any didactic form in her films, her works can ultimately be interpreted in the exact opposite way, as if to say "Reality is like this". Moore says that the average spectator does not appreciate the reflective films in the way the director intends and there is even a risk that this type of documentary may reinforce prejudices and stereotypes. For the reader, she says, it is not clear that those remarks have to be analysed critically, as different perspectives of reality. That plurality of voices, those deconstructive texts, end up being decontextualized; and since no voice is given priority, the representations might be interpreted from the position of a naive empiricism, where words and images speak for themselves, and the image / sound is interpreted as a narrative that only corroborates what is displayed.

Without wanting to underestimate these objections, I would say that an open discourse, travelling the territory of creative ambiguity, may run greater risks, but these are always worthwhile... perhaps it is not a question so much of understanding certain ideological contents, or of accessing each of the critical perspectives contributed, but of examining more closely “different thought processes”, regardless of whether we assimilate all the different degrees.

Perhaps it is merely a question of embarking on a personal journey, of creative nomadism... of imagining a moving border, from which to attempt to think in another way:

“I do hear from a number of academics that my books are very difficult. And I don’t deny this. On the other hand, I’ve also met people who left school at the age of fifteen or who have no training for theoretical thought. They come across these books by accident and they can’t read many pages in one go, but they have no concern for that, they just steadily read a few pages at a time and say it’s incredible, because they feel a lot of affinity with the process of my thought and can follow it so well. If one simply observes how language operates—creating all these circuits within itself [...]—and how it works on us constantly, then these films are very easy to “understand.”^{vi}

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Trinh T. Minh-ha is a film director, writer and composer. She was born in Vietnam and moved to the United States in 1970. In 1974 and 1975 she lived and taught in Paris, and from 1977 to 1980 she lived in Senegal. She studied music and composition, French literature and musical ethnology in Vietnam, the Philippines, France and the US. She is now a professor of *Women's studies and Rhetoric (Film)* at the University of California, Berkeley.

Filmography Trinh T. Minh-ha

- 2004 *Night Passage* (fiction)
- 2001 *The Fourth Dimension*
- 1995 *A Tale of Love* (fiction)
- 1991 *Shoot for the Contents*
- 1989 *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*
- 1985 *Naked Spaces - Living is Round*
- 1982 *Reassemblage*

Leading books:

- The Digital Film Event*. New York : Routledge, 2005.
- Cinema Interval*. New York : Routledge, 1999.
- Drawn from African Dwellings*. (In collaboration with Jean-Paul Bourdier). Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1996
- Framer Framed*. New York : Routledge, 1992.

When the Moon Waxes Red : Representation, gender and cultural politics. New York : Routledge, 1991.

Out There : Marginalisation in Contemporary Culture. New York : New Museum of Contemporary Art ; Cambridge, Massachusetts : MIT Press, 1990

Woman, Native, Other : Writing postcoloniality and feminism. Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1989

En minuscules. Libro de poemas. Paris : Edition Le Meridien, 1987

African Spaces : Designs for Living in Upper Volta. (In collaboration with Jean-Paul Bourdier). London ; New York : Africana Pub. Co., 1985

Un art sans oeuvre. Lathrup Village, Michigan. : International Book Publishers, Inc., 1981

Installations by Trinh T. Minh-ha

- *The Desert is Watching* (in collaboration with Jean-Paul Bourdier, 2003, Kyoto Art Biennale)
- *Nothing But Ways* (in collaboration with L Kirby, 1999, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco)

Music composed by Trinh T. Minh-ha

- *Poems.* Composition for Percussion Ensemble. Premiere by the Univ. of Illinois Percussion Ensemble, Denis Wiziecki, Director. 9 April 1976.
- *Four Pieces for Electronic Music.* 1975 Performances at the Univ. of Illinois.

NOTES & REFERENCES

ⁱ Declarations by Trinh T. Minh-ha in the article: "Trinh T. Minh-ha: teoría y práctica del cine multicultural" in "Miradas" magazine, Escuela Internacional de Cine y Televisión de Cuba.

ⁱⁱ *Ibíd.*

ⁱⁱⁱ *Op. Cit.*

^{iv} *Op. Cit.*

^v *MOORE, H.* "Trinh T. Minh-ha Observed: Anthropology and Others", in Taylor, Lucien (ed) *Visualizing Theory.* London : Routledge, 1994.

^{vi} Statement taken from "When The Eye Frames Red", interview by Akira Mizuta Lippit with Trinh T. Minh-ha. http://www.ntticc.or.jp/pub/ic_mag/ic028/html/130e.html