



Speaking Nearby

Nancy N. Chen and Trinh T. Minh-ha

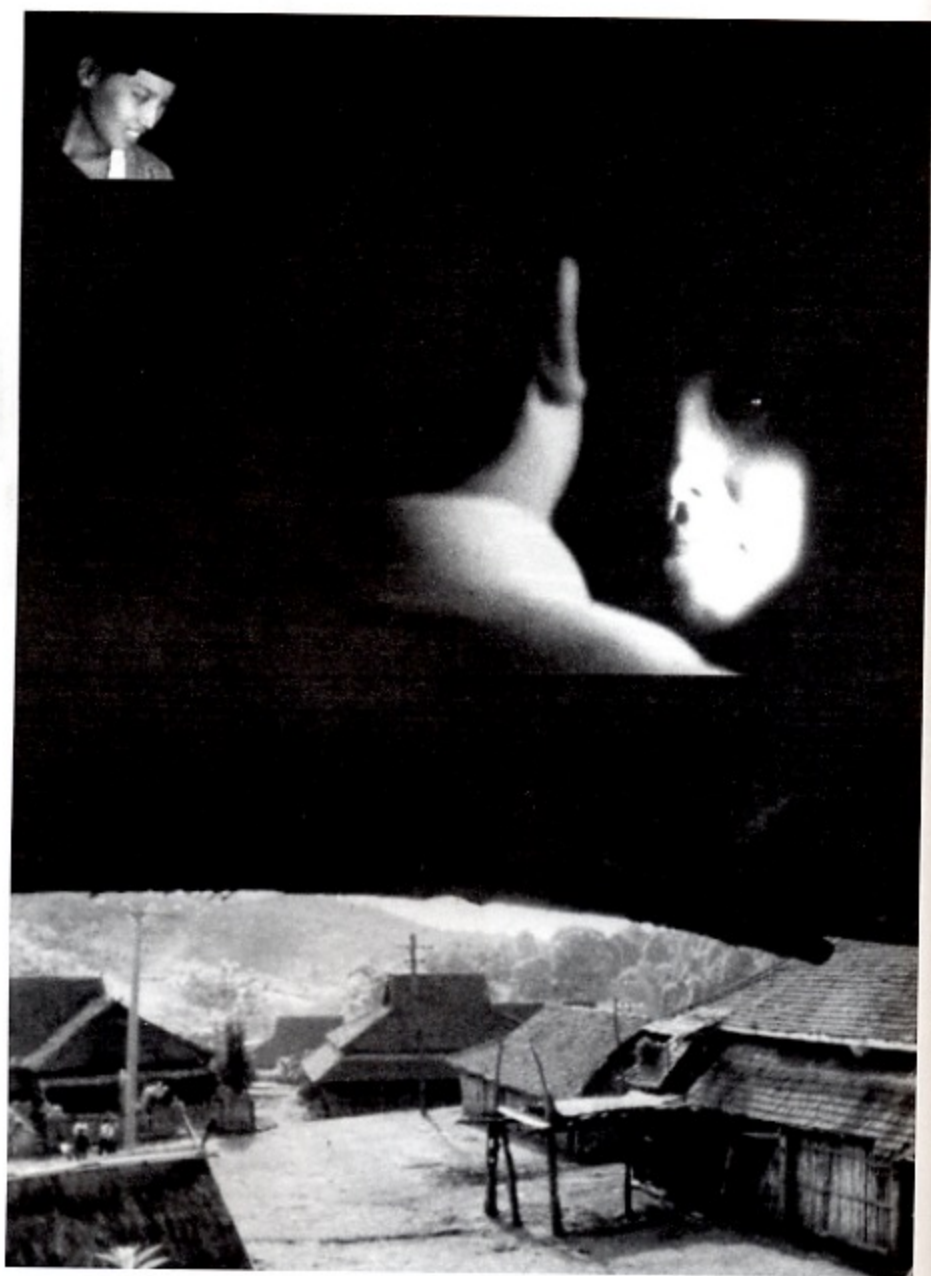


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Nancy N. Chen: *One of the most important questions for myself deals with the personal. In your latest film SHOOT FOR THE CONTENTS Clairmonte Moore refers to himself as "a member of the residual class" which is a euphemism for "living underground, for living outside the norm, and for living outside of the status quo." Then another character Dewi refers to having the "pull" of being here and there. I think that this reflects on the personal and I would like to ask how your family background or personal experience has influenced your work.*

