

## From a Hybrid Place

with Judith Mayne

Mayne: One **O**f the things I admire about your work—your films as well as your book *Woman, Native, Other*--is that it resists any easy categories. Your book is a work **O**f theory, but it is very poetic: the reader has a different relationship to it than is usually the case in theoretical writing. Your films are obviously not documentaries in any classic sense, and it's not accurate to call them "commentaries" on the documentary genre either. Could you talk about this resistance to categorization that seems to be a crucial part **of your** work?

Trinh: I am always working at the borderlines of several shifting categories, stretching out to the limits of things, learning about my own limits and how to modify them. The book, for example, was completed in 1983. It took me that long to find a publisher. Ironically enough (although not surprisingly), what I went through in submitting it for publication seemed to be sadly consistent with certain repressed realities of women's writing and publishing, which I discussed in its very first chapter. The book was rejected by no less than thirty-three presses. The kind

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Interview conducted by Judith Mayne in May 1990, when Surname *Viet* Given Name *Nam* was screened at the Wexner Center for the Arts. First published as "Feminism, Filmmaking and Postcolonialism: An Interview with Trinh T. Minh-ha," in *Feminisms*, September–October (part I) and November–December (part II) 1990; and in *Afterimage* 18, no. 5, December 1990.

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of problems it repeatedly encountered had precisely to do with marketable categories and disciplinary regulations; in other words, with conformist borders. Not only was the focus on postcolonial positionings and on women of color as a subject and as subjects of little interest to publishers then, but what bothered them most was the writing itself.

For academics, "scholarly" is a normative territory that they own all for themselves, hence theory is no theory if it is not dispensed in a way recognizable to and validated by them. The mixing of different modes of writing; the mutual challenge of theoretical and poetical, discursive and "non-discursive" languages; the strategic use of stereotyped expressions in exposing stereotypical thinking; all these attempts at introducing a break into the fixed norms of the Master's confident prevailing discourses are easily misread, dismissed, or obscured in the name of "good writing," of "theory," or of "scholarly work." I was continually sent back and forth from one publisher to another-commercial, academic, and small presses-each one equally convinced in its kind suggestions that the book would fit better in the other marketing context. What transpired through all the comments I received was mainly that the work never quite corresponded to what these diverse publishers were "looking for." Obviously, as they said, they were very interested in writings "from the Third World," but this one "would not fit in the series" they had or were in the process of establishing. An editor of a small press specializing in creative writing seriously felt he was being helpful when he decreed "it's not good writing because it's too impure."

It was a depressing experience. But I accept it as part of the struggle that this book is carrying on. I have to find a place for myself since I am at odds with all these categories of writings and modes of theorizing. A straight counterdiscourse is no longer threatening. It ultimately contributes to things remaining in place, because it tends more often than not to block critical thinking; it is unable to do much but repeat itself through the same anti-repressive rhetoric of modernist ideology. Let's take the example of a notion in vogue like "interdisciplinary." This notion is usually carried out in practice as the mere juxtaposition of a number of different disciplines. In such a politics of pluralist exchange and dialogue the concept of "inter-" (trans)formation and growth is typically reduced to a question of proper accumulation and acquisition. The disciplines are simply added, put next to one another with their boundaries kept intact; the participants continue happily to speak within their expertise, from a position of authority. It is rare to see such a notion stretched to the limits, so that the fences between disciplines are pulled down. Borderlines remain then strategic and contingent, as they constantly cancel themselves out. This "new" ground, always in the making, is what interests me most in everything I do. It

constitutes **the** site where the very **idea** of a discipline, a **specialization**, and an expertise is challenged. No single field, profession, or creator **can** "own" it.

I **never** think of **my** films as specifically documentary or fictional, except when I send **them** off to festivals. Then I **have** to choose my jury. It is with this jury in mind that I place the film in a category. For years, no matter which one I chose, it **seemed** as if I constantly **made** the "wrong" selection. When I **chose** "documentary," I knew the problem would have to do with what people expect from a documentary and **the** ensuing rigidity of criteria. Most of these specialized jurors not only had difficulty in accepting my films as documentaries but also hardly considered **them** befitting the social, educational, or ethnographic categories. The same problem occurred **when** I opted for "film art" or "experimental," because jurors of such a category tend to see "experimental" **as a genre on its own rather than** as a critical venture working upon "genre" itself. Many still hold on to a mystical concept of "visionary art," and any preoccupation with or attempt at exposing ideology is **rejected as** "CORRUPT"-lacking pure vision, hence being no real Art. Now it seems that as my work is getting better known the categories become less important. But these used to be something that completely limited the ground on which the films could circulate.

