

A R T S A N D E N T E R T A I N M E N T

Contemplating Trinh Minh-Ha

by Laiwan

**Reassemblage**

"I do not intend to speak about
Just to speak near by" *Reassemblage*

There is a complex body of work by Trinh Minh-Ha to think about. Although not excessive in quantity, her four films, three books and various lectures give one a lot to absorb and ponder. They are lucid and thoughtful, yet also, challenging, deliberately strategic and difficult.

In our struggles against oppression and racism, it is important to look at Trinh's strategies in her filmmaking and writings to find the models she is working towards, and the models she is working from, so that we can move on in our own work in culture and identity.

On Thursday December 3rd, Trinh presented a lecture *Musical Accuracy: Fiction at the Heart of Documentary* at UBC's Museum of Anthropology. This was well attended by people from various audiences. Her style and syntax of speech is complex and disturbing to a complacency - the complacency that expects to be given easy answers certainly won't find them here. I see Trinh to be a listener - unpatronising and unpretentious.

As Chancellor's Distinguished Professor in Women's Studies at the University of California, Berkeley and Associate Professor of Cinema at San Francisco State University, Trinh, a Vietnamese woman, is one of a very few acknowledged philosophers not from the West who is referred to for issues on identity, representation and cultural difference in intellectual circles of academia and high art. Within this context it is important to look at her lucid complexity as a strategy against easy consumption and tokenism that has become habitual in Western society.

"The margins, our sites of survival, become our fighting grounds
and their site for pilgrimage." *UBC Lecture, also When the Moon Waxes Red, pg 17*

Her four films were presented at the Pacific Cinematheque over the weekend of December 4th. *Reassemblage* was filmed in Senegal in 1982. 40 minutes and in colour, Trinh critiques ethnological filmmaking through the absence of "talking heads", "translators", "native informants" and specifically, the absence of an expert usually in documentary a white male "objective" voice explaining and defining what we see.

Images and non-sync sounds, women tending crops, weaving, dancing, bathing children, preparing food are rapidly intercut. A single woman's voice, critiquing neo-colonialism through stories of various Westerners, including a Peace-corp worker, a Catholic nun and an ethnologist husband-gynecologist wife team, display their insensitivity and unconscious cultural bias to their location:

"If you haven't stayed long enough in a place you're not an ethnologist, he says...
Late in the evening, a circle of men gather in front of the house where the ethnologist and his wife gynecologist stay. One of the villagers is telling a story, another is playing music on his improvised lute, the ethnologist is sleeping next to his switched on cassette recorder." *Reassemblage* script from *Framer Framed*, pg 103

Naked Spaces: Living is Round was filmed in villages of six West African countries: Senegal, Mauritania, Togo, Mali, Burkino Faso and Benin, in 1985. 135 minutes and in colour, Trinh moves from the single voice of *Reassemblage* to the use of multiple voices. There are 3 women's voices: one that speaks village sayings, villagers' statements, and works by African writers; one that recounts Western logic and cites Western thinkers; and one that speaks in the first person of personal feelings and observations.

A village saying: "If the woman plasters the walls such that from far away you don't see the different levels, we say the house is beautiful" (*Framer Framed*, pg 21) is contrasted neatly with Western logic: "Colour is first and foremost a sensation" (*Framer Framed*, pg 31). This strategy succinctly highlights the syntax of a hierarchy of values in Western logic. It visibilises the ensuing difference of values in experiencing beauty. This strategy of comparing perceptual values within culture remains a common trait in all of Trinh's films.

The names of nations and of peoples appear as subtitles on the lower corner of the film frames as they are quoted. The Joola, Sereer, Mandingo, Jaxanke, Bassari, Soninke, Oualata, Moba, Tamberma, Kabye, Konkomba, Dogon, Birifor, Bisa, Fon, Peul sayings, with writers such as Aboya to Ogotemeli to Boubou Hama, are juxtaposed with writings of the West, ranging from anonymous ethnological sources to Shakespeare to Roland Barthes, creating a complex weaving of multiple logics. She examines music, colours, architectures, space, ethnological explanations and the containment of culture by the West.

