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★★★NAKED SPACES—
LIVING IS ROUND

Directed by Trinh T. Minh-Ha.

By Fred Camper

Naked Spaces—Living Is Round, a remarkable new film by Trinh T. Minh-Ha, works on several levels. It is a documentary about the life, and especially the dwelling places, of west Africans. At the same time, the way the film is constructed offers a critique of past conventions of ethnographic filmmaking, as well as a proposal for a new way of looking at, and thinking about, the world.

In the traditional ethnographic film, the European or North American filmmaker depicts the life of a more "primitive" culture. The camera attempts to observe, as passively and objectively as it can, daily life and customs. Frequently a voice-over narration provides information about what is being portrayed. The problem that many have found with this mode of filmmaking is that, whatever useful details it may preserve and present, the filmmaker has nonetheless placed himself, and his own inevitably Western system of cinematic representation, in a position of authority vis-a-vis the culture being documented. No matter how objective the camera may appear to be, the smoothness of the camera's movements, the evenness of "correct" exposure, and the classicism of well-balanced symmetrical compositions create a subtext that has little to do with the culture being represented and indeed will inevitably affect the way that the viewer apprehends

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the film's information, even to the point of falsifying the culture being presented.

In her attempt to create a new kind of ethnographic filmmaking, Minh-Ha has made a film that directly contravenes past conventions. Instead of one narrator, we hear the voices of three different women, one of whom

is Minh-Ha. These voices convey information, but also offer observations and interpretations more directly than a conventional narrator might. One argument implied here is that a narrator who purports to be conveying only "facts" is in fact offering interpretation as well, but since the narrator's value system is not made explicit, the

viewer cannot properly evaluate it. Minh-Ha's narrators offer poetic and paradoxical comments as well as facts. Thus not only is the narrator's voice divided in thirds, but the narrator's function is divided as well. In the best tradition of past independent and avant-garde filmmaking, these divisions startle the viewer out of the role of passively accepting the narrator's voice as truth, as a naive instructional film encourages one to do, and into a more active role of thinking for himself, speculating on meanings, arguing with the offered observations.

Similarly, Minh-Ha's filming and editing styles owe little to the conventional ethnographic film. While she will frequently pan over details of the scene in close-up, the pans are not smooth but jerky and unsteady. Though this may have resulted from a less than top-grade tripod, it seems quite clear that the resulting "look" is completely appropriate to the film. In the same way, the editing only sometimes works to establish smooth continuities in space and time. Just as often, cuts occur at points that create irregular rhythms and spatial jumps within a scene.

A well-made traditional ethnographic film will look quite different from *Naked Spaces*. Smooth, steady camera movements, rock-steady static shots, and perfectly matched cuts may superficially seem to create a careful and balanced portrayal of the subject, but in another way they construct a self-contained cinematic space in which the seamless, internal perfection of the film creates a worldview of it:

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own, a Western vision whose evenness and balance would be thoroughly inappropriate to filming the dwelling places of west Africa. Behind the apparent liberalism and self-effacement of traditional ethnography lurks our old friend Western cultural imperialism, seeing only what it wishes to see, its own particular vision, rather than opening itself to the variety of the world.

Minh-Ha's style, by contrast, is likely to prove jarring at first. There may be a temptation to see the film as simply not very well made. But the effect of its lack of smoothness, its formal incompleteness, is to prevent the film from becoming an aesthetic object in itself, as are most works of Western art. The result is that every moment of unsmoothness presents a gap, almost a kind of wound, a moment in which the inevitably consistent rhythm of 24-frame-per-second film projection is broken, and consequently, a place at which the film's

style can open itself to an observation of the outer world. By giving us a film that does not cohere in the classical ways, Minh-Ha has redirected our attention to her subject.

She has also redirected our attention toward ourselves. The viewer is forced out of the passive, observational mode that many viewers slip into when they begin to watch a movie. We are denied the usual pleasures of cinematic consistency, and are required instead to look at each new image, each depicted object, and hear each spoken observation, with our active mind.

As a Vietnamese woman who has lived in Africa and the U.S., Minh-Ha is undoubtedly aware of issues of culture and of gender. *Naked Spaces* can be seen in relation to the recently emerged tradition of feminist filmmaking. In many such works, the filmmaker is no longer present as a kind of god who remakes the world with his camera, or re-creates a world out of his imagination, as most of the masterworks of film history have done. The filmmaker instead assumes a more modest presence: that of the mediator between the viewer and an external, socially oriented reality.

Fortunately for the viewer, Minh-Ha has chosen a subject that is

of considerable interest in itself, and which is also appropriate to her broader concerns. The west African living spaces she depicts have none of the composed, self-enclosed, even aesthetic qualities of Western houses. The interiors instead appear sparse, though one must admit that perhaps the hand of the artist-as-creator has reemerged here: the interiors are so darkly lit as to be nearly invisible, because Minh-Ha films with what little sunlight finds its way inside, rather than artificial lights. But her many compositions in which a patch of sunlight illuminates a small part of an interior bring out another truth. Many of these dwellings were constructed with particular regard to the ways in which the sun will enter, and what portions of the interior will be so illuminated. Indeed, the Africans see the sun as possessing a kind of magical power, an idea well conveyed in Minh-Ha's high-contrast sunlight-and-darkness compositions.

The west African dwellings seen in this film do not exhibit the sense of a separate inside and outside that one finds in a Western house, in which an interior decorating scheme can make the interior into an enclosed, constructed world. The west Africans must move constantly between inside

and outside, and the houses are built, and filmed by Minh-Ha, to reveal their relationship with the surrounding land. Thus there is a way in which the lack of aesthetic closedness in Minh-Ha's film style, for all it may owe to modern feminism and a desire to argue with traditional ethnography, also mirrors on a formal level the aesthetic of west African architecture.

This is never more clear than when one narrator's voice pronounces with characteristic paradox and indecisiveness, "Question and answer: a mixture of deception," only to be followed by another voice that describes houses built on water (which we are now seeing on the screen) as being "suspended between water and sky." All of the homes seen do exist between several worlds, water and sky, or exterior and interior, without becoming fixed in one or the other, without becoming closed objects, just as the film as a whole avoids becoming a formally made, and thus closed, work. Through these connections, Minh-Ha has made a film that reverberates between its subject matter and its cinematic form, and that challenges each of us to examine the ways in which we think about looking at films, and other cultures, and at ourselves.