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An van Dienderen

This Special Mystique of Interview Politics

A Flow Between Fact and Fiction

Trinh T. Minh-ha

\_Cinema Interval\_

New York and London: Routledge, 1999

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274 pp.

1. Introduction

Vietnamese filmmaker and feminist thinker Trinh T. Minh-ha is an articulate voice in independent filmmaking. In her writings and interviews, as well as in her film scripts, Trinh explores what she describes as the \*infinite relation\* of word to image.

*Cinema-Interval* brings together her recent conversations on film and art, life and theory, with Homi Bhabha, Deb Verhoeven, Annamaria Morelli, and other critics. Together these interviews offer a broad presentation of her ideas. *Cinema Interval* covers a wide range of issues, many of them concerning \*the space between\* -- between viewer and film, image and text, interviewer and interviewee, lover and beloved. How Trinh uses the concept of \*interval\* is explained at different passages in the book. In one such passage, she writes:

'I would say that creating rhythm is a way of working with intervals -- silences, pauses, pacing -- and working with intervals means working with relationships in the wider sense of the term. Relationships between one word, one sentence, one idea and another; between one's voice and other women's voices; in short, between oneself and the other. What you are creating in relationships is not the mere product of an accumulative process, but rather, a musical accuracy -- the precise rhythm and tuning that allow what you say and don't say to find its reverberation in other people.' (38)

Extensively illustrated in colour and black and white, the book also offers a visual trajectory within her work. Not reducing the images to mere illustrations, the viewer is invited to enter her work simultaneously from a textual and a visual perspective. As an added bonus, the complete scripts of Trinh's films *Shoot for the Contents* (1991) and *A Tale of Love* (1995) are also included in the volume.

## 2. The Politics of the Interview Explored

Why a book with interviews? Trinh dealt with the 'special mystique' (247) of interviews at length in her films and writings. According to her, what is at stake in the politics of interviews is not only the unavoidable question of truth and information, but also the \*burden of representation\*. For her, the French terms \*entrevue\* and \*entretien\* are revealing both mutuality, betweenness, and a \*third ground\*, concepts which are most apt in dealing with the notion of interview (248). In this book she presents another exciting layer in her exploration of the politics of interviews. She collected several interviews in which she herself is interviewed. As such, she offers the reader a vulnerable and personalised take on the politics of interviews, in which she ingeniously transforms the discourse on her films into one on interviews. As Trinh explains:

'the interview is, at its best, a device that interrupts the power of speaking, that creates gaps and detours, and that invites one to move in more than one direction at a time. It allows me to return to my work or to the creative process with different ears and eyes, while I try to articulate the energies, ideas and feelings that inspire it. It is in the \*interval\* between the interviewer and the interviewee, in the movement between listening and speaking or between the spoken word and the written word, that I situate the necessity for interviews.' (4)

Additionally, she offers the script of *\_Shoot for the Contents\_* in which she also explored the politics of interview: 'I was working with a body of interviews that had been carried out in Vietnam by another woman of the Vietnamese diaspora, translated and published in French, retranslated by myself into English and then re-enacted in the film' (29). As such, she emphasises the fictive nature of oral testimonies, 'because language itself is fictional by nature. An image of a reality or a word used to point to a reality, has to address its *\*fictive\** reality as image or word.' (56) In dealing with this pseudo *\*truthfulness\** in representation, Trinh offers again the complexity of the politics of knowledge, and refuses to reduce it to a mere representation of authenticity.

