Film and video artist Trinh T. Minh-ha has revolutionized narrative and post-narrative filmmaking with her film and videos, which displace the voyeuristic gaze of the traditional Western viewer and re-theorize the relationship between spectator, filmmaker, and performer. In her work, she has emerged as one of the most influential theorists, filmmakers, and composers of the Post-Colonial late twentieth century. Trinh T. Minh-ha’s works have been widely screened in the United States and abroad, and her writings have been published in several collections of critical essays and several volumes devoted to her work alone.

Born in Vietnam in 1953, Trinh T. Minh-ha came to the United States in 1970. After graduate school, she studied cinema and cultural theory in Senegal and Dakar. Her work as an ethnographer led her to question then-contemporary notions of ethnography. She argued that ethnographic filmmaking as it was then practiced did not objectively represent the Third World subject, and she questioned the validity of “objective truth.” In her first film, *Reassemblage* (1982), she redefined the documentary form by exposing its limited designs. *Reassemblage*, ostensibly “about” women in Senegal, is instead a film that challenges the role of the colonialized “other” (Third World women) as subjects of the
filmmaker’s gaze. *Reassemblage* was hailed as a critical success, and Minh-ha was able to obtain several grants to continue her work as a film and video artist.

*Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* (1989) looks not only at the role of Vietnamese women, but at Trinh T. Minh-ha, the filmmaker herself. The film is a metanarrative of interviews of Vietnamese women in Vietnam and the United States. Also included in the film is archival footage, poetry, art, printed text, and footage of refugee camps in the United States. *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* is a poetic investigation and celebration of Vietnamese women’s rejection of their subjecthood. It is an avant-garde documentary that redefines the genre of the ethnographic film, as it simultaneously redefines the positionality of the filmmaker within the production/reception process of cinema/video.

Minh-ha’s work extends beyond filmmaking and critical film discourse. Her post-colonial feminist criticism, particularly her books *Woman, Native, Other*, *Framer Framed* and *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representations, Gender and Cultural Politics*, have been extremely significant in cross-cultural studies and literary criticism. Minh-ha, in turn, is inspired by writers such as Assia Djebar, Clarice Lispector, and Zora Neale Hurston, as well as critics such as Gilles Deleuze, Hélène Cixous, and Roland Barthes, and filmmakers such as Chantal Akerman, Valeria Sarmiento, and Yvonne Rainer. After Trinh T. Minh-ha released her most recent film, *A Tale of Love* (1995), I interviewed Minh-ha in the spring of 1997 on her work as an artist and critical theoretician, and more specifically on *A Tale of Love*, which is her first 35mm narrative feature, although it remains, in many respects, as unconventional and uncompromising as her earlier works.

**Gwendolyn Foster:** *A Tale of Love* transgresses the borders between narrative film and experimental film. I read it as a postmodern performative enunciation of a 19th-century Vietnamese poem, “The Tale of Kieu.” I was wondering how you might classify the film, if it even needed classification, and how those people who have seen the film are classifying it. It’s been positioned as your ‘first narrative film’. I am wondering how you feel about that.

**Trinh T. Minh-ha:** Yes, no doubt, the term is not mine and I don’t
consider A Tale of Love my first narrative film. One can see it as a natural extension of my previous work or one can see it as a different kind of performance, a new trajectory in directions similar to those taken by my earlier films. These have always resisted the reductive binaries set up between “fiction” and “documentary” films.

GF: Exactly. This brings up the issue of categorization.

TMH: I’ve made it quite clear, in the writings and interviews I’ve published, that “experimental” is not a genre and “documentary” does not really exist since everything goes through fictional devices in film. Rather than reverting endlessly to these established categories, I would prefer to speak about different degrees of staged and unstaged material, or about different spaces of resistance—such as that of enriching meaning while divesting it of its power to order images and sound. I work with the tension these differences raise and the way they creatively or critically contaminate each other. This largely accounts for the difficulties my films kept on encountering in many exhibition venues, including those that claimed to support multicultural, independent or alternative work. The films I’ve been making confront people in their normalized need to categorize, to make sense and to know all. It is in this vein that A Tale also continues to frustrate easy consumption, although it certainly differs from the earlier films in its work process. For example, none of my previous films was scripted before the shooting, while in this film almost everything was scripted ahead of time, albeit in a form that was unusual for the actors and the crew.

GF: What was different about the way you worked with the actors and the crew on this film?

TMH: The script I gave them had all the scenes, with storyboards that showed all the camera positions and movements, the framings, as well as the lighting designs for each scene. But there was no set order to these scenes. I wrote them both as a director and as an editor, so I was leaving room for the scenes to build on one another during the shooting and to find their own order in the editing phase. Since I did away with sequential order, the planning was at times
very frustrating for the key organizing members, including the script supervisor, who is traditionally the continuity person. Working with a large crew in a limited time frame makes it almost impossible to improvise and to operate outside of the framework of traditional narrative filmmaking, in which the specific division of labor tends to become at times too rigid and constraining. However, most of the “department heads” of our crew had more than one role to fulfill, and I can’t complain, for everyone did their best. The actors, for example, tried very hard to make their lines, their roles, and their precisely blocked movements all seem natural despite the quite “unnatural” nature of the script. I myself had to shift ground radically and to conceive of the space of “improvisation” other than as a space of spontaneous formation. The openings offered should then be found elsewhere than in the dichotomy of unscripted versus scripted work.