Trinh T. Minh-Ha: *Although the ideology of "starting from the source" has always proved to be very limiting, I would take that question into consideration since the speaking or interviewing subject is never apolitical, and such a question coming from you may be quite*



Images from *Shoot for the Contents*, Trinh T. Minh-ha.

differently nuanced. There is not much, in the kind of education we receive here in the West, that emphasizes or even recognizes the importance of constantly having contact with what is actually within ourselves, or of understanding a structure from within ourselves out. The tendency is always to relate to a situation or to an object as if it is only outside of oneself. Whereas elsewhere, in Vietnam, or in other Asian and African cultures for example, one often learns to "know the world inwardly," so that the deeper we go into ourselves, the wider we go into society. For me, this is where the challenge lies in terms of materializing a reality, because the personal is not naturally political, and every personal story is not necessarily political.

In talking about the personal, it is always difficult to draw that fine line between what is merely individualistic and what may be relevant to a wider number of people. Nothing is *given* in the process of understanding the "social" of our daily lives. So every single work I come up with is yet another attempt to inscribe this constant flow from the inside out and outside in. The interview with Clairmonte in *SHOOT FOR THE CONTENTS* is certainly a good example to start with. His role in the film is both politically and personally significant. In locating himself, Clairmonte has partly contributed to situating the place from which the film speaks. The way a number of viewers reacted to his presence in the film has confirmed what I thought might happen when I was working on it. Usually in a work on China, people do not expect the voice of knowledge to be other than that of an insider—here a Chinese—or that of an institutionalized authority—a scholar whose expertise on China would immediately give him or her the license to speak about such and such culture, and whose superimposed name and title on the screen serve to validate what he or she has to say. No such signpost is used in *SHOOT*; Clairmonte, who among all the interviewees discusses Chinese politics most directly, is of African rather than Chinese descent; and furthermore, there is no immediate urge to present him as someone who "speaks as . . ." What you have is the voice of a person who little by little comes to situate himself through the diverse social and political positions he assumes, as well as through his analysis of himself and of the media in the States. So when Clairmonte designates himself literally and figuratively as being from a residual class, this not only refers to the place from which he analyzes China—which is not that of an expert about whom he has spoken jokingly, but more let's say that of an ordinary person who is well versed in politics. The designation, as you've pointed out, also reflects back on my own situation: I have been making films on Africa from a hybrid site where the meeting of several cultures (on non-Western ground) and the notions of outsider and insider (Asian and Third World in the context of Africa) need to be re-read.

This is where you talk about the intersubjective situation in your writings.

Right. I have dealt with this hybridity in my previous films quite differently, but the place from which Clairmonte speaks in *SHOOT* is indirectly linked to the place from which I spoke in relation to Africa. Just as it is bothersome to see a member of the Third World talking about (the representation of) another Third World culture—instead of minding our own business (*laughter*) as we have been herded to—it is also bothersome for a number of viewers who had seen *SHOOT*, to have to deal with Clairmonte's presence in it. And of course, the question never comes out straight; it always comes out obliquely like: "Why the Black man in the film? Has this been thought out?" Or, in the form of assumptions such as: "Is he a professor at Berkeley?" "Is he teaching African Studies or Sociology?"

In some ways those questions indicate there's a need for authenticity. My question about Clairmonte concerns what he said about identity and I think that the issue of identity runs throughout all of your work. You've often talked about hyphenated peoples and I'm interested if in any way that notion stems from your personal experience. Have you felt that people have tried to push you, to be a Vietnamese-American or Asian-American, or woman-filmmaker? All of these different categories is what Clairmonte points out to. In your works and writings you distinctly push away that tendency. I think you are quite right in pointing out earlier that there is a very strong

tendency to begin with a psychological sketch like "What are your primary influences . . ." (laughter) I would be very interested in learning about your particular experiences in Vietnam. Could you talk more about that?

I will. But again, for having been asked this question many times, especially in interviews for newspapers, I would link here the problematization of identity in my work with what the first chapter of *Woman, Native, Other* opened on: the dilemma, especially in the context of women, of having one's work explained (or brought to closure) through one's personality and particular attributes. In such a highly individualistic society as the one we belong to here, it is very comforting for a reader to consume difference as a commodity by starting with the personal difference in culture or background, which is the best way to escape the issues of power, knowledge and subjectivity raised.

