TRINH T Minh-ha

When the Eye Frames Red

Interviewer: Akira MIZUTA LIPPIT

Translation: TOCHIGI Akira

Upper ——TRINH T. Minh-ha
photo: Jean-Paul Bourdier
Left——A Tale of Love
TRINH T. Minh-ha

Akira Mizuta Lippit —— I want to begin by thanking you for agreeing to sit for this interview. It's perhaps worth noting that this interview is destined, at least in the first instance, for a Japanese audience and precedes the screening, in the near future, of your films at the ICC, which includes the Japanese premier of your 1985 film Naked Spaces, Living Is Round. There has been a vibrant interest in your films and written work in Japan, where you have recently spent some time, so perhaps we can touch upon those experiences and your reception there a little later.

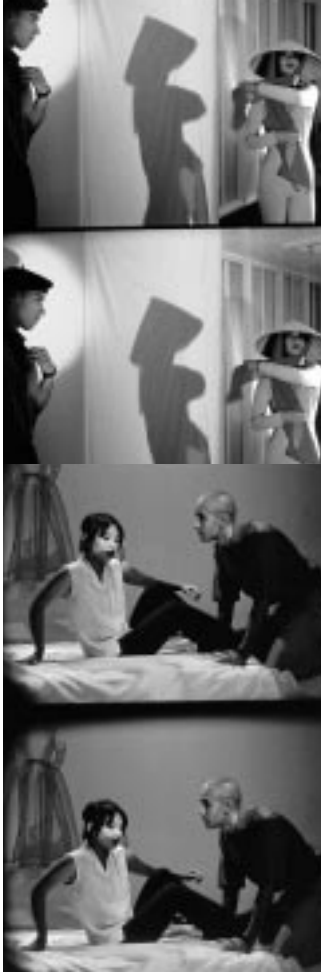
It is in some ways an extremely difficult task to approach you for an interview. The conventions of this medium assume some notion of a constant or discernable identity, an interviewee whose essential features are either already known or can be known. In the case of Trinh T. Minh-ha, one recognizes a filmmaker and a scholar, but also an artist of many shades, a perpetual traveler, and a person whose own history in the world is marked by the epistemic shifts that characterize this century and its thought. Looking back on the various interviews collected in Framer Framed, I'm struck by the sheer diversity of subjects that you speak of, but also by the sometimes anxious ways in which the interviewer tries, at times, to situate you within established traditions of experimental filmmaking, the critique of anthropology and conventional documentary, ethnography, poetics, post-colonial thought, feminist thought and activity and so forth. I'll try to resist the temptation to identify, as it were, a fixed dwelling and try instead to follow the nomadic qualities of your expansive work.

Since many of your previous interviews speak to your cultural politics and positions vis-a-vis the subject of alterity, I thought we might approach this conversation from the vantage of your films, which represent, in my opinion, absolutely discrete and distinct pieces of work, which are nonetheless bound by a very particular spirit or desire. So, perhaps to begin with this notion of a project, how do you define your film project-if you accept the notion of a project-and how does your film work fit into your broader artistic and intellectual projects?

Trinh T. Minh-ha ——When I work on a film, I am drawn very intensely to the world of images and sounds. On a basic level, such a state of creative availability and of active receptivity is in itself a "project." But the making of a film also opens up many doors to other means of creativity. It sharpens the edge between, let's say, writing for a book and writing for a film-a difference one constantly faces when words are part of the film fabric. Not only does the use of language differ markedly from one medium to another, but working with storytelling, poetry and everyday speech in cinema also makes me aware of music in ways I never thought of before. If a poem is an invisible painting, as Chinese artists put it, then a film can be all at once visible poetry, musical painting and pictorial music. The spaces between image, sound and text remain spaces of generative multiplicity, in which the function of each is not to serve nor to rule over the other, but to expose, in their tight interactions, each other's limit. What I cannot avoid experiencing at certain moments of the process is both the different strengths and limits of these tools of creativity. So it is in working constantly with these limits and with the circumstances that define them that I advance, quite blindly, actually. Even though in discussions, it does seem as if all my projects are very lucidly thought out, this comes in the making process, not before it. Most of the time I jump into a project blindly, and this is how boundaries are also displaced.

Lippit ——So you see the production of a film as something that opens up a space for writing, thinking, and learning, even as you are creating the work itself?