GF: I wonder whether you felt in some ways more free and in some ways more restricted in the making of A Tale of Love? I’m also very interested in the spare acting style of the film.

TMH: In some ways it was certainly more restrictive. I used to have a crew of three to six people maximum, and I was doing most
of the work myself, including the camera and sound recording in remote rural contexts. Of course, the time was then my own. I shot whatever I saw or whenever the moment was ripe for shooting, and I shot it the way I looked at it through the lens. The indeterminate waiting and looking without using the camera was always part of the shooting. As soon as you start working with a crew of seventeen to twenty-five people, the space for improvisation is extremely limited. Because of budgetary constraints, I cannot afford, for example, what Godard can sometimes afford, which is to keep the actors for a certain length of time (he mentioned three to six months) so that he can experiment and write his script from day to day. Or, for example, the case of Robert Bresson, who asks his “models” (or non-actors) to perform their actions mechanically and exactly as he wants them, and then to repeat them until they no longer notice what they are doing. It is in this mechanical precision that he feels he can capture something “raw” (matière brut) of his models. These are two examples of ways of reconceiving acting which I love, but I had a different situation and very different constraints. These constraints actually added to the film because I learned to work with them and use them to my advantage.

Since experimentation cannot be equated with improvisation in this film, I was compelled to come up with a space of acting whose slightly denaturalized performance would hit on very different sensitive chords in our reception of narrative film. It was more a question, let’s say, of performing with the unknown (what is veiled to our ear and eye) within the appearance of the known. As Alikan, the photographer, states in the film, here everything is performed for and nothing is really unforeseen. Freedom in a highly constructed space is a different kind of freedom, much less obvious and hence more easily mistakable for its absence. Yet it is in this space that elements unknown to myself, to the actors, and to the end product emerge in the moments of production and reception. Performing here is not simply evaluated according to how well an actor can portray the psychology and behavior of a given character. The intent is not to capture “natural” or naturalistic acting, but rather what remains unforeseeable, for example, when one works with precision on duration. The overall choreography of the camera movement in the film is both exact and exacting.
There is not a single shot-reverse-shot in the entirety of this feature-length film, and what may become perceptible when the camera stays fixed on two actors in dialogue, or when it passes by them in a mercilessly slow movement, is the very space of viewing and of performing. When the actors' slightest self-consciousness becomes visible to the spectators, the latter may also become conscious of their own moment of consumption of the "spectacle" or of the "scene" acted on screen for them, and hence the general discomfort that some of them have voiced.

GF: One could read the film in the traditional linear narrative fashion in the sense that it centers on a heroine, Kieu, who is in love with writing. She's investigating "The Tale of Kieu" and working as a model. But as the film unfolds I see her as a figure who moves across narrative zones. I notice she often gazes at the viewer and speaks to us as she actively deconstructs the very narrative that she embodies. Towards the middle of the film, the narrative drive of the film becomes, I think, less and less linear. I'm referring to those sections of the film in which we watch her writing and daydreaming, thinking about writing and fantasizing. She makes me think of a "character zone," a very fluid zone in the sense that Bakhtin used that phrase. Do you see her that way?

TMH: To some extent, yes. Most of the experimentation done in "narrative film" focuses on the structure of the narrative. Very few filmmakers have worked on the space of acting to stretch the dimension of the narrative. Marguerite Duras certainly contributed to calling into question narrative form by doing away with acting as impersonifying and representing. Her complex use of the voice (voice-over, voice off-screen; external, non-psychological, non-interiorized voices) in relation to blank spaces, love, death, desire, and their absence-presence through the actors' bodies is unique. It is more common among experimental filmmakers to rupture the narrative by using non-linear time and space, for example. But for me, since I've always worked at the limits of several categories, several narrative realms at once, it was not a question of simply rejecting linearity or doing away with the story.
GF: Yes, here we have many stories, many Kieus, many levels of narrative and at the same time there really is no unified narrative. It's very pleasurable to experience.

TMH: You start out with a story and you realize, as it unfolds, that there's not really a story in the film. The thread created moves forward criss-crossed and interlaced by other threads until it breaks with its own linearity; and hence, a story is told mainly to say that there is no story--only a complex, tightly knit tissue of activities and events that have no single explanation, as in life. Of course, a number of viewers tend to catch immediately onto the relationship between Kieu, the protagonist, and Alikan, the photographer, because what they see above all is a conflict between genders, cultures, economical and political positions (boss/employee; subject/object). The ideology of conventional narrative is, as Raul Ruiz puts it, based on the globalized central conflict theory; a theory that rules over both the film industries of the world, and the political system of the U. S. as a dominant model nation. Fortunately, of love however, for other viewers and myself, there is no real conflict in *A Tale of Love*. Not only is the relationship with Alikan merely one among the three visualized in the film, but there are also many relationships other than the ones people tend to follow, especially those not dependent on actors and dialogues. These dialogues are further not real dialogues; they are written as story-spaces that are peculiar to each role designed, and despite their close interactions, they maintain their independent logic--not good versus bad logic, but only different ones.

