

Document Citation

Title	Trinh Minh-ha breaks convention in film
Author(s)	Frances Leventhal
Source	<i>Asian Week</i>
Date	1989 Feb 17
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Surname Viet given name Nam, Trinh T. Minh-ha,, 1989

Trinh Minh-ha Breaks Convention In Film

By Frances Leventhal

SAN FRANCISCO -- Film allows Trinh T. Minh-ha to intertwine many of her interests - music, poetry, language theory and anthropology. Trinh left Vietnam 18 years ago and since that time has acquired a Ph.D in literature and a master's degree in music, not to mention

the international acclaim she has received as an experimental filmmaker.

"It was a natural thing for me to go into film, which pulls together different arts," said Trinh.

Now living in Berkeley, Trinh made her first film, "Reassemblage," while teaching music in Senegal, where she

considered herself an insider, since, like Africans, she was also a subject of colonialism in Vietnam, and an outsider, since she had no preconceived notions about African culture.

However, the subjective and fictional approach Trinh used to film her first two documentaries created controversy in circles of anthropologists, documentary-makers and in the Asian community.

"In the Asian community my previous films were controversial because my subjects didn't concern Asians. Why must we always make films about ourselves -- Asians about Asians, Africans about Africans? That territorial mentality bothers me very much. And on a general level my films generate controversy because I challenge the documentary conventions, which people find objectionable," said Trinh.

While some dislike the way Trinh goes about the making of her documentaries, she has walked away with many complimentary reviews, awards and grants including the NEA Media Arts and the Rockefeller Foundation Intercultural Film Fellowships. "Reassemblage" was exhibited at the the New York Film Festival in 1983 and "Naked Spaces" received the Blue Ribbon Award for Best Experimental Feature at the American International Film Festival.



Trinh Minh-ha



"Surname Viet, Given Name Nam," uses experimental techniques

This time around "Surname Viet, Given Name Nam," Trinh's third film, which Cinematheque will screen at the San Francisco Art Institute on Feb. 19 at 8 p.m., deals with an Asian subject -- the plight of Vietnamese women.

"I have no single message to convey, but I provide the viewer with many entrances into the film. One entrance is seen in the title, which came from a quote that identifies a husband with the state, thus a women is married to the state. This can be read positively or negatively," said Minh-ha, whose interpretation brings to mind French theorist, Jacques Derrida.

"Surname Viet, Given Name Nam" begins with a dance that evokes the movement of a boat, and ends with a small raft in the midst of the sea -- a metaphor that can apply to Vietnamese exiles or to the country itself.

"A number of exiles believe themselves to be in a state of flux. They have a desire to keep their values, their heritage. Always thinking of going back, they never become American

citizens. The same questions can be asked about Vietnam. Where is it going? It's in a state of flux," said Trinh.

The film is a series of interviews with women who have lived a life of poverty and war, as well as footage from the war that Trinh found in an archive collection here, giving the impression that she made the film in Vietnam.

"I wish to bring out the fictional process in any filmmaking whether its a feature or a documentary. Conventional documentaries are extremely manipulative in that they present themselves as objective, but the director is always deciding what he wants to be in his film," said Trinh.

The women interviewed speak English, leaving the audience to participate in the speaker's struggle with language.

"I wanted the viewer to listen to the way other people speak English and to experience the problem of translation and of speaking a foreign language. Silence is a deterring factor in all of my films," said Trinh