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Reflections: *A Tale of Love*

In the realm of the senses with a mind's eye on the politics of gender, *A Tale of Love* is the controversial new film by the highly acclaimed filmmaker and U.C.B. Professor Trinh T. Minh-ha.

At the Berlin International Film Festival, *A Tale of Love* was received with overwhelming enthusiasm and some sparks of hostility; yet as is said in the film, "People always find fault in women with many talents and loves. No matter what they do, they can never escape criticism." Trinh is definitely a woman with many talents and loves. She is author of several articles and books, including *When the Moon Waxes Red*; holds degrees in Music Composition and French Literature; and teaches through the Women's Studies Department here on campus. She is the recipient of numerous awards and grants including an American Film Institute Maya Deren Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, two NEA Media Awards, and two Rockefeller Intercultural Film Fellowships, just to name a few.

A Tale of Love is her fifth feature film and as the above quote suggests, she has had her share of criticism. Remarking on the few but fierce reactions from some viewers in Berlin, Trinh stated, "Nobody is immune to this kind of hostility in reception but I think this kind of divided reaction is very consistent with the reception of my work."

With the areas of focus in the film, it is no wonder that some viewers may experience some discomfort. In the tradition of the avant-garde, Trinh challenges the very way the audience experiences "watching without being watched." Through abandoning the conventional shot-reverse-shot and opting for a more static camera placement, the familiar voyeur quality of movie watching is replaced by a self-consciousness that many are unused to. In addition, the film is wider in scope than the mainstream's singular emphasis on visual pleasure. *A Tale of Love* delves into an exploration of the sensual: fragrances, exemplified by Juliet's perfume collection; and sounds, particularly the voice of love, Java (interestingly played by the directors husband).

"Every story of love is a story of voyeurism," a character declares, yet this tale of love is much more complicated. It manages to interweave several controversial issues into a exuberantly colorful tapestry on film. Strong liaisons are forged between the modern issues of love the main character Kieu negotiates and those negotiated by the heroine of an ancient Vietnamese poem--also named Kieu. For Trinh, this poem, *The Tale of Kieu* personifies, among other things, Vietnam's socio-economic condition as a "victim to foreign forces." The film also explores an aspect of contemporary feminist discourse, a concern with when love becomes a site of oppression.

A Tale of Love follows Kieu, a contemporary Vietnamese San Franciscan writer, as she researches the social and historical legacy of *The Tale of Kieu*, the national poem of Vietnam. Like many struggling writers, Kieu has several part-time jobs to make ends meet. When not writing or cleaning house, Kieu poses for Alikan, a photographer. . . and this is when the film most overtly *poses for us* the issues of gender and representation.

While Alikan photographs portions of her body with heavy use of shadow and veils, Kieu continually challenges him by wanting to return his gaze. "Don't let me see you watching me while I shoot." Their discourse revolves around Kieu's dissatisfaction with being objectified and photographically dissected. He retorts, "You never give in....You really resist not having a head don't you."

Resistance is the pivotal site where the concerns of feminism and the socio-political issues of Vietnam, converge. Reporting to her editor, Kieu states "Vietnamese people all around the globe recognize their country in the image of a woman, Kieu is here a folk symbol of love and she is both passionately admired and blamed for having loved improperly. . . . I can't mention her name without feeling somewhat implied. Isn't a writer someone who loves for a living?"

As a writer, director, and producer, Trinh is a women who makes films about love. And after viewing the film, it's obvious that she loves what she does for a living.

- -Margaret Kelly