Here the notion of fluid “character zone” raised in your earlier question is very relevant. I am thinking more specifically of the movements of the characters across dream-states and reality on film. I could talk in dichotomies and say they are the landscapes of a person in love: internal and external, past and present, mythical and historical, literary and filmic. I could also see these movements as inscribing a multiplicity of narrative threads and narrative interfaces. An example is the night scene (in an industrial setting) toward the end of the film when Kieu is speaking to a man wearing a raincoat and a hat, whom we do not recognize as Alikan until either the last line of the scene or until we see Kieu, in the next day
shot, waking up (in Juliet’s court) and uttering his name with surprise. The same day shot with Kieu drowsing off (in Juliet’s court) is seen somewhere toward the beginning of the film. So many things have happened in the film during this lapse of time that a multitude of questions may be raised as to both the nature of that night scene (is it a nightmare? a fantasy? a memory?) and the nature of the events that came before it (Was she telling herself stories all this time? Or was the daydream dreaming her?). No single linear explanation can account for these narrative interfaces in which performer and performance, dreamer and dream are constituted like the two sides of a coin. One cannot say that she’s simply moving in and out of fantasy and reality, but rather, that it’s a different zone we are experiencing.

GF: I really like that sense, as a viewer, of falling into that zone because it’s undescribable, and it makes you want to see the film again and re-experience the cracks and fissures in narrative and character. I was really interested in the parallels you imply between writing and loving and the connection to the rhetoric around women as writers. In particular, I was thinking of some the writing that’s been done on women writing such as Cixous’s “The Laugh of the Medusa.” But it also made me rethink Plato’s *Phaedrus*. Both speak specifically about writing, creativity, and romantic love and how they’re very much tied to the body. I was struck by the ways in which you embodied and enacted these ideas in the film.

TMH: Well, I’m certainly glad to hear that because although I do not expect viewers to be receptive to all the layers involved (I myself am still learning to articulate them), the fact that some viewers, yourself included, may be familiar with feminist writing would make all the difference. If we don’t center our attention on this so-called conflict in the film, then there’s a whole other narrative layer that may come to the front. This is the realm in which Kieu as a character shuttles between more than one identity and contributes to the afterlives of The Tale. No matter how non-illustrative the relation is, the film’s present-day Kieu who lives as an immigrant in the States and does research on the “Tale of Kieu” is also embodying the poem’s 19th-century Kieu who sacrifices herself for love; and in that sense, she partakes in the life experiences of
the thousands of all-time Kieus whom her Aunt mentioned in the film. As with my other films, there are many forms of reflexivity in *A Tale of Love*. And working with them means opening up to the possibility of engaging with infinity within the very finiteness of a constructed film space. Kieu's self-reflectivity and reflexivity constantly shift; the question is not simply that of doubling—one looks into the mirror and sees a reflection or a double of oneself—but that of one reflection reflecting another reflection to infinity. Kieu's reality here is in tune both with the boundless (or bounding) reality of love, and with the radically reflexive nature of cinema and writing. It is this notion of shifting interface and reflection, with no side passing for the original, that really interests me, especially in working with voyeurism in this film.

GF: Another aspect that I really liked about the film is that it obviously is a meditation on the discourse around the politics of women and objectification and voyeurism. I felt engaged in a performance that was voyeuristic and at the same time made me critique that place of voyeurism.
TMH: Yes, I think the film can offer the viewer a unique entryway when it is placed in the context of feminism; but if you miss that entryway, there are other possible ways to enter A Tale of Love, because the voyeur has appeared quite prominently in a number of writers’, filmmakers’ and artists’ works. One can look at the entire history of narrative in terms of voyeurism—how different forms of voyeurism are deployed in order to sustain narrative power, and how they are made to go unnoticed, especially among spectators who, unaware of their complicity as screen voyeurs, want to be “convinced” of what they see. In other words, the production of (unacknowledged) voyeurism and the consumption of realist narrative continue to feed on each other. It’s difficult for me to tell right now how audiences are viewing the film because it has just been released. From the screenings I attended, its reception already oscillates between a very high discomfort and a very intense, enthusiastic response.

GF: Maybe even a bit of both. I do remember being a bit shocked that you were taking on what can be shown and what cannot be shown. I mean, we’re looking at women being looked at and with all the discourse around women being reduced to their object status of to-be-looked-at-ness. It made me constantly ask myself questions such as, how is Trinh, as a woman filmmaker, different in her representation of voyeurism? How can I negotiate the many different narrative strands of the film with relation to the questions of voyeurism and spectatorship? How is this moving the discourse of pornography further beyond rigid moralistically defined ideals?

