

Document Citation

Title	Trinh Minh-ha : a multi-dimensional maker of film
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Source	<i>Mindport</i>
Date	1986
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	4
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	Trinh T. Minh-ha
Film Subjects	

Trinh Minh-ha

A Multi-Dimensional
Maker of Film

by James Robert Sherman
and Laurie Sosna

Born in Vietnam, Trinh T. Minh-ha is an artist with a varied and multi-cultural background. She studied comparative literature and music in Vietnam, and music composition, ethnomusicology and French literature in France and the United States. She has taught at a number of universities and institutions, including the Dakar Conservatory of Music in Senegal. Her first film, *Reassemblage* (1982) is a tribute to the people of Senegal and a critique of conventional documentary practices.

In her second film, *Naked Spaces: Living is Round* (1985), Trinh Minh-ha brings together her interests in literature, music, film and ethnology. As described by Steve Jensen of the *Bay Guardian*: "The film itself has a musical structure, with recurring themes both visual . . . and verbal." Writing in *Afterimage*, Berenice Reynaud observed, "The editing, as fluid as the camera work, juxtaposes images from different cultures; from one village to the other, not only are the houses different, so are the interpenetrations between the people and their living spaces. . . ."

Naked Spaces has been recurrently shown in the Bay Area at several repertory movie houses as well as at the Cinematheque and the Pacific Film Archive. It has been programmed in several film and media art centers across the country including the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Earlier this year, the film premiered at the International Women's Film Festival in France, and has been selected for the Toronto Film Festival, the Vancouver International Film Festival, the International Women's Film Fest of Montreal, and the Edinburgh International Film Festival.

Trinh Minh-ha is presently teaching in the Cinema and Art Departments at San Francisco State University. In the following interview, she discusses her films and the nature of her art.

Q: Your original studies are literature and music, what caused you to become interested in the cinema?

A: Well, for various reasons. One of the most evident reasons is that cinema pulls together a number of possibilities, including literature and music, and in addition to that you have the visual arts. Since I have always been active in more than one field, it is only "natural" that I combine writing, composing and producing images through filmmaking. Now in my films there is also this interest in anthropology, which, in a way, is an interest that dated back long ago to the years when I first encountered colonial discourse through schooling in Vietnam. Africa has allowed me to live again what I'd already felt in Vietnam, with much stronger intensity, hence, the choice to make films in Africa. But of course this does not mean that I'll not be making films elsewhere.

Q: So you found cinema as the best way to express the things you wanted to say?

A: Well, yes, right now it's the most adequate, in terms of pulling together a diversity of interests and potential, but . . . I still pursue my interest in literature; and I still write, and I write poems, essays, as well as scholarly books, and I have never lost interest in music composition or in ethnomusicology. These are the fields I still very much feel part of, despite the importance I give more recently to my film work, to critical anthropology and to architecture. What I'm suggesting is that maybe in



Naked Spaces

the future there can be other fields that I will also want to work with, such as video, and performance arts.

Q: What type of problems did you have with *Naked Spaces*, compared to *Reassemblage*?

A: Let's say that it is much more practical, with regard to financial means and distribution possibilities, to work with a shorter format like in *Reassemblage*. This film circulates more easily in educational networks, but it does not enter the theatrical circuit and what one says in a shorter format, of course, is different from what one says in a longer one. With *Naked Spaces*, which is a much longer film, the problem is almost reverse. There is a potential for its being shown in some theatrical movie houses, especially repertory movie houses, but non-commercial distributors tend to reject it for its length, which goes beyond the usual length allowed for both documentary and experimental films.

The notion of time, however, is what frustrates most foreigners in the Third World. Anybody who has been in Africa knows how differently time is lived there, and the stories that you'd be hearing from these foreigners, on Africa, would always involve this different notion of time, so it is necessary to bring that back on the screen. . . . As one of my very good African friends said, you need to be very generous in order to understand Africa and generosity involves much patience as well as an ability to live with differences. This is what I work with in *Naked Spaces*. I wanted to bring back images that do not, let's say, conveniently fit into the widespread image-repertoire on underdevelopment. This would, therefore, entail a certain notion of beauty in the film and working with that notion of beauty, one has to immediately think of consumption, of how beauty is going to be consumed. So by having such an exacting length, I invite the viewers to either invest to the limits or to leave the room. And when they leave at the end of the film they do not leave with the feeling of having "digested" the work or Africa.

Q: What interested you the most about the subject matter, the theory of living space of your two films?

A: Well, there are many ways of looking at my films, there is just not one reading, and I would say that my reading has no more authority than any other viewer's reading (when this viewer has also invested her/himself in the film). The second film is more focused on space, but then one talks about space, the term is so vast that one can imagine all kinds of spaces, so hence the necessity for the subtitle, *Living is Round*. But of course in trying to specify my interest in living space, I find myself facing a number of inseparable notions from this living-is-round experience. In other words, a closure always opens onto another closure, which keeps on opening onto something else, and it does not stop.

Q: Some have called you a feminist filmmaker, is this a label you would deny or accept?

A: This is a simple but difficult question -- perhaps not in this American context. Even though I am always resisting all kinds of labels that people put into my work, including labels like semiology and structuralism, I would very gladly accept that label. But I have to clarify one thing: for example, in France, there's a whole feminist movement that rejects precisely the label "feminism" so that as a "non-essentialist" feminist I would leave it open to whether and when one should claim such a label. Feminism is not something one can adhere to or not; it is not something closed, but something that necessarily remains open. So the definition of feminism needs to be questioned, and needs to grow. Q: Since you have so many broad interests, such as music, literature, anthropology, film, do you see filmmaking as a stage that you are at now, and as something you'll move on from?

A: No, as I said earlier, I pursue all of my interests: I do not abandon them, I expand them. And in that sense, I do not think of myself definitely either as a writer, as a composer, or as a filmmaker. These are labels, as I've said, if one person evolves then all of the labels would have to evolve. I think my interest in film is one that I would like to continue to explore and expand. But I do not view myself as "the" filmmaker, one who protects film as a specialist protects his/her territories and resorts to exit formulas like "this is not my field." Perhaps one sentence that would summarize the idea of being in several fields, is a sentence by I think it was Merce Cunningham. He was saying that every dance movement is like breathing, a movement is like an exploration, or an inspiration; each breath is different, as an Indian musician says, and each raga is a way of breathing. If you consider what you are doing as part of your life, like breathing, then it is just as awkward to say I'm a writer, a poet, a composer, or filmmaker, as to say I'm a breather.

James Sherman is a screenwriting student in the Department of Cinema at SFSU. He is also Vice President of the Creative Arts Student Association.

Laurie Sosna, a film studies graduate student, received her B.A. in film from UC Santa Barbara and has written extensively on film for various publications.

Naked Spaces