Trinh ——Yes, very strongly. There's a whole web of activities involved in and triggered by the making of cinematic images. I have no such thing as a preconceived idea that I want to visualize or illustrate through film. It doesn't happen that way; it's more likely through an encounter-with a person, with a group of people, with an event, or with a current of energy that is sparked by a specific



A Tale of Love（108min., 35mm, color, 1995）
photo＝TRINH T. Minh-ha

situation.

Lippit —— Your body of films suggests a certain consistency, an idea not of any totality, but of a shared quality. When thinking in the abstract about your films, they seem to offer a shape, to have and take shape, yet when one looks at the films individually, they are in many ways radically different. There persists, however, a common desire or spirit that motivates them. One motif that appears strongly in all your work involves an aesthetic or politics of travel. Another is the notion of encounter and portraiture. A portraiture that is not always of people or places but sometimes of relations to places, producing a sense in which the viewer finds herself or himself the subject of a portrait-as if the spectator is being watched.

I am interested in this dual sense of absolutely discrete projects with completely separate foci and emphases on the one hand, and the persistence of a communal space that works in your films on the other. I have noticed that interviewers often try to identify you within very specific communities and it seems impossible to do so. There is, it seems, something fundamentally nomadic about your work both in its geographical momentum but also in its intellectual or creative capacity to wander, as it were, and move-

Trinh —— Perhaps something that seems recognizable in my work and can only be realized intuitively with each film, is this tendency in pushing the limits, to lead the work, just when its structure emerges, to the very edge where its potential to return to nothing also becomes tangible. Whatever takes shape does not do so simply in order to address form. In that sense, nothing really takes shape. By going towards things while letting them come to me in the mutually transformative process of filmmaking, I am not merely "giving form." Taking shape is not a moment of arrival, and the question is not that of bringing something vague into visibility. Rather, the coming into shape is always a way to address the fact that there is no shape. Form is here an instance of formlessness, and vice-versa.

So when you talk about this sense of traveling, of wandering, and of not fitting comfortably in one group, it's not so much something that constitutes an agenda on my part as something rather intuitive that corresponds to the way I live, to the skills of survival I've had to develop, and to my own sense of identity. I'm not at all interested in giving form to the formless, which is often what many creators reach for. Rather, I'm taken in by the creative process through which the form attained acutely speaks to the fragile and infinite reality of the world of forms-or, of living and dying.

How to incorporate that sense of the infinite in

film is most exciting, even though we know that we always need a beginning and an ending, and that making a film is already to stop the flow or to offer a form. But rather than reaching a point of completion where form closes down on form, a closure can act simultaneously as an opening when it addresses the impossibility of framing reality in its subtle mobility. This is certainly one way of looking at what happens with all of my films.

The other aspect which you mentioned, which I love very much, is that, yes, there is a tendency to see the two films I shot in Africa as being alike and sometimes they are even scheduled to be screened one after the other in the same program slot. This is a terrible mistake, for Reassemblage and Naked Spaces need to be viewed as far apart from one another as possible, if the spectator's creative and critical ability is to be solicited. Such a programming decision, detrimental to the reception of the films, tells us how people continue to see films predominantly in terms of subject matter. Yet how the two films are realized and how they physically affect the viewer are radically different. As I mentioned earlier, each encounter is so utterly bound to the elements that define it, that for me, it is impossible to reproduce, identically, what has been made at different moments of one's itinerary, and with different peoples, circumstances and locations. The specificity of each encounter would dictate a different move for each film. In other words, each film has its own . . . field of energies.

Lippit —— Yes, a vitality. It is surprising to think of Reassemblage and Naked Spaces as similar films. Do you feel that sometimes because the subject matter can be so powerful in your work that it interferes or disrupts other elements in the work? The subject matter you select is often very powerful.

Trinh —— I'm very glad it comes out that way for you. There's always a tendency to think that because I don't come into a project with an idea in mind or with a preconceived political agenda, the content is of little account, which is not at all the case. I feel very strongly about the subject matter of each of the films-again, not as something that precedes but something that comes with the making of these films. In fact, people bewildered by the freedom with which my films are structured often react by saying, "Well then this film could have been made anywhere." And I would have to say "No," because each film generates its own bodyscape-as related to specific places, movements, events and peoples-which cannot be reproduced elsewhere.