TMH: Right. Actually the film does not really show nudity in a pornographic way and it doesn’t have any lovemaking scenes, for example. As a filmmaker has said it before, when it comes to lovemaking, all actors just start looking like all other actors. The way lovemaking scenes are realized on film remains quite homogenous throughout the history of commercial narrative. Knowing my background, it was perhaps unavoidable that you would ask how a feminist treatment of voyeurism could be different, but this is one way of approaching A Tale of Love. I would say that the viewers’ discomfort with it so far seem to be less easily locatable,
perhaps because it takes time to articulate this discomfort, and there is no consensus among them as to where or what disturbs them. Some think it’s the script; some, the lack of plot and unified storyline; others, the acting and the actors; and others yet, the explicit recognition of themselves being voyeurs.

A number of comments did focus on the acting, which some spectators find “hard to look at,” “self-conscious,” “distant,” “odd,” or they simply “didn’t like the style.” Informed viewers have invoked similarities with the films of Straub and Huillet or of Duras. What seems striking in the more negative comments is the fact that viewers differ markedly in their opinions about the specific actors: the one they really have problem with is definitely not always the same (and this applies “democratically” to all five main actors of the film), and yet each sees in one and only one particular actor the unequivocal source of their discomfort. Several viewers have also divided the acting, in accordance with the setting and the characters, into three levels: more natural, more stylized, and in between the two, mid-stylized. By these comments, it seems likely to me that the viewer is uncomfortable, because she or he feels some of the acute moments when the actors themselves are self-conscious. This is exactly what I was aiming for, although I was not sure what the exact outcome would be. *A Tale of Love* does not fall squarely into the kind of film whose actors’ deliveries sound deliberately *read* or monotonously flat because the artifice is clearly exposed as such. There are a number of films that work in that direction; Yvonne Rainer’s films, for example. In my case, I was experimenting with different effects in a slightly different space, and I didn’t want the scripted lines to sound distinctly “read.” I would let the actors try to make their deliveries as naturalistic as possible because I knew that the “dialogues” I wrote could not be entirely naturalized, although what ultimately resists being naturalized remains undefined, and hence fascinating to me.

GF: So, in a sense, you’re acting as an ethnographer of performance itself. You are problematizing acting styles in ways that question naturalistic expression. I’m thinking particularly of moments such as when Kieu tells the photographer, Alikan, that what he really wants is a headless body. There’s a sense, as a viewer, that she may
not have said that (in any sort of reality or narrative construct that we’re used to), but she’s saying it in this film and there’s something disconcerting and abstract about the way she says it. I was wondering how the actors felt about delivering these lines. It must have been discomfiting or maybe funny at points.

TMH: Actually, it seemed that what bothered them, or at least in the case of Dominic Overstreet, the actor who played Alikan, was not so much the lines themselves as the way they were written. He would repeatedly try to change the sentence slightly to make it more colloquial. At one point, I asked him to tell me on camera the problems he was having with the script. And he said that, for him, it’s not really written in American English, the kind of English he’s used to, it’s written in British English. I was tickled to hear that because there is some truth to such a remark; I was taught English in Vietnam by British or British-educated teachers, and furthermore, both my personal assistant and the script supervisor speak British English. Yet I know the problem is not only to be found there; it also has to do with how, when, and where (in what situations) the lines are supposed to be delivered. Alikan is working with a model who “resists not having a head” and whose uncommon lines can leave both actors slightly at a loss as to finding the right tone and reaction for them.

GF: It’s very active and self-reflective. I found great visual pleasure watching the scene in which the male photographer is blinded. I don’t know if that was an allusion or not, but it reminded me of something that 19th-century women writers do to heroes in Gothic romances. I was particularly thinking of Wuthering Heights. I wondered if you were making an allusion or if I was just looking for connections to women writers?

TMH: This is a wonderful reading. But for me, this was not a direct allusion because when I was creating it, I was doing it quite intuitively in relation to the whole context of voyeurism. It is important to note that in the scene you mentioned, both the man and the woman are blindfolded. The people working with me and some of the viewers who have seen the film have been struck by
the fact that for the first time neither can see each other.

GF: Yes, that scene is certainly one of the most transgressive images. It destroys subject-object positionality as we know it. To look as a voyeur at both male and female who are bound with the veil feels oddly powerful yet self-conscious because we find ourselves surprised in our active gaze.

TMH: On the one hand, it is a rupture with domination by eye because only touching prevails here in the relationship between the man and the woman. And the sense of touch is all the more heightened when sight is hindered. Vision and visuality have long been the domain in which male mastery is exerted, while the eroticism of the female body through touch is an area some feminists have reappropriated and theorized at length. On the other hand, one can say that the film is a trap for the gaze, and the gender line is not so clear-cut. Except for Alikan, the other voyeurs in the film are women, and as you mention, the scene we discuss is one among those designed to call attention to the viewing space or to the spectator’s own voyeurism. (If the actors can’t see each other then, who’s looking at them?) Finally, it is not just looking at the scene, but being put on the spot—the voyeur’s encounter with his or her own gaze—that has the potential to make the viewers most uncomfortable, even though they may not recognize this and would rather find fault elsewhere.