My past in Vietnam does not just belong to me. And since the Vietnamese communities, whether here in the U.S. or there in Vietnam, are not abstract entities, I can only speak while learning to keep silent, for the risk of jeopardizing someone's reputation and right to speech is always present. Suffice it to say that I come from a large family, in which three different political factions existed. These political tendencies were not always freely assumed, they were bound to circumstances as in the case of the family members who remained in Hanoi (where I was born) and those who were compelled to move to Saigon (where I grew up). The third faction comprised those involved with the National Liberation Front in the South. This is why the dualistic divide between pro- and anti-communists has always appeared to me as a simplistic product of the rivalry between (what once were) the two superpowers. It can never even come close to the complexity of the Vietnam reality. All three factions had suffered under the regime to which they belong, and all three had, at one time or another, been the scapegoat of specific political moments. As a family however, we love each other dearly despite the absurd situations in which we found ourselves divided. This is a stance that many viewers have recognized in SURNAME VIET GIVEN NAME NAM, but hopefully it is one that they will also see in the treatment of Mao as a figure and in the multiple play between Left and Right, or Right and Wrong in SHOOT.

How I came to study in the States still strikes me today as a miracle. The dozen of letters I blindly sent out to a number of universities to seek admission into work-study programs . . . It was like throwing a bottle to the sea. But, fortunately enough, a small school in Ohio (Wilmington College) of no more than a thousand and some students wanted a representative of Vietnam. And so there I was, studying three days of the week and working the other three days at a hospital, in addition to some other small odd jobs that helped me to get through financially. As an "international student," I was put in contact with all other foreign students, as well as with "minority" students who were often isolated from the mainstream of Euro-American students. It was hardly surprising then that the works of African American poets and playwrights should be the first to really move and impress me. By the sheer fact that I was with an international community, I was introduced to a range of diverse cultures. So the kind of education I got in such an environment (more from outside than inside the classroom) would not have been as rich if I had stayed in Vietnam or if I had been born in the States. Some of my best friends there, and later on at the University of Illinois (where I got an M.A in French Literature and Music; a Master of Music in Composition; and a Ph.D in Comparative Literatures) were Haitians, Senegalese and Kenyans. Thanks to these encounters, I subsequently decided to go to Senegal to live and teach.

When I planned for university education abroad, I could have tried France (where financially speaking, education is free) instead of the United States. I decided on the United States mainly because I wanted a rupture (laughter) with the educational background in Vietnam that was based on a Vietnamized model of the old, pre-1968 French system. Later on, I did go to France after I came to the States, in a mere university exchange program. It was one of these phenomena of colonialism: I was sent there to teach English to French students (laughter).





During this year in France I didn't study with any of the writers whose works I appreciate. Everything that I have done has always been a leap away from what I have learned, and nothing in my work directly reflects the education I have had except through a relation of displacement and rupture as mentioned. While in Paris, I studied at the Sorbonne Paris-IV. It was the most conservative school of the Sorbonne. But one of the happy encounters I made was with noted Vietnamese scholar and musician Tran Van Khe, who continues until today to shuttle to and fro between France and Vietnam for his research, and with whom I studied ethnomusicology. That's the part that I got the most out of in Paris. So you go to Paris, finally to learn ethnomusicology with a Vietnamese (*laughter*).

This throws my question about intellectual influences or ruptures the question (laughter). In all your works, but particularly your writings on anthropology, ethnography and ethnographic films, there's a critique of the standard, the center of rationality, the center of TRUTH. I think that critique is also shared by many anthropologists, especially those in the post-structuralist tradition. Do you think that there is more possibility in ethnography if people use these tools? What do you think would be possible with reflexivity or with multivocality?

Anthropology is just one site of discussion among others in my work. I know that a number of people tend to focus obsessively on this site. But such a focus on anthropology despite the fact that the arguments advanced involve more than one occupied territory, discipline, profession and culture seems above all to tell us where the stakes are the highest. Although angry responses from professionals and academics of other fields to my films and books are intermittently expected, most of the masked outraged reactions do tend to come from Euro-American anthropologists and cultural experts. This, of course, is hardly surprising. They are so busy defending the discipline, the institution and the specialized knowledge it produces that what they have to say on works like mine only tells us about themselves and the interests at issue. I am reminded here of a conference panel years ago in which the discussion on one of my previous films was carried out with the participation of three Euro-American anthropologists. Time and again they tried to wrap up the session with dismissive judgements, but the audience would not let go of the discussion. After over an hour of intense arguments, during which a number of people in the audience voiced their disapproval of the anthropologists' responses, one woman was so exasperated and distressed, that she simply said to them: "the more you speak, the further you dig your own grave."