But yes, I would agree that if the subject matter comes out strongly, then what we call structure, form, or even process, become less noticeable. Not because they are in any way less important, but because when everything clicks together in a film, it's no longer possible to speak of form and content as separate entities. This reminds me of

the other dimension, which you touched on earlier, namely, that the subject who films is always caught in the process of relating-or of making and re-presenting-and is not to be found outside that process. All of my films are actually attempts to bring out that process with and within the image. Because of the very tight "always-in-relation-to" situation, it is also difficult to simply indulge in the subject matter, as if it pre-exists out there, waiting to be retrieved "as it is." There should always be some kind of a split somewhere that compels the viewer to pull out of the illusory screen space where subject matter tends to take over film reality.

Lippit —— In watching your films again recently, but also following from what you have just spoken of, I am interested in your sense of framing. It has a peculiar tendency, although different from film to film, to make the familiar look unfamiliar, even peculiar and unknown. I am thinking especially of Reassemblage, where one looks at images that are part of a cultural vocabulary and yet the look of that film is so absolutely distinct that one begins to notice the very consistent but subtle sense of framing. Perhaps that also relates to your earlier comments about edges and borders. The framing doesn't operate according to conventions, to the demands of balance or symmetry. Could you speak of your ideas regarding framing?

Trinh ——Yes, actually we can go in many directions with this because it reminds me that when Reassemblage was first released, there were often, unavoidably, a couple of viewers in the audience at each screening who either praised the film or got very upset because they related it to a National Geographic product. Even today, I still occasionally encounter those kinds of response, whether in the U.S., in Europe or in Asia. And of course, there have also been instances where there is someone in the room who works for National Geographic who immediately says, "We would never accept such a film."

Sometimes the mere fact that the subject matter is located in rural contexts or in remote parts of the non-Western world (what the Japanese film milieu commonly calls "ethnic films"), and the fact that, in addition, the images are bright and colorful, with no immediately definable or recognizable political agenda attached, are sufficient for some viewers to attribute the film's look to the more familiar one of National Geographic images. I once said in response to a similar, aggressively voiced reaction that, ah yes, for some people all reds look alike, and that for them there's no difference between the red of a rose, the red of a ruby and the red of a flag; nor is there any difference within the reds of blood flowing unseen in life and of blood spilled out conspicuously in death.

Fortunately, a number of viewers do come to acknowledge on their own that what they first thought of as a National Geographic-type film does work on them, as the film advances, in such a way as to leave them ultimately perplexed and troubled. Days and even weeks after, they say, their perceptions of the film continue subtly to expand and to open onto unexpected views and directions. For me, this is largely due to a process of shooting and framing in which, as I mentioned earlier, the filming subject and the filming tools are always caught in the subject filmed. I don't mind it when viewers in Europe link my films to those of Johan Van der Keuken, who is known as one of those truly "mad about framing." I am not so much concerned here with composition, but as you've noted, I'm sensitive to the borders, edges and margins of an image-not only in terms of its rectangular confines, which today's digital technology easily modifies, but in the wider sense of framing as an intrinsic activity of image-making and of relation-forming. Working with Jean-Paul Bourdier, who is an architect, has incited me to see in terms of space so as to decide where to put the camera and how to move with it. This is quite prominent in A Tale of Love, for example. While Reassemblage and a large part of Naked Spaces were shot intuitively with the camera placed very close to ground level, where most daily activities are carried out in African villages. Such a decision has an important impact on the image, but the

Reassemblage © image forum

frame itself is very intimately created while I am shooting.

Most of the time, if a good cinematographer sees an interesting subject and wants to use a pan, for example, she rehearses the gesture until the movement effected from one object to another is impeccable in its precision and certainty. In my case, I usually shoot with no forepractice and often with only one eye-the kino-eye, as Vertov called it. I may at times shoot the same subject more than once, but well, the first time always turns out to be the best, because when one repeats the gesture one becomes sure of oneself, which is what most cinematographers value-the sureness and smoothness of the gesture. But what I value is the hesitation or whatever happens when I first encounter what I am seeing through the camera lens. So the way one looks becomes totally unpredictable. Like wearing blinders and not seeing where one is going, the camera just moves with you according to the pace of your own body, or the pace of your camera pan. It is this attentive half-blindness that interests me. Rather than merely conforming to the ideal of seeing with both eyes while shooting-one inside, the other outside the lens and the frame so as to foresee one's moves-I largely confine myself in the films I've shot to the eye that only sees reality via the camera. There is, in the look that goes toward things while letting things come to it unplanned, no desire to capture per se. You start a move and then simply continue it to see what comes into that framing in time and space.