GF: Perhaps because it’s a new experience. We have not really seen images like this before, images that place us in a different kind of subjectivity with relation to our sense of voyeuristic pleasure. There are other scenes that have a resonance in their ability to render pleasure and discomfort in the viewer. I’m thinking of the scene in which Kieu takes the veil and puts it on herself. She goes to work at the photo studio, and there she takes the veil and places it on herself. I think this happens immediately before she gets verbally assertive towards Alikan. She tells him he really only wants a headless body. This is interesting because immediately before this, when she entered the studio, she was flipping through a book of pornographic images of women. She’s taking more and
more of her body back, of her subjectivity back. I was very drawn to those scenes and also to the scenes between Juliet and Kieu in which they discuss the history of fragrances and love. I know there’s some critical writing about fragrance and film and eroticism. For me, this is wrapped into the idea of writing and performing and romance.

TMH: In filmmaking the two senses that are most privileged are the visual and the auditory. The other senses, like touch, taste, and smell, are extremely difficult to solicit without falling into the order of meaning. One hears or looks at a film; but one can only literally touch, taste, and smell a piece of celluloid. Perhaps it is necessary to return here to the notion of film as event rather than as mere spectacle; instead of centering on the screen, the viewer’s experience of film is also engaged in the extra-screen space—that is, the moviehouse space or the immediate environment. I am reminded here of a practice, in Japanese Kabuki theater, devised to heighten the audience’s sensual experience of the play: with the extended notion of the stage and the many uses made of the passage-way(s) (hanamichi) that runs through the audience, a play can, for example, have its “fragrant stamp,” or its performance can be intensified at specific moments—such as at the last rites of a funeral, when the body of a beloved character is placed in a palanquin with a bowl of incense, and as the palanquin is carried through the audience, the theater is slowly filled with the mournful fragrance.

This is quite a challenge for a filmmaker to convey through film, and unfortunately, one cannot aim for similar effects with today’s movie-theater audiences (a public, for example, largely not initiated to the language of fragrance and its precise use in different rites and ceremonies), since most of us tend to minimize the sense of smell as well as the tools to qualify it. However, it seems that the time when, despite oneself, one becomes oversensitive and one’s senses are wildly awoken, is when one is in the state of being in love. Since the film enacts this state, with all of its lucidity and its silliness, it is important to dedicate a large part of the film to the importance of smell. Andy Warhol wrote a whole chapter on smell and perfume. What interests me is that you find perfume in all women’s magazines. So in the film it is through Juliet, who is the
editor of a women’s magazine, that one hears about how stories and fragrances can be created. When you see how inventively the creation of perfume in these women’s magazines is written about, it’s just really amazing. It’s a whole unexplored area, for me, of creativity.

GF: Another thing I am really interested in is the use of multiple voice-overs in the film. In the context of the discussion of disembodied knowledge and embodied knowledge, Kieu has a number of very active voice-overs presented within the context of the discourse of eroticism of headless women. I thought that was really funny and poetic. The film repositions the voice-over in search of a multiplicity of subject positions for Kieu. Was this choice made as you edited the film, or had you had those sort of ideas in your mind before you wrote it?

TMH: The lines Kieu read in voice-over were written with the script from the start (albeit on separate sheets to be recorded at the postproduction phase), but I only decided on how and where they came in when I built the soundtrack. As I’ve mentioned earlier, the order of these lines was not set in advance; the film took form during the shooting and changed again during the editing. It was in the process of going from one form to another that the different designations of the voice-overs (the verse-singing can be another indirect voice) emerged.

GF: One thing that should be noted is how the character Kieu stresses that the importance of Kieu (of the poem) lies in her resistance. Kieu forces us to think about the daily acts of resistance that so many women, particularly women who are read as “victims,” perform. I find it significant that Kieu is walking along in front of stripclubs when we hear her voice-over reflecting on the morality of Kieu. What she says in her voice-over is as important as her actions. By walking along beside the sex workers she gestures toward a rereading of sex worker as “non-victim,” and she claims space in a transgressive performative act. Within the context of the film, I get a sense that “The Tale of Kieu” is one of the most culturally significant poems of the Vietnamese diaspora. Why did
you choose this poem?

TMH: It is a very important poem for the Vietnamese. I already touched on the figure of Kieu in one of my previous films, *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*. It was then placed in the context of mythical, historical, and current women of resistance of Vietnam. Kieu’s passion-driven life, marked by unremitting misfortunes and sustained by her sacrifice, endurance, and loyalty, has become the allegory for Vietnam’s destiny. But if in *Surname Viet* the film’s reflexive dimension is gradually brought out through a number of devices and more explicitly toward the end in the comments of a voice-over, in *A Tale of Love* you don’t have the explicit staging of any voice that stands outside “the story” to comment on it; in other words, there’s no visible metadiscourse. That is discomforting for viewers who expect, as with my other films, to be informed more directly of the moves involved by a voice that pulls out from the film to reflect on it. I decided in this film that I would have none of that, so meaning, form, and structure evolve out of the tension between the filmmaker, the subject, and the viewer. As we’ve discussed, the reflexive dimension is both diffused in every narrative layer and concentrated in the treatment of voyeurism. This seems to have made filmviewers even more uncomfortable.