*M: You mention the word "borderline" several times, and the immediate connection that comes to mind is Gloria Anzaldua's Borderlands/La Frontera. That notion of a space in between conventional opposing pairs has been very important to the work of many women of color. I wonder how you see your own work in relation to that of other women writers of color?*

T: I really like **Anzaldua's** works, and I often quote her in my own writings. I don't want to collapse all fights into one, however. I do realize the question of borderlines is particularly exigent in the **Latina/Latino** community because for many it remains physically an acute, everyday experience. This being said, and without forgetting the specificities of each context, I also recognize the **commonalities** between that border fight and the ones carried out, literally as well as figuratively, by women of color across ethnicities and cultures.

As in all struggles there are divergences among us; mostly in terms of **strategy** and **location**, I would say, but sometimes also in terms of objective and direction. What I understand of the struggle of women of color, however, is that our voices and silences across difference are so many attempts at articulating this always-emerging-already-distorted place that remains so difficult, on the one hand, for the First World even to recognize, and on the other, for our own communities to accept to venture into, for fear of losing what has been a costly gain through past struggles.

To unlearn the reactive language that promotes separatism and self-enclosure by essentializing a denied identity requires more than willingness and self-criticism. I don't mean simply to reject this language (a reactive front is at times necessary for consciousness to emerge) but rather to displace it and play with it, or to play it out like a musical score.

Many of the younger diasporic generation who come forth today, on the artistic as well as the theoretical scene, have voiced their discomfort with any safeguarding of boundaries on either side of the border. This is precisely because the repressed complexities of the politics of identity have been fully exposed. "Identity" has now become more a point of departure than an end point in the struggle. SO although we understand the necessity of acknowledging this notion of identity in politicizing the personal, we also don't want to be limited to it. Dominated and marginalized people have been socialized to see always more than their own point of view. In the complex reality of postcoloniality it is therefore vital to assume one's radical "impurity" and to recognize the necessity of speaking from a hybrid place, hence of saying at least two, three things at a time.

*M: What's loosely called "French theory" has obviously influenced you*

*T: France colonized Vietnam for a long time. Despite having fiercely resisted the French colonials, someone like Ho Chi Minh would admit that he preferred the French mentality to the American one. Colonialism really has a grip on its people. At a recent conference on African cinema in San Francisco, the Mauritanian filmmaker Med Hondo started out saying a few lines in perfect English, but he immediately ruptured his speech by saying that he was colonized first by the French, and he went on in French for the rest of the session! "French theory" is certainly part of my hybrid reality, although I would say it is only one part among others.*

*M: At one point in your book, commenting on the work of Helene Cixous, you say, "The One is the All and the All is the One; and yet the One remains the One and the All the All. Not two, not One either. This is what Zen has been repeating for centuries." I think there is something very contemplative about your films and your writing, a meditative quality. So-called "high theorists" never want to talk about a spiritual element in the text, but I sense that element very strongly in your work--specifically in the references to Zen, but more generally in your approach to representation.*

*T: This is a point hardly ever discussed. Since it took so long to find a publisher for the book, I had to resort to other publishing venues. Hence, some parts excerpted for this purpose had appeared here and there, in different journals. Now*

people confidently talk about earlier versions that “were later elaborated in the book,” but in fact the book was written in its entirety long before any of these “articles” came out. After submitting these “excerpts” to journals, I received detailed comments from academic readers whose advice was sought by the concerned editors. Some of the readers, indeed, had a major problem with the Zen materials included, **which they** considered to be useless in a theoretical context. They **reacted** most scornfully, **focusing** on **the** “what” and turning a blind eye to the “how”-the way the materials are used and the inter-links created (as with Cixous’s feminism in the example you mentioned).