"They call it giving. *We call it self-gratification. We call it self-gratification.*
They call it give and take. *We call it take and take. We call it take and take.*
They call it generosity. *We call it conditioning! the beggar's mind. We call it conditioning the beggar's mind.*

Today, to survive, the poor can hardly refuse to accept."

Naked Spaces script from *Framer Framed*, pg 35.

The three type styles indicate the three voices, plain type informs according to Western logic.

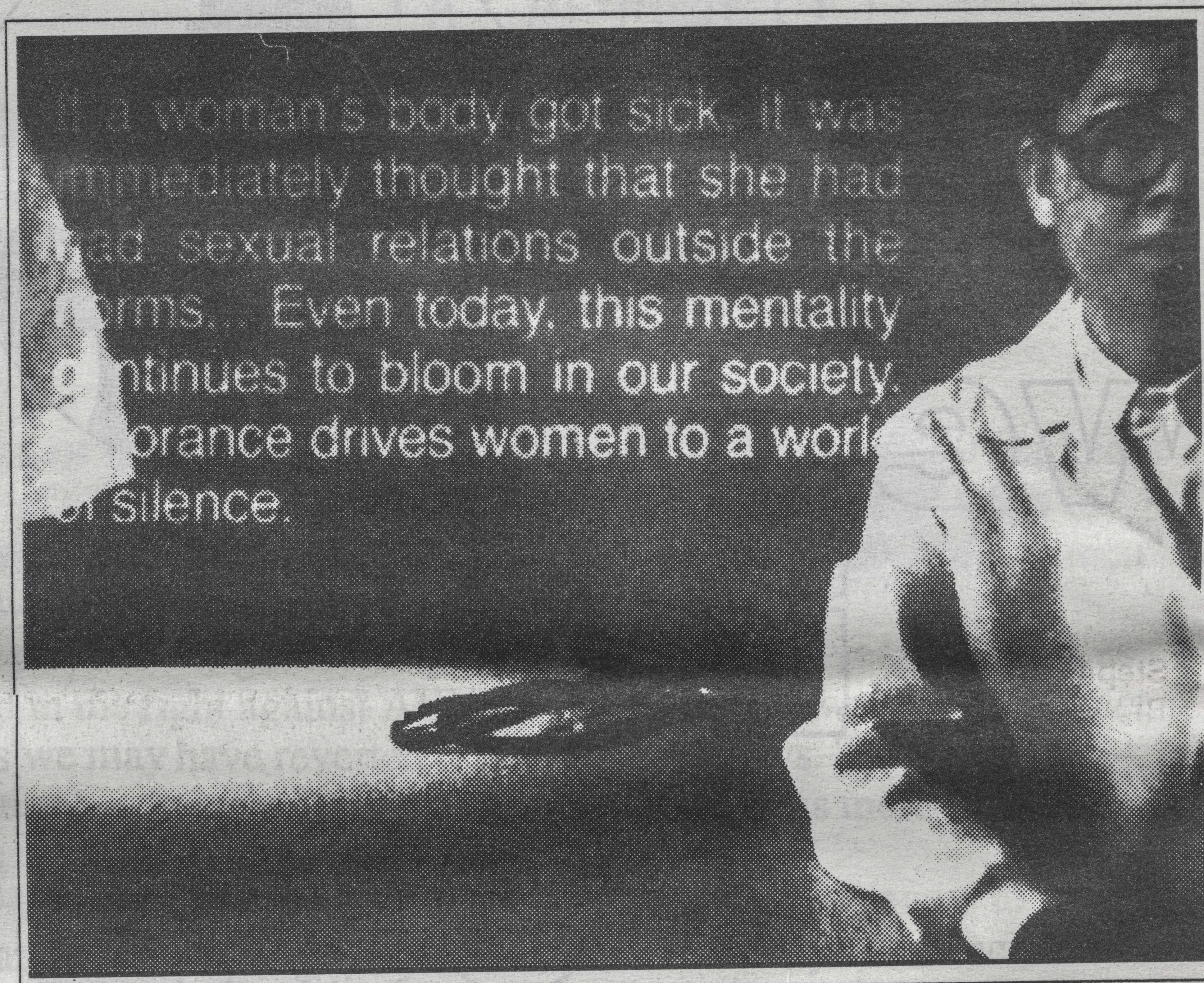
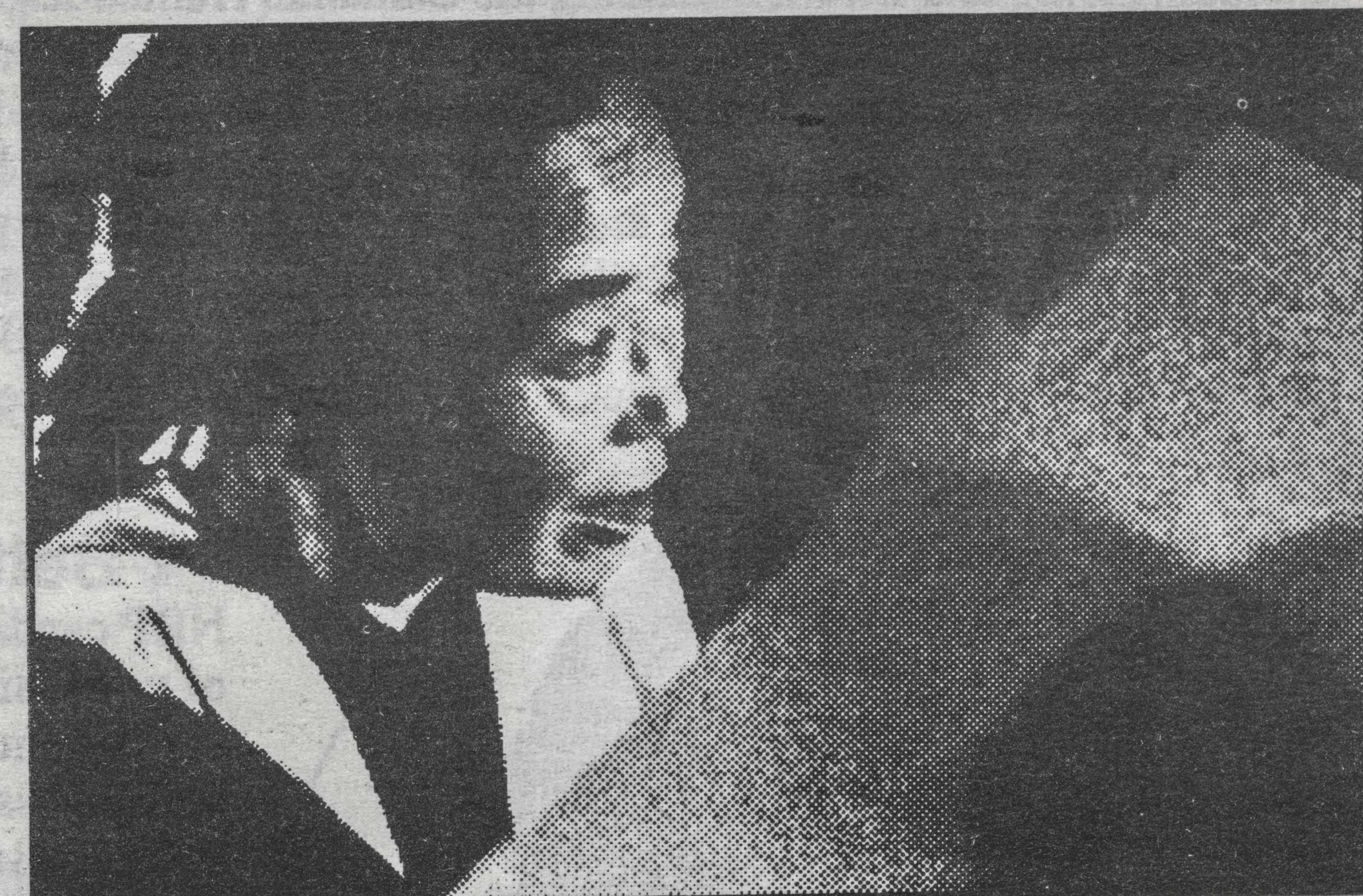
Surname Viet, Given Name Nam, is 108 minutes in both colour and black and white, and filmed in the US and Viet Nam. Here, there are 5 women's voices, 2 voice-overs read in English, 1 voice sings sayings, proverbs and poetry in Vietnamese with translations, 1 interviews in English with Vietnamese subtitles, and 1 interview in English in image-sync-sound. This highlighting of multiple voices and translation is important to understand Trinh's belief in contextualising perception to experience and location, and thus interpretation is broadened.