Voyeurism is here further coupled with the aesthetics and politics of the veil. Of course the veil and the headless female body are reflected in many ways in the film, both literally and metaphorically. Linked to voyeurism, it is framed in a whole fabric of relations. First, Alikan’s love for everything that is veiled, including the look of the model. That the model should not “look back” while he shoots is certainly nothing new in photography (the naturalistic formula we all abide by when shooting on location is: “Don’t look at the camera, just go on with your activities as if I’m not there”). Looking back is also commonly experienced as an act of defiance, a perilous act that is historically feared for its ability to divest the Master of his power to possess and control. In many parts of the world, the unveiled woman is still the one who moves about “undressed.” She who looks back rather than hide or be oblivious to her body and her sensuality is bound to provoke. And here we paradoxically link up with the other dimension of the veil:
if Alikan uses all kinds of veiling devices, it is both to dispossess the model of her power to gaze and to prevent the image from falling into the realm of pornography (in pornography, the nude often looks straight—provocatively and invitingly—at the camera). The veil is oppressive, but it can also become a form of resistance; hence the importance of the scene in which both man and woman are blindfolded, and the necessity of also having women voyeurs in the film, as mentioned. The way we all partake in the politics and aesthetics of veiling is complex and often paradoxical.

The scene that you mentioned, having Kieu walking outdoors, is therefore very important for me personally. I’ve noticed, for example, how in certain Middle Eastern cultures—this should apply to other contexts across nations as well—the streets continue to belong to men, while the domestic realm remains women’s domain. But this being said, I don’t want to reiterate that binary opposition between public and private space as developed in certain feminists’ work. Let’s just say that since the street belongs to men, women have a different space. Whenever they go out into the street, for example, they only go out at certain hours of the day. The unspoken rule is that they shouldn’t be seen too much in daylight and they shouldn’t be seen at night; it should be somewhere in between. This is what I’ve noticed in Yemen. Between four and six p.m. the women come out in the street completely veiled. This is the time of the day when their veiled silhouettes are seen moving outside against the walls of the houses. So, for me, the scenes of women walking outdoors at night, the scene of Kieu walking by herself and a later scene in which the camera pans along with women outside on the street, is also a way of gesturing toward the whole history of veiling. The dark of night itself is a veil. Even in progressive societies, a woman is not supposed to be alone, outside in the street if she comes, let’s say, from a well-to-do family or if she has been “properly educated.” The night belongs, actually, to those of the margins: sex workers, drug users, secret lovers, and so on. So the scenes of women walking outdoors can be liberatory, but they also remind us of the values of society and the restraints it puts on women in their movement. For how is a woman walking aimlessly alone at night looked at?
GF: The idea of taking back space is something that’s important to me in a feminist performative context. I read Kieu as “devenir femme” or “becoming woman” in the sense that French feminists use this term. Kieu has flashbacks or fantasy sequences in which she sees herself as a child. I was wondering if you were staging a primal fantasy of mother/daughter recovery or if you were doing something different here?

TMH: No, actually, I was thinking more in the context of the tale or the poem itself. You see the poem opens with a very famous scene in which Kieu goes to a temple. There she suddenly sees a desolated tomb and weeps over it, moved by the fact that nobody’s really tending this tomb. At night, the woman who was buried there comes back to her. It is through this woman that Kieu becomes very conscious of the fact that she’s a talented woman and that women with many talents are bound in life to suffer. She begins remembering signs from her childhood that foretold how she was going to suffer in life because of her beauty and her talent. The scene where you first see Kieu as a child precisely alludes to that part of the poem. But it can also work on another level, especially for people who are not familiar with the poem. I guess for those viewers, it evokes a physical and psychological response. In these memory scenes, the child is seen near a body of water. The element of water which runs through the film is very important; here, it is visually tied to the image of Kieu playing naked freely and to her memories of home. This is again an intervention of women’s space. Another device that I use here is the voice-over, the brief voice of memory. Instead of using a standard device such as a dissolve, or a color change to signal the passage to fantasy or memory, I simply have her name being called by an offscreen voice. To hear one’s name called by an ex-lover or by a relative can trigger unexpected memories or it can lead one to an immediate change of zone. One can enter and exit a zone by a smell, a sight, or a sound. So, yes, the scenes with the little girl introduce the viewer to the relation between mother and daughter. This is tied to another thematic thread in the film between tradition and modernity; between the Vietnamese in the diaspora and the Vietnamese “at home” in Vietnam. The link between the two can be both moving, warm,
affectionate, and tense, burdensome, problematic; but either way, one cannot simply dispense with it. The mother figure is always present.

GF: This is a little bit off the topic, but I feel like you’re maybe making a connection in this film between how people of the supposed “Third World” are lumped together in a space called “the Other” and the way in which romantic narratives break down our notions of an undifferentiated “Other.” Kieu is very much like Kieu of the poem and yet unlike her. And Juliet is also like and unlike Juliet of Romeo and Juliet. I like the way that you challenge categorizations. You challenge the notion of the “Other” just as you challenge our notion of self. This revolves around a questioning of the constructions of our essential love tales.