I *can* understand such a reaction, especially living in California. I think that Zen-as it has spread in the West, especially in the 60s, with prominent names like John Cage, Alan Watts, Allen Ginsburg-has been mystified in its very demystifying practices. (This despite and *not* because of **the** works of the individuals mentioned.) **Zen** was recuperated into a dualistic and compartmentalized worldview. Speaking *again* of classifications and borders, you are here either “holistic” or “analytical,” but you can’t possibly be both, because the two *are* **made** into absolute antithetical stances. Zen has **the** gift to frustrate and infuriate **the** rational mind, which hurriedly dismisses it as simply one more form of mystification. So Zen’s tenets are a real problem for a number of academics; but I myself do not operate within such divisions, and I don’t see why I have to be bound to them. Spirituality cannot be reified. It’s difficult to talk about it, not only because it escapes the principles of logic but also because “spiritual” itself is an impossible term: disinherited and vacated in this society of reification, hence not easy to use without exacting negotiations. The first book I wrote in 1976–77, *Un Art sans oeuvre* (An art without masterpiece, published in 1981), includes a chapter relating the works of Jacques Derrida and Antonin Artaud to those of Krishnamurti and Zen Buddhism. For me many of Derrida’s theories, including the critique of the metaphysics of presence, are forces that have been active in Zen and in **other** forms of Buddhism for centuries. So what he says is not really “new,” but the way he puts them into discourse, the links **he** makes, *arc*. The weaving of Zen in my text is therefore not a “return to my roots” but a grafting of several cultures onto a single body-an acknowledgment of the heterogeneity of my own cultural background.

M: *This connects to one of the issues you discussed at the screening last night, the notion of “negative space.”*

T: In my films the notion of negative space has always been crucial. The “object-oriented camera”--a camera that focuses only on catching **the** object and is eager to objectify--obscures the role of negative space. I don’t mean **the** ground behind the

filmed subject or the field surrounding it, but rather the space that makes both composition and framing possible, that characterizes the way an image breathes. To see negative space as intensely as the figure and the field, instead of subjecting it to the latter in cinematography, mise-en-scene, and narrativity, implies a whole different way of looking at and of relating to things. This is not far from the notion of the Void in Asian philosophies. People often don't even know what you are talking about when you mention the vitality of the Void in the relationships between object and non-object, or between I and non-I. Again, they may think it's a form of mystification. This is a problem with reifying, binarist thinking: emptiness here is not merely opposed to fullness or objecthood; it is the very site that makes forms and contents possible—that is, also inseparable.

*M: I'm curious how you see your most recent film in relationship to your two previous films, both of which depict the women of Africa and your relationship, as an Asian woman, to Africa. I'm thinking here especially of the term "hybridization" that you used last night to describe your approach to filmmaking.*

*T: The title of the film—Surname Viet Given Name Nam—is taken from recent socialist tradition. When a man encounters a woman, feels drawn to her, and wants to flirt with her, he teasingly asks, "Young woman, are you married yet?" If the answer is negative, instead of saying no, she will reciprocate, "Yes, his surname is Viet and his given name is Nam." In this apparently benign reply the nation-gender relationship immediately raises questions. One of the recurring motifs in the film is the wedding, women being married: to a little boy or to a polygamous husband through family arrangements; to the cause, the fatherland, the state; to a foreigner bowing *a la* Vietnamese; then to a native man in Western outfit. The predicament of married women, which is woven here with the condition of single women insinuated or directly commented upon in poetry, proverbs, and popular stories, is unfolded in contexts of Vietnam that cut across the times before, during and after the revolution, including the periods of Chinese and French dominations, as well as the shift to life in the Vietnamese community in the United States. As one interviewee affirms toward the end of the film, whether a woman marries a foreigner or a Vietnamese, her surname will always remain "Viet" and her given name "Nam." A slight mutation of meaning occurs in that affirmation as it gets transferred from one context to another.*

The question of nation and gender is opened up in a multiply layered way. The inquiry into identity provides another example. The latter can be said to develop in the film through a (re)appropriation of the inappropriate(d) body—the relations indirectly built up between the problematics of translation; the multiple (re)naming

of a country; and the plural expropriation (owning, selling, humiliating, burning, exposing, glorifying) of women's bodies. Translation, like identity, is a question of grafting several cultures onto a single body. For example, the name of Trieu Thi Trinh, one of the historical heroines who resisted Chinese domination, has at least five variations (heard and seen on screen); each of these is a different reading, a different emphasis of her attributes-her lineage (by her last name), her gender and age status, her leadership, or merely her simplicity. Similarly, each of the numerous names used to designate Vietnam (also heard and seen on screen) relates to a historical period of the nation, thereby to the diverse outside and inside influences that have contributed to what is viewed as the Vietnamese culture. So hybridization here refers to a negotiation of the difference not merely between cultures, between First World and Third World, but more importantly within the culture. This plural singularity and the problematization of the insider-outsider position are precisely what I have explored at length in my previous films, although in a way that is hardly comparable since it is so differently contextualized.

