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On Trinh T.
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Xiaolu Guo

One day last summer Trinh Minh-ha wrote to me and asked for my collaboration. She was in California. I was in London. We could not meet. We talked about our past lives in Asia and her new project, *What About China?* (2020–21). Minh-ha said she had just read my memoir *Once Upon A Time in the East* and was moved by it. She wanted to use some of my text. So with her very precise instructions, I recorded myself reading from my book, which was heavily highlighted and annotated by Minh-ha. She wanted in particular some paragraphs describing my childhood. I had no idea what her new film would be about, but I sent the recording to her. A few months later, when I saw the film I realized how she works – totally intuitive, handmade, and very discreet. The new film bears her unique signature: it is attentive, interior, and reflective, with a particular feminine gaze and voice. It also reminds me of how I first encountered her cinema in Beijing, when I saw a film she made almost 40 years ago: *Reassemblage*.

Reassemblage: a beautiful and surprising product in cinema history. It's not Jean Rouch or Jean-Luc Godard, nor something from Robert J. Flaherty or Margaret Mead. Though it is relatively recent, it is indefinable because of Trinh's anti-genre voice-over. For me, the film belongs to the landscape of ethnographic filmmaking, even though it escapes rigid definition. Some scholars even argue it is an anti-ethnographic film.

In *Reassemblage*, a young Asian woman (we never see Minh-ha in the film) arrives in Senegal with her 16mm camera. She films what she sees. She says: *What I see is life looking at me*.

Through her viewfinder, we see African landscapes, scorched red earth, untamed and damaged. It is the typical landscape seen in other anthropological films from the 1960s and 1970s. But something is very different in her lens. We see village settlements, fires, cooking, washing, grain pounding, group singing, and dancing. We see men cutting wood objects with primitive tools. We see children smiling and laughing into the camera.

Then we see those women, Senegalese women, young and old, beautiful and weary, short and long haired, smiling or frowning, with babies or without, with their tops or without. We are drawn to those women. We gravitate towards those feminine bodies and enigmatic faces.

But mostly, we see soft naked breasts and dark nipples. All sorts of shapes. They blend into the brown earthy background. Repeatedly, in different parts of the film, we see round and youthful breasts, as well as aged and sunken ones. We even hear Trinh's voice-over, commenting on what we see: 'Filming in Africa, for many of us, means naked breast women, exotic dancers and fearful rites, the unusual. Nudity does not reveal the hidden, it is its absence.' How wonderful that we hear such a statement in the filmmaker's gentle voice. *Nudity does not reveal the hidden, it is its absence*. In the West, eroticism is focused on the hidden, and erotic feeling is tied up with the imagining of the hidden.

We see images of a nipple in a child's mouth or a breast grabbed by a baby's hand. The baby is turning to look at us while her head rests against her mother's breasts. No, actually, the baby does not turn to look at us. She looks at the camera, she turns to look at the Asian woman with the camera. That is Trinh Minh-ha. She was 30 that year. And she was making her first long film. She was one of the first women filmmakers from the Third World to make anthropological films.

I cannot help but compare Trinh's cinema to Jean Rouch's. Both started with documentary filmmaking in Africa, though Rouch was from a much earlier generation than Trinh. As much as I love Jean Rouch's dynamic improvised montage, I feel that Trinh's films are even more fragmented than his. Both use heavily edited sequences and fast cutting. But whereas Rouch's close-ups often serve a narrative purpose, advancing the story, Trinh uses numerous non-narrative close-ups, especially of women. Ears, hair, eyes, lips, breasts...

For me, one of the key differences between Rouch and Trinh is their approach to the subject. As a white European filmmaker in Africa, Rouch used local informants and relied on them to develop the stories. When he arrived in Niger in the 1940s, as an engineer to start with, he had to depend on locals for his work and therefore had very close relationships with his subjects. The local men often acted in his films and served as his central characters. I don't think this is Trinh Minh-ha's approach.

As a young woman who had originally come from Vietnam, Minh-ha conducted her research in a much more personal and private way. She might have had help from the locals, as any non-native artist would. The gaze she cast on Senegalese women was not intended to represent their culture, or to draw out a narrative in a traditional manner. The way she used a tripod for her 16mm camera (instead of using handheld shots) was a way of stepping back from the subject, a way of observing without judging. This reminds me of one of my favourite lines from Christopher Isherwood: 'I am a camera, with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking.' But then immediately I remember Trinh's famous statement that there is no such thing as documentary. One cannot really just record passively. One cannot remove one's subjective gaze from the object. As she stated in an interview, there is no such thing as a documentary 'because it's illusory to take the real and reality for granted and to think that a neutral language exists, even though we often strive for such neutrality in our scholarly work. To use an image is to enter fiction.'

So, neutrality does not exist in an image. I am reminded of another woman documentarist, Safi Faye, a native Senegalese. Faye is a remarkable filmmaker and the first sub-Saharan ethnologist to use a camera as her means of expression. Ten years older than Trinh, Faye had worked with Jean Rouch in the late 1960s, but she claimed she disliked Rouch's cinema. When Trinh arrived in Senegal, Faye had already made important films such as *Kaddu Beykat (Letter From My Village, 1976)*. In 1982, Faye was working on a new documentary titled *Selbe et tant d'autres (Selbe: One Among Many, 1983)*. With a more traditional approach, Faye follows a village woman called Selbe who labours endlessly to support her eight children without her husband around. We are really affected by the bitter

female reality that Faye tried to render in her cinematic observation. What's remarkable is that it is a film made between a native woman filmmaker and a native mother. Two African women converse with each other, in front of and behind the camera. Faye remains off-screen and demonstrates a melancholic reality of African womanhood. It's an incredibly touching film, with the absence of male characters, and the absence of the male gaze. Safi Faye, now 77, still lives in France today. And of course, Minh-ha knows Faye's cinema well. They are joined in sisterhood, not only of the Third World but also of the frontline of an intellectual community.

In *Reassemblage*, I love the way Trinh delivers her voice-over, but I particularly love her speech at the very end of the film. While we watch the close-up of an attractive woman in a flowery red dress, we hear the filmmaker say: 'A woman comments on polygamy: it's good for men, not for us. What about you? We accept it owing to the forces of circumstances. Do you have a husband all for yourself?' Behind the camera, the filmmaker does not answer the question. Instead we hear the music commencing and see perhaps the shortest credit sequence in the whole history of cinema. Then, black and silence.

Upon finishing this essay, I wrote to Minh-ha and asked how she felt about the film forty years after. I waited for three days, then she wrote back with this: 'How to approach everyday life afresh, non-knowingly but intimately? There's really no 'Senegal' in Senegal.'