TMH: This is your own reading of the film. The film is made to invite such readings, so I’m very happy to hear them. But I would rather say that I was working with multiplicity. The letters Juliet receives indicate, for example, that even though people know Juliet does not exist, they still address their letters to “Juliet, Verona, Italy.” The same can be said of “The Tale of Kieu,” which every Vietnamese remembers, whether it serves the official narrative of the Vietnamese government or whether it is carried on by the people who have exiled themselves from Vietnam. The verses have long become part of our daily expressions. Instead of saying how bad a person is or of describing what kind of a person one is dealing with, for example, one just invokes the name of one of the typical characters in the Tale to communicate precisely what one means. It happens with all classes of people. Because the poem is written in a rhythm taken from Vietnamese proverbs and folksongs, people remember it very easily and they quote its verses as popular sayings. But, for me, what remains most amazing is the fact that a whole people identify the destiny of their country with the love story of a woman. Kieu personifies Love. This is the link to Juliet and Romeo, for Kieu is not one heroine, not one character but, as it is stated in the film, she’s numberless. There are as many Kieus as there are talented women across generations whose destinies Kieu’s story has typified. Kieu is a multiplicity, just as Juliet is a multiplicity.
So, for me, it’s not so much a question of opposing the West to its Other or of correcting the gap between the self and the other. “Juliet” is a name that stands for a person; at the same time, she’s a character in the film whose fiction evolves from another fiction; she’s a symbol for love and a love site that is radically a multiplicity.

GF: I guess what I was speaking of was the whole discourse of the essentialized notion of woman. Which would mean that “Third World” stories cannot be spoken of in context of “First World” stories. I’m drawn to the scene in which Kieu questions Juliet about her conception of romance. She says to her, “The problem with your love story is that it invariably ends in death or in marriage. You see, I prefer the less definite ending of “The Tale of Kieu,” which ends in love and friendship.” I was very interested in the idea of female love and friendship in the film. The friendship between Kieu and Juliet is foregrounded. Their relationship is just as important, if not more important, than the relationship between Kieu and Alikan.

TMH: Yes. I am happy you noticed that because, for me, the relationship between Juliet and Kieu is decisive. They move through different levels. At the beginning it might seem as if it their
friendship is based on an editor-writer relationship, which is usually inequitable. Some viewers have rightly seen Juliet as a mentor or elder sister in relation to Kieu, who is younger and an emergent writer. But, for me, I think they are equals in the sense that the performance space and the acting trajectory allow them to develop as equals.

GF: It's a relationship usually based to some extent on money and privilege, but in the film, it's a more even exchange; it is a fantasy relationship. The two women spend great amounts of time together, and Juliet speaks from her heart in ways that are unexpected. Going back to new ways of looking at acting, I'd like you to talk about that section of the film in which Juliet does a performative dance. It was very funny and unusual and self-reflective. It is during the scene when they're talking about Romeo and Juliet. Juliet stares directly at the camera and begins dancing. Her dance seems to be out of context. I was wondering why she suddenly begins doing those dance moves?

TMH: Yes, there's one aspect of my film work which comes out very strongly with certain audiences and totally gets lost on other audiences. And that's the whole dimension of humor. To some extent it may be because of cultural difference. When Surname Viet Given Name Nam was premiered in San Francisco, half of the audience, the Vietnamese-speaking audience, were laughing at certain parts while the English-speaking audience laughed at other parts. They were almost never in sync, and some of the viewers were disoriented by that because they had the feeling they had missed out on something. Language seemed to have played a role here. But then the reception of Shoot for the Contents (a film in which only English is used) was similarly disparate; it varied from audiences that were extremely serious and totally silent throughout the film to audiences in which people were laughing and giggling all along. The same thing seems to be happening with A Tale of Love. The very first small audience I showed it to--mostly programmers--were deadly serious with it, but when A Tale of Love had a sneak preview with hundreds of people, they were largely laughing and giggling throughout the film. Many media makers and consumers tend to
reduce humor to its most evidently comical connotation (the sitcom kind of jokes), but humor can be subtle, barely present, yet disturbing, tragic, anarchic, dissociative, moving and deconstructive, and so on. Humor is not only in what makes one laugh, but it also lies in one’s ability to respond (with humor). With humor, things always leak, and as you’ve seen, there is definitely a dimension to my films that is quite silly and that has no logical explanation.

GF: And that’s part of our whole notion of romance. There’s a whole playful, illogical part of it that we can’t quite explain.