### 3. *\_Cinema Interval\_* Inscribed within the Discourse on Production Processes

I propose to view *\_Cinema Interval\_* within the discourse on production processes. I obviously recognise that there are many ways to encounter this book, that's precisely the interest of her work. However, I think perceiving this book as a way to enlighten creative processes could be a contribution to (un)veil what happens within the infinite relation of word and image: 'filmmaking is a complex form of veiling. So rather than simply condemning the veil, we also have to deal with the power of its attraction as with desire in love relationships.' (197) By reproducing issues encountered in the process of creating the films she sheds light on how she envisions the production process, and, as such, she invites the reader to broaden their concept of filmmaking. In her films she explicitly reproduces the performance and theatricality of the film process. 'Like in all my other films, the strategies I use usually point back to the making

and viewing of the work.' (202) By inscribing the process in the production of knowledge, she proposes a critical stance on image building -- 'the demystification of the creative act has almost become an accepted fact: The writer or the artist is bound to look critically at the relations of production and can no longer indulge in the notion of \*pure creativity\*.' (224) Cinematic framings are imbedded in an intangible relationship between the real and the imaginary. Arjun Appadurai writes: 'ordinary lives today are more often powered not by the givenness of things but by the possibilities that the media (either directly or indirectly) suggest are available'. [1] However, in being inspired and challenged by the identities on screen, the mode of production is often omitted. In this sense, the reconstruction of the real (this fiction) is perceived as fact. There exists a deeply rooted confusion between the presented and the experienced reality, which is blurring the urge for scrutiny. A viewer is being developed who is highly trained in believing what is being showed. Because of the referential or indexical quality images are wrongly taken for reality, and therefore the production or constructionist level that is located between the experienced reality and the representation is neglected. Bill Nichols writes: 'The very authenticity of the image testifies to the use of source material from the present moment, not the past. This presents the threat of disembodiment: the camera records those we see on screen with indexical fidelity, but these figures are also ghosts or simulacra of others who have already acted out their past.' [2]

The essential elements of film are mostly being covered up. When, why, and how selection, intrusion, performance, and representation has taken place is being camouflaged by means of an Ancient Greek view on drama. By submitting the flow of experiences to the structure of a classical drama, one confides in a certain appropriation and an ideology-laden use of images. The viewer cannot locate censorship nor accountability. Form

(the type of narrative, the scenario) in and of itself thus carries a highly sophisticated ideological meaning. To ignore the mode of production of this form is to confine it in an ideological drama. Elsewhere Trinh writes:

'What is presented as evidence remains evidence, whether the observing eye qualifies itself as being subjective or objective. At the core of such a rationale dwells, untouched, the Cartesian division between subject and object, that perpetuates a dualistic inside-versus-outside, mind-against-matter view of the world. Again, the emphasis is laid on the power of film to capture reality 'out there' for us 'in here'. The moment of appropriation and of consumption is either simply ignored or carefully rendered invisible according to rules of good and bad documentary. The art of talking-to-say-nothing goes hand-in-hand with the will to say, and to say only to confine something in a meaning. Truth has to be made vivid, interesting; it has to be 'dramatized' if it is to convince the audience of the evidence, whose 'confidence' in it allows truth to take shape.' [3]

An example I experienced in my own filmmaking: I used a Super8 camera in my film *\_Visitors of the Night\_* (1998) to illustrate the reactions of the Mosuo-people in China to my digital video camera. The Super8 images can therefore be presented as more 'real', more authentic in relation to the mode of production of this film as they evoke the scene of filmmaking. However, the medium itself (Super8) can work as an imaginary process, evoking souvenirs of the early seventies when it was used to produce home movies. The Super8 images, filmed on location in China, projected this nostalgic remembrance of (Western) time past. The complexity thus created reveals an approach to the real in a multi-layered way. It refuses to perceive reality as a good-bad fiction. Trinh writes: 'A documentary aware of its own artifice is one that remains

sensitive to the flow between fact and fiction'. [4]

#### 4. Politics of Narration: Spiralling Movements and Indirection

In this book, then, Trinh translates those issues to the written medium by which she contextualises these aspects in a broader discourse. The book develops a style of narrative which is able to resonate with issues such as hybridity, marginality, difference, resistance, autobiography, representation, and more. The term \*resonate\* is appropriate, since she explicitly decides to offer the reader a non-linear, non-encyclopaedic, or academic account of these concepts. She uses the image of \*spirals\* to explain her style of discourse:

'You, as the onlooker, position yourself differently according to different contexts and circumstances, but so does the \*other\* whom you are looking at. Each constitutes a site of subjectivities whose movement is neither simply linear nor circular. In the spiralling movement, you never come back to the same, and when two spirals move together in a space, there are moments when they meet and others when they do not. Trying to find a trajectory that allows the two movements to meet as much as possible without subsuming one to the other is also how I see the process of translation.' (187)

This citation is typical of her discourse, in which she combines one concept with another and by doing so broadens both issues.

