

Document Citation

Title	Hanoi-born filmmaker turns her lens on Africa
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Source	<i>Christian Science Monitor</i>
Date	1986 Nov 19
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	32
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	Trinh T. Minh-ha
Film Subjects	

ARTS • LEISURE

Hanoi-born filmmaker turns her lens on Africa

By David Sterritt

New York

In a healthy development for documentary cinema, some filmmakers have been moving purposely away from the pontificating approach that's a feature of many nonfiction films.

This trend has been especially strong in the field of anthropological and ethnological film. Robert

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Gardner, for example, has continually reduced

the explanations and narrations in his movies, eliminating them entirely in the recent "Forest of Bliss," which calls for viewers to make what they will of his complex Indian images.

Even the pioneering Jean Rouch has evolved from the reportage of "Les Maîtres Fous" to the knockabout impressionism of "Cocorico Monsieur Poulet," showing less interest in "objective facts" than in the subjective moods and emotions of the African cultures he explores.

Trinh T. Minh-ha is younger

than those directors, but may grow to equal stature.

Under the label "Images of Culture," two of her films are on screen through Nov. 21 at the Whitney Museum of American Art here. Both show a deep fas-

cination with the African cultures they depict.

More innovatively, they also show a determination to challenge the exploitative attitudes that Trinh feels are built into documentary filmmaking itself.



Frame from Trinh's 'Naked Spaces,' on view at Whitney Museum

"It's hard to avoid being a voyeur when you're holding a camera," she said during a recent Whitney Museum talk. But she tries.

"Reassemblage," shot in Senegal, is an exercise in avoiding self-centered stances. Near the beginning we hear Trinh saying she wants to speak not "about" her subject but "nearby" it. That is, she hopes to suggest ideas about Senegal without pretending to be part of it or to "understand" it in a reductive way.

To this end, she has cut the film into bits and pieces, using odd vantage points and seemingly random camera movements. And she never stays with a scene or image long enough for it to become "entertaining" and thereby exploit or demean the everyday people she depicts.

"Naked Spaces: Living Is Round" is different in that it has an organizing theme – the strong feminine character of some West African cultures, and how this is reflected in the round con-

Please see CINEMA page 36

CINEMA from page 31

tours of homes and other objects. Again the images are fleeting and fragmented, and again the soundtrack is a complex collage of words and on-location sounds.

It seems likely that Trinh's chief trademark – her aversion to the know-it-all nature of much ethnographic film – is rooted in her own international background, which has taken her through many cultures. Born in 1952 in Hanoi, Vietnam she left at age 17 to continue her

education in the Philippines, at the Sorbonne in Paris, and then at an American university.

She holds advanced degrees in comparative literature and music, which helps explain the keen verbal and musical aspects of her films. Her strategy is a risky one: to advance the art of documentary by questioning its most basic assumptions. While this may not endear her to those who enjoy basking in "exotic" travel and educational movies, it promises to enrich an important branch of world cinema.