

## Document Citation

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Author(s)	B�er�enice Reynaud
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**TORONTO, cont'd.**

(continued from page 5)

by BERENICE REYNAUD

The nudity of Trin T. Minh-ha's *Naked Spaces: Living is Round* is a metaphor applied from clothing to the organization of the human habitat; its subtitle reinforces the equivalence between the body and its dwelling. Minh-ha's subtle exploration of the housing in several remote African villages becomes an erotic encounter. The problematic difference between pornography and eroticism is the same as between ethnological discourse and Minh-ha's investigation. The pornographer, the ethnologist, the colonial administrator, all seek to dominate, even humiliate, their object. Eroticism, on the contrary, allows for an interpenetration between the subject and the object of desire; it seeks to reduce the distance between subject and object by creating an *intimacy* between the two, yet strives to maintain the absolute *otherness* of the object.

Minh-ha's camera, while exploring houses, granaries, and village yards where ritual dances take place, always leaves some corner in the shadow, because "to provoke desire, a house, like a woman, should have secret parts."<sup>10</sup> Like a Zen philosopher, Minh-ha understands the complementary relationship of light and darkness (the darkness should not be suppressed), outside and inside (inside should remain unviolated), convex and concave (concave is a hole within reality, not something made to be filled), noise and silence ("noises are like bubbles

on the surface of silence"<sup>11</sup>). Her precise, fluid camera work, the density of her images, the beauty of her visual compositions result directly from ethical choices.

Born in Vietnam and raised as a Buddhist  
Trinh T.

Minh-ha moved to California where she studied music composition. She taught for three years at the Dakar (Senegal) Conservatory of Music, where she became passionately involved in the local culture, especially music and architecture. Her first movie, *Re-assemblage* (1982) described lovingly her difficulties in comprehending all aspects of Senegalese village life. *Naked Spaces*, a longer and more complex film, was shot in the rural environment of six West African countries—Senegal, Mauritania, Togo, Mali, Burkina Faso (formerly Upper Volta), and Benin. 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, the daily activities, the ritualized ceremonies, the quality of the light, and the solidity of the earth.

To express the otherness of the Other, the filmmaker stakes her own otherness: her discourse is not suspended in an authoritative void, but embedded in her multiple (cultural, linguistic) exiles. Her own voice, frail and a bit hesitant, is heard on the sound track, alternating with music carefully recorded on location, long moment of silences, and two other female voices. The voices are uttering, at different moments, the same aphorisms: myths and parables from the cultures visited, quotations from African writers, texts by Minh-ha herself, and, incongruously, a line from the French Surrealist poet Eluard: "The earth is blue like an orange." This is repeated again and again, and seems to ward off the possible construction of an "objective" discourse, which would be the discourse of the master.

PHOTOGRAPHY/INDEPENDENT FILM/VIDEO/VISUAL BOOKS

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