Now there are films where I've worked with a cameraperson because I had to do more directing. Here, it is difficult to talk about one approach, because mine is necessarily mediated by the camera operator. In Surname Viet Given Name Nam, in the interview scenes of Shoot for the Contents, and especially in A Tale of Love where fiction intensifies framing, the sureness of the cinematographer's hand is inevitable. But I value that element as well, when it doesn't come from me. For it is then simply another element that contributes to the experience of film as an activity of production. Non-knowingness is an attitude, not a

technique to perform. What is specific to the cinematographer also has a place, and even if that cinematographer does not decide on the framing, the gesture, rhythm and sureness developed are hers. Treating these as her contribution to the process also means that one necessarily creates a different space for the film. What you have is something, let's say, between the open-ended process of the filmmaker and the skilled expertise of the operator.

Lippit —— The images are beautiful in your films, strikingly beautiful-much more so than in National Geographic-and that may be an effect precisely of what you have described. Your description of the process of filmmaking for you suggests something more on the order of the sublime. Rather positing mastery over her medium, her subject matter, the filmmaker here loses herself in the process of making a film. It's very different from the more popular notion of the filmmaker as a master of one's craft, of one's subject, of one's space. Your description of the first gesture, the first movement as the one that you regularly prefer suggests a kind of dissipation or a loss of the self in the act of filmmaking. And the result can be a very beautiful image that emerges from the encounter with that dissipation, rather than from the assertion of one's mastery in the form of a pan, or tilt, or some kind of practiced gesture.

Trinh —— What you've just elucidated is very different from how people usually understand it. I feel much more affinity with the terms you use-"the loss of oneself," by which one gains everything else, and hence no mere loss. The tendency among many, when I try to put this process of filmmaking into word, is immediately to recast it in terms of spontaneity and personal subjectivity. The first gesture is then viewed as the more truthful one. But the moment of spontaneity, which is so sacred for modernist art in general, has its limits. One can be quite cliched when being spontaneous. And there are often more instances, where instead of encountering elements of surprise or newness in spontaneity, one simply faces a form of reification of the individualist self.

Lippit —— The fantasy of a spontaneous gesture does suggest the emergence of an authentic or genuine self: A truer self that escapes in the inattention of spontaneity. Another feature that I find striking in your work is the adamant tension between images but also the sounds that are sometimes naturalistic and at others synthetic, artificial, and staged. Sounds are often broken, just when one is ready to be drawn into their flow. And one feels this at work in a variety of places, certainly I would say in Shoot for the Contents. During the interview with the Chinese filmmaker, for example, one recognizes a very theatrical mise-en-scene; similarly in the interviews that constitute Surname Viet Given Name Nam. Do you see these tensions between naturalistic and synthetic representations as an element of your style, or do you see them as a dialectic that works between the notion of nature, naturalism, or things as they are, and the process of reflecting, commenting, filmmaking-"being nearby"?

Trinh —— Neither one of those. Perhaps if I can find a way to say it on my own terms, it would be to say that what is viewed as being natural on the one hand and staged on the other belongs to a whole process. If one looks at the image in terms of representation, then I'm not simply representing "substance," but I'm actually bringing out what one can call "function" or "condition." In Shoot for the Contents, the image is mediated by the translator-a literal translator during the interview with the Chinese filmmaker, but also other translators heard or seen through the voices of the narrators and of myself as writer, editor and photographer of images of China. The fact that both makers and viewers depend here on translation in order to have an "entry" into the culture was clearly brought out in the sound-image. On one level, this interdependence made visible and audible may appear artificial, but on the level of its function within the process of producing meaning and images, it is totally natural.

This "natural" process is precisely what has been widely suppressed in films that try to get at "substance" while forgetting the importance of

function and field in the mediation of reality on film. As the Indian philosopher Coomaraswami said, one cannot imitate nature, one can only operate the way nature operates. When one thinks in those terms, the two currents you mentioned (one naturalistic, the other synthetic) are one and the same. To call attention to the subjectivity at work and to show the activity of production in the production is to deal with film in its most natural, realistic and truthful aspect. So I don't see the separation. This largely applies to my first four films; with A Tale of Love, where everything was thought out down to the smallest detail, the situation is different. Ultimately, despite the contrasting way with which this last film fractures conventions of genre and of narrativity-or of psychological realism in acting and in consuming-its direction expands the one adopted by the previous films. ✺

[Berkeley October 8th, 1998]

Naked Spaces © image forum