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PROVOCATIVE STATEMENTS FROM THE EAST

★★★REASSEMBLAGE

Directed by Trinh Minh-ha.

★★★TURUMBA

Directed by Kidlat Tahimik.

By Pat Aufderheide

For most moviegoers, a foreign film is a French or Italian comedy—a safe adventure, a familiar experience with a different flavor, sort of like going out for a Taco Bell taco instead of a Whopper.

But a really foreign film can do so much more. It can offer, for example, a cheap vacation, showing you foreign sights without jeopardizing your digestion. It can introduce you to people, subjects, and issues you never thought about. It may even talk to you in a foreign language of film, a different means of expression than you've seen before.

Consider two films showing on the opening night of Facets' Asian-American film series. Both intend to engage us in dialogue with the kinds of people we tend to forget about when we're not pasting labels on them that read "other," "underdeveloped," "primitive," or just plain "poor." Each uses a distinctive style, and the contrast between them couldn't be more stark. One is visually spectacular, the other mungy-looking; one is biting but humorless, the other slyly, wryly comic; one is formally rigorous and demanding, the other artfully primitivistic.



Reassemblage

poem offered up in contradiction to every well-wrought National Geographic documentary about Africa. The 40-minute film, made by expatriate Vietnamese literary critic Trinh Minh-ha while she was at the National Conservatory of Music in Dakar, is about Senegal—or rather, about the fallacy of thinking you can make movies "about Senegal." It challenges the Western assumption of objectivity, that one can observe without being involved. Minh-ha plays meticulously

tition, and displacement of images and sound, using tribal scenes of Senegalese daily life to call into question every easy assumption—even her own—of knowledge.

Minh-ha came to the project with a method. A literary critic with a semiotic bent, she is fascinated by the task of deciphering the signs of and meanings behind ordinary discourse; to use Michel Foucault's phrase, she is an archaeologist of knowledge. As an Asian woman and an expatriate, she

puts it in a theoretical article, "to dislocate the entire system of Western rhetoric"—a rhetoric she describes as dominated by the notions of objectivity and noninvolvement with the subject, and permeated by imperialist premises. In *Reassemblage*, Minh-ha focuses on ethnologists, the social scientists of culture, as the bearers of that rhetoric to third-worlders. But while she ridicules them, she also counts herself among them.

At first *Reassemblage's* travelogue images—the exotic beauty of a different nature, picturesque thatched huts, kids wolfing down weird-looking food, bare-breasted women at their chores—are postcards, commercial commodities. But Minh-ha's strategy is to strip them of that quality. She presents them perhaps two and three times in succession, making us resee them; she inserts early shots into later sequences; voice-overs jar with the images, or make a devastating comment on their most familiar interpretations. This shredding of the touristic does not restore the images to unmediated wholeness, however; instead, once the film shatters our voyeuristic relationship with the material, we're left uncertain about what it is we've really seen.

The narration—a discontinuous series of declarations and verbal images, read as if they were *haiku* in Minh-ha's own precise, high-pitched voice—is equally problematic, full of repetitions and deliberate mismatching. One

Reassemblage is a part-essay, part-but passionately with distortion, repetition, and displacement of images and sound, using tribal scenes of Senegalese daily life to call into question every easy assumption—even her own—of knowledge.

REASSEMBLAGE

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of its prime targets is the smugness of foreign experts: One snippet recounts the work of a Peace Corps volunteer teaching women to grow vegetables—women who, we see, are experts in provisioning already. Another segment comments: “Ethnologists handle the camera the way they handle words/ Recuperated Collected Preserved... What are *your* people called again? an ethnologist asks.” It is objectivity like that, Minh-ha charges, that has made it possible for “two billion people [to] define themselves as underdeveloped.”

Her task is quite different: “I do not intend to speak about. Just speak nearby.” The university-educated woman from Vietnam holds a camera up to the tribal women of Senegal and finds herself drawn into a relationship: “I look at her becoming me becoming mine.” But even when women invite her into their homes and talk to her about the injustices of polygamy, she cannot find an uncomplicated way of knowing; she still calls her work of recording their reality “stealing.”

Trinh Minh-ha wants viewers, like her, to realize how much we impose on the reality we see. Further, she wants to show us by example how fundamentally implicated our film

styles are in our notion of what reality and knowing are. *Reassemblage*, superbly crafted and visually exquisite, is also a work of film criticism—one that plays with the qualities of film itself. It integrates form and content in a critique of both Western science and traditions of documentary filmmaking. While it does not harangue, it is an angry, troubled, provocative work. That is partly because it demonstrates the problem of knowing “the other” without offering a comforting resolution. And also because it asks us to reconsider some fundamental assumptions that bolster our privileged position in front of such people as the bare-breasted women of a village in Senegal.