Similarly, she doesn't expect the reader to have seen her films, because you can enter a spiral at any time. There is no specific beginning nor ending in Trinh's discourse. It develops within the process of developing and as such opens paths to a multitude of interpretations and opposes clear cut definitions. 'The story . . . is headless and bottomless but one has to enter somewhere, one has to go out somewhere, and even though there is a beginning and an end to every story, the readers can actually enter and exit on any page they wish without the feeling that they have missed \*the intrigue\* or the \*main point\*.' (37) This stance, again, refers back to her perspective on, for instance, anthropological issues. The \*other\* in anthropology is often understood as clearly different and apt to fit the dichotomy created as such. This dichotomy, for her, can be traced back to colonial politics of certain methodologies of anthropology. By creating binary divisions the self is situated in a veiled game of ideology and power and 'flattened down to a form of oppositional demarcation between dominant and dominated cultures' (63). The self that Trinh offers consists of a broad range of subjectivities. Again, the image of the spiral is useful to shed light on this idea. Instead of envisioning the self as an onion with a clear core, she creates a layered and dynamic complex which can't be reduced to simple definitions. Opening up concepts by refusing static classification is the only clear core that she will defend. This \*core\* can be understood by the strong affiliations she has with, on the one hand, French critical theories, and, on the other, traditional Asian philosophies:

'What interests me is not the return to the roots nor an assimilation of French theory but rather how I can use all tools that I have in their radical resistance to one another; how I can read French theory in light of Zen Buddhism or Taoism; and how to a certain extent, I can reread Zen Buddhism and Taoism in light of contemporary critical continental philosophy. The



process of cultural and theoretical hybridity gives rise to an \*elsewhere within here\* -- a space that is not easy to recognize, hence to classify.' (63)

Trinh's approach can be described as a strategy of indirection and understatement, an approach that many find disturbing as she doesn't offer a clear and logical account of her discourse. 'One can only approach things indirectly. Because in doing so, one not only goes toward the subject of one's focus without killing it, but one also allows oneself to get acquainted with the envelope, that is, all the elements that surround, situate or simply relate to it.' (33-34) 'The way a thought, a feeling, an argument, a theory, or a story takes shape on paper is at the same time \*accidental\* and very precise, very situated, just like a throw of dice.' (35) 'I would take up the element of chance and dwell on the configuration of the dice until their inherent relations rise to visibility and reveal to me something of our encounter. Listening to how things resonate among themselves has led me into totally unforeseen areas.' (257)

## 5. A Never Ending Story

It is impossible to end a review on this book in any significant way, as it offers endless re-entering. You can walk through her book reading the interviews with specific issues in mind, such as the production process of the creative act, but also with a focus on the specific films whose scripts have been included, or a precise interest in the politics of China and Vietnam. Therefore, she manages to appeal to a large audience and can offer a challenging questioning of the topics that you were hoping to find. By reading the book concentrating on a particular issue you suddenly find associations you were not thinking off. You will

pass by several notions that you were not familiar with. Moreover, you can also view the book as a visual piece of art, with an attractive and interesting combination of imagery. The one thing that you will not find, however, is a clear cut definitive account of her discourse. If you prefer clarity over (un)veiling, logic over indirectness, you would probably find the book too mystical.

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## Footnotes

1. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 55.

2. Bill Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 4.

3. Trinh T. Minh-ha, 'Documentary Is/Not a Name', *October*, no. 52, Spring 1990, p. 83.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 89.

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