Winner of international awards, this film challenges the viewer with the questions *what is fact and how is truth depicted?* Using a well-known series of post-Viet Nam war interviews from 1982, Trinh re-creates this document with entirely staged interviews with "actresses" in the US. The film critiques the interview as a central tool of documentary film practice that creates an authenticated body of authoritative information. Trinh's strategy is to question this in a self-aware, interactive and sometimes humorous style of filming - playfully, the camera, concentrating on the speaker's face, slowly drifts off to her shoulder and ponders the wall beside her like a thoughtful eye, and our gaze as viewer is given back to us.

**Shoot For the Contents**

Archival and newsreel footage and still photographs of the Vietnamese war, Vietnamese beauty contests in the US, and traditional folk dances are intercut with the re-created interviews, in addition to "real-time" interviews with the "actresses", create a complex weaving of rich insights, sounds and ideas of multiple layers. *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* is Trinh's most personal film against cultural imperialism: an examination of power, using the metaphor of the camera-eye, and a testimony to the strength and endurance of Vietnamese women.

"Interview: an antiquated device of documentary. Truth is selected, renewed, displaced and speech is always tactical." *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam*

**Surname Viet, Given Name Nam**

Winner of the Best Cinematography Award, *Shoot for the Contents* is filmed in China and the US in 1992, in colour - 102 minutes. Again using multiple voices, text and calligraphy on screen, with voice-overs and staged interviews, Trinh creates a complex conversation of a rich variety of sources, from insiders to outsiders of China, to ponder questions of power and change, politics and culture, ideology and poetics in a deft multitude of layering which defy simple answers.

In weaving two women's voices with folk songs; the sayings of Mao next to Confucius; the interviewing of an exiled filmmaker - highly stylised and composed with the simultaneous-interpreter's face and lighting; in between scenes of dwelling places and the wanderings of the occupants, Trinh articulates her meditations on the changing nature of perception and philosophy in China and the West, thereby visibilising an intrinsic interplay that influences identity within both locations.

"Any revolutionary strategy must challenge the depiction of reality." *UBC Lecture*

Trinh Minh-Ha knows her challenge. To be a woman of colour in the the West demands a rigour and quality of one's work - always aware of the biases of western dominance. One is expected to work harder and more conscientiously than is usual to be and remain visible, respected and empowered. That one has to strategise to not be contained and consumed as the sole representative of the thousands of those not heard and not given voice. Trinh knows her other challenge. To critique linear perception and monologism, the basis of western dominance and division, and to open a space that is patient and listening to the many levels of reality and perception that exist around us. These are seen in her work.

"What is more beautiful than a lotus
in a pond?...
Yellow stamens, white petals, green
leaves:
Always near mud, it never smells of mud."
Surname Viet, Given Name Nam

Films on video available from IDERA
Books available from Spartacus
Bibliography
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Indiana University Press 1989.
When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics. Routledge 1991.
Framer Framed. Routledge 1992

**Trinh Minh-Ha**