*M: One of the most striking features of Surname Viet Given Name Nam is your exploration of different modes of storytelling, or what you described last evening as two different kinds of truth.*

*T: Storytelling is an ongoing field of exploration in all of my works, hence a vast subject to discuss. I'm afraid I can only cover a few aspects of it here. The interviews originally carried out by Mai Thu Van in Vietnam were published in the book *Vietnam: un peuple, d e s voix* (Paris: Pierre Horat, 1983. Vietnam: one people, many voices). I ran across this book while browsing in a small bookstore in France some years ago. It was certainly a discovery. I was very moved, both by the stories of the women interviewed and by the personal story of the author herself. Born in New Caledonia, she is a second-generation exile, her mother having been sent there by force to work in nickel mines because her village was among those that rose in rebellion against the French colonials. Mai came to Paris at the age of twenty-three to work and study and went to Vietnam in 197X to research Vietnamese women, which resulted in the book mentioned. Being a Marxist, she landed in Hanoi with "a plethora of images of liberated women who have disturbed old concepts to meet socialism," and her stay there, as she puts it, "had profoundly shaken [her] preconceived ideas as well as pulverized the stereotypes of (Vietnamese) women made up by the press." It took her tenacity and an almost morbid care for the truth to wait for the ice to melt, to develop trust in an atmosphere of fear and suspicion, to take the blows, and to accept the eye-opening realities of women who refused to let*

themselves be mystified as heroines in postrevolutionary times. In brief, it took her five years to collect the interviews in question.

So in using some of the interviews in my film, the question for me is: Which truth does one want to offer to the viewer? The truth that Mai spent five years to approach, or the truth that we can easily claim by setting up an interview situation, directing a microphone at a person (like myself right now!), and trying to skim the cream off the answers afterwards? The point at issue is somewhat different here, however, because when an interview is recorded and transcribed for publication you can work on it, and the length of the interviewee's replies is usually respected. But in film the problem of editing is much more acute, because you can't reword to condense, nor can you add to clarify; you can only cut. And you cut what you want people to be saying: you cut only the statement that will help you to make your point. So there are certain kinds of unintended surface truths that may emerge as unique to the filmed interview situation, but there are also other kinds that can never be accessible through this antiquated device of documentary--unless the element of realism is worked on.

Perhaps one can find an example in a film like *Chronique d'un été* (Chronicle of a Summer, 1961, by Jean Rouch), where an interviewer just pointed a microphone at people in the street, asking, "Are you happy?" The shallow answers might have been a reaction to such a question, but they also implied the shallowness of such an interview setup. The director must then "work on" this shallowness, that is, deliberately acknowledge it in order to further the film's inquiries. As spectators, our attitude toward interviews often proves to be naive. We tend to forget how tactical speech always is, no matter how naturally it seems to come out. To assume that testimonies filmed on the site are de jure more truthful than those reconstructed off the site is to forget how films are made. Every representation of truth involves elements of fiction, and the difference between so-called documentary and fiction in their depiction of reality is a question of degrees of fictitiousness. The more one tries to clarify the line dividing the two, the deeper one gets entangled in the artifice of boundaries.

The making of Surname Viet allows the practice of interviews to enter into the play of the true and the false, the real and the staged. In the first part of the film, the interviews were selected, cut, and blueprinted for reenactment. A certain length of the speech and the image was deliberately kept to preserve the autonomy of each story as it unfolded and, paradoxically, to render perceptible the play on traditional realism. The latter becomes more and more manifest as the film progresses, until further on the viewer is presented with a series of "real" interviews with the same women as in the first part, but in the explicit context of the U.S. The editing of these

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1st part - reenactment of Mai's interview in Vietnam published in her book



last interviews comes closer to the conventions of documentary as the statements are chopped up, redistributed, and woven in the filmic text with footage of the women's "real" life-activities. By using both reenacted interviews and on-site interviews and by demarcating some of their differences (in the duration, mode of address, use of English, camera work), in other words, by presenting them to the viewer together, what is visibly addressed is the invisibility of the politics of interviews and, more generally, the relations of representation.