TMH: Exactly. Many aspects of the film invite immediate experience and exceed rational interpretations. The dance sequence to which you refer is one of these nonrational events. In addition to the mental relations woven in the film, there is this other dimension that is extremely important for me--in this film more than any other film--because I know the difficulty that I’m creating for the viewer. It is this dimension, especially when it clicks with the conceptual dimension, which I find most stimulating to work with--I don’t have an adequate name for it; we can call it plastic, sensual, nonverbal; something that involves the poetry of the stage-image, the language of color and space, or the sense of painted rhythm. It is mind-boggling to note how certain audiences are highly sensitive to it while others are totally oblivious. In the scene you mention, in response to Kieu’s speculation on love, death, friendship, and happy ending, Juliet makes up a dance. Here, I asked Juliet to come up with a mixture of different kinds of dances and to improvise on her own. It’s not simply a dance that fits in one of the known categories that people usually have in mind. Rather, it’s a dance that comes out as a physical response to what she’s hearing, that is, an intellectual reflection. It’s a form of resisting the closure of meaning, whether in movements of the body or of the mind.

GF: My husband and I have collaborated both in film and performance art, so I’m always interested in the nature of collaborative partnerships. Also, I have written a great deal on women filmmakers, many of whom worked with their husbands in
collaborative partnerships. Often one or the other tends to get sole credit for a project because when one co-directs, when you give credit to both partners, often someone chooses who’ll get the credit. Usually it is a film historian, curator, or archivist. Usually they’ll choose the male partner. For example, Elizaveta Svilova co-directed many of the Vertov films, and there are many, many other examples. I want to make sure that it is known that Jean-Paul Bourdier co-directed this film with you and that you often co-direct. In Western culture, we tend to see the artist as an individual, and we have trouble with the notion of any kind of collaborative art. I wonder if you would talk a little about the nature of collaboration and your experience of collaboration?

TMH: Collaboration is a term that is highly esteemed among marginalized groups because there is a tendency to value collaborative work over individual work in contexts where it is almost impossible to escape the burden of representation. There are number of film collectives (of which the more successful ones are Sankofa, or the Black Audio Film and Video Collective in the U.K., for example), through which a certain rejection of individual authorship may thrive. I think it’s a wonderful concept, but most of the time what happens in collaborative situations is that you end up having one person who directs and then the other people work with the director. One of the solutions that collectives have come up with is to have different members direct different films. But in the process, it usually becomes clear that you only have one or two directors on whom the members of the collective rely to “give direction” to a project. So, unless one works with someone on equal ground, but whose areas of strength are radically different from one’s own (even when situated in the same field), one cannot really talk about collaboration. Collaboration happens not when something common is shared among the collaborators, but when something that belongs to none of them comes to pass among them. This is what happens between Jean-Paul and I when we work together.

Not only did Jean-Paul take part in all of my previous films—he was consistently the co-producer, production designer, or art director—but we have also written two books on African architecture together. For the films shot in Africa, even though he didn’t have
to design any specific setting, we selected all the sites together. He did research for all the locations and had a major role in deciding at which site we would choose to film. He really has an eye for that. We have different strengths, though. Every time we encounter the same experience, we have totally different approaches to that experience. For example, during the shooting of *Naked Spaces* or of *Shoot for the Contents*, Jean-Paul’s relation to movement and space was certainly that of a passionate “eye-feeler” that sees and feels almost everything at once. He apprehends space in its overall expanse and potential; receives it instantaneously in form, volume, plan, and structural capacities; and visualizes it effortlessly from a bird’s-eye view. A building is immediately envisioned as time, age, trace. My relation to space and the built environment is almost the opposite: blind, fragmented, temporal, circumstantial; I don’t see through walls and roofs, so I move around unknowingly and I’m always at a loss. Both relations are necessary in filmmaking. So in *A Tale of Love*, which Jean-Paul co-directed, in addition to fulfilling all the other tasks mentioned, we decided to divide our roles accordingly: Jean-Paul would direct according to the script. Being the one who actually facilitated all the action during the shooting, he was the “true director.” I was a very quiet director because I needed the space both to take in and to pull out from the whole process. The execution of ideas is not all that there is, of course, to filmmaking; but one easily forgets that, especially when one is working with some twenty-five people and everybody wants the director’s attention. The fact that we co-directed the film really allowed me to have that space, to reflect on what was going on in the production process and how that might act on the editing and post-production of the material. More than with my previous films, Jean-Paul’s production design and lighting design in *A Tale of Love* play a decisive role in bringing out what I’ve discussed earlier as being most stimulating—the sensual, nonverbal, unmeasurable dimension of the film.

GF: What are you working on now?

TMH: My next project may well be a video series on traveling and dwelling. *A Tale of Love* was shot in thirty-five millimeter and I
now find myself in huge debt. It has been very difficult financially, but I don't regret it; the main reason I worked in thirty-five was because Panavision donated the camera equipment in thirty-five for the shoot. I actually have two other film projects in mind, but I like the idea of working next with video, and with a project that will be small-scale, simply produced, and that I will shoot myself.

Trinh T. Minh-ha: Selected Bibliography


Trinh T. Minh-ha: Selected Filmography

Reassemblage (1982)
Naked Spaces: Living is Round (1985)
Surname Viet Given Name Nam (1989)
Shoot for the Contents (1991)
A Tale of Love (1995) (Co-Director: Jean-Paul Bourdier)