I am not really interested in judging which truth is better than the other, but rather in working with both together to open a critical space in the viewing of the film. Whether the viewer is knowledgeable enough in cinema to attribute some of the strategies to a questioning of the conventions of documentary authority is also not the point. The viewing situation created is such that it is likely to provoke questions and reactions. By playing with the false and the true at work in the two kinds of truth, what is usually taken for granted in interviews suddenly becomes very prominent. As a bewildered Vietnamese viewer told me: "Your film is different. I can't yet tell exactly how, but I know it's different from the documentary films I am used to seeing." The recognition that the early interviews in the film are reenactments comes at different places and stages for different viewers. This is deliberately planned, as I previously suggested. Of course, as you probably noticed at yesterday's screening, some viewers were furious because they expected to be told about it at the outset of the film (as the norms dictate). But other viewers felt that to reveal the reenactment from the start would be to give away the "plot" of the film; they were uncomfortable with the lingering uncertainty, but retroactively they loved the challenge and the intermittent discomfort. I obviously do not intend to "hide" the reenactment--on the contrary--only to delay or grade its visibility for strategic purposes. Nor do I feel compelled to flatten out the film to facilitate its consumption. Instead of being a mere illustration of a point that is evident from the beginning, a film could be a constant discovery process. Much of filmmaking and storytelling relies on an ability to withhold information as well as to let go of knowledge and intention.

M: Tkr process **Of** "*recognition*" in the film is very unsettling

T: The distance between the written texts and the images is necessary. The women are asked both to embody other selves, other voices, and to drift back to their own selves, which are not really their "natural" selves but the selves they want to present or the images they want to project in front of the camera.

M: *Another kind of distance is the discrepancy between written text and voice, sometimes small—suggesting that the text is being performed.*

T: If it is unsettling, it's because the line between performance and nonperformance in these interviews is not so evident. You can't tell right away that they are staged—you do ask the question, but you can't tell for sure until you get enough "Cues."

M: *In conclusion, could you say something about the kind of work that has most influenced you?*

T: It's very difficult for me to talk about influence. Even with someone like Ho Xuan Huong, the early nineteenth-century poet quoted in the film: I knew of her, but she was hardly taught in school. I remember how perversely excited we (the students) were whenever a teacher announced that a poem of hers would be read in class. Not only because her poetry is known for its forbidden sexuality and explicit defiance of Confucian (male-chauvinist) mores, but mainly because she is a poet whose work we are never truly exposed to. All this to say that on the side of women you always have to do more; you have to be committed to reach out to non-mainstream works and to the writings of other women. This is one of the constraints that you necessarily assume as a feminist. The writing of *Woman, Native, Other* touches upon this specific issue. For example, the only chapter that deals exclusively with the world of white males is the chapter on anthropology. This chapter is also one, however, in which all the names of the representative famous *men* are replaced in the text by impersonal, stereotyped appellations ("The Great Master," "The modern anthropologist," "the wise man"). Their proper names, their "true" names, are "buried" in the footnotes.

For me there is no such thing as a one-way influence. In (re)reading women's works—actually any work—I am not sure who influences whom, for I have the feeling that I've contributed as much as I've learned. And if I take the example of a few Western writers with whom I have affinities, such as Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin, Maurice Blanchot, or Derrida, sure, I find their writings uplifting and penetrating. But our actualities are undeniably different. They have their own house to empty out, their own obsessions to pursue. However, their works do provide tools of resistance that we *can* use on our terms. Tools that also allow me independently to rediscover, let's say, Zen Buddhism or other Asian philosophies as if I were reading them for the first time; *and* vice versa. What has become more evident to

me is that I can't settle down with any single name, any single work. The only times I felt that something could strongly inspire me, and in ways that were both moving and baffling, was when I was staying in the villages in Africa. The richness of the diverse oral traditions is humbling. Again this may seem romantic to many-although in the context of other cultures it is rather "realistic." As a Yoruba song of divination says, "Anybody who meets beauty and does not look at it will soon be poor." Stories, songs, music, proverbs, as well as people's daily interactions, certainly constitute for me the most moving sources of inspiration.