If we take the critical work in *REASSEMBLAGE* for example, it is quite clear that it is not simply aimed at the anthropologist, but also at the missionary, the Peace Corps volunteer, the tourist, and last but not least at myself as onlooker. In my writing and filmmaking, it has always been important for me to carry out critical work in such a way that there is room for people to reflect on their own struggle and to use the tools offered so as to further it on their own terms. Such a work is radically incapable of prescription. Hence, these tools are sometimes also appropriated and turned against the very filmmaker or writer, which is a risk I am willing to take. I have, indeed, put myself in a situation where I cannot criticize without taking away the secure ground on which I stand. All this is being said because your question, although steered in a slightly different direction, does remind me indirectly of another question which I often get under varying forms: at a panel discussion in Edinburgh on Third Cinema for example, after two hours of interaction with the audience, and of lectures by panelists, including myself, someone came to me and said in response to my paper: "Oh, but then anthropology is still possible!" I took it both as a constructive statement and a misinterpretation. A constructive statement, because only a critical work developed to the limits or effected on the limits (here, of anthropology) has the potential to trigger such a question as: "Is anthropology still a possible project?" And a misinterpretation, because this is not just a question geared toward anthropology, but one that involves all of us from the diverse fields of social sciences, humanities and arts.

Whether reflexivity and multivocality contribute anything to ethnography or not would have to depend on the way they are practiced. It seems quite evident that the critique I made



of anthropology is not new; many have done it before and many are doing it now. But what remains unique to each enterprise are not so much the objects as the relationships drawn between them. So the question remains: how? How is reflexivity understood and materialized? If it is reduced to a form of mere breast-beating or of self-criticism for further improvement, it certainly does not lead us very far. I have written more at length on this question elsewhere ("Documentary Is/Not a Name," *October* No. 52, 1990) and to simplify a complex issue, I would just say here that if the tools are dealt with only so as to further the production of anthropological knowledge, or to find a better solution for anthropology as a discipline, then what is achieved is either a refinement in the pseudo-science of appropriating Otherness or a mere stir within the same frame. But if the project is carried out precisely at that limit where anthropology could be abolished in what it tries to institutionalize, then nobody here is on safe ground. Multivocality, for example, is not necessarily a solution to the problems of centralized and hierarchical knowledge when it is practiced accumulatively—by juxtaposing voices that continue to speak within identified boundaries. Like the much abused concept of multiculturalism, multivocality here could also lead to the bland "melting-pot" type of attitude, in which "multi" means "no"—no voice—or is used only to better mask the Voice—that very place from where meaning is put together. On the other hand, multivocality can open up to a non-identifiable ground where boundaries are always undone, at the same time as they are accordingly assumed. Working at the borderline of what is and what no longer is anthropology one also knows that if one crosses that border, if one can

depart from where one is, one can also return to it more freely, without attachment to the norms generated on one side or the other. So the work effected would constantly question both its interiority and its exteriority to the frame of anthropology.

This goes back to your previous point that being within is also being without, being inside and outside. I think this answers my next question which is about how if naming, identifying and defining are problematic, how does one go about practicing? I think that you are saying that it also opens up a space being right on that boundary. I would now like to turn from theory to filmmaking practice. Your writing has often been compared to performance art. Could you say that this is also true of your filmmaking as well in the four films that you have made so far?

I like the thought that my texts are being viewed as performance art (laughter). I think it is very adequate. Viewers have varied widely in their approaches to my films. Again, because of the way these films are made, how the viewers enter them tells us acutely how they situate themselves. The films have often been compared to musical compositions and appreciated by people in performance, architecture, dance or poetry for example. So I think there is something to be said about the filmmaking process. Although I have never consciously taken inspiration from any specific art while I write, shoot or edit a film, for me, the process of making a film comes very close to those of composing music and of writing poetry. When one is not just trying to capture an object, to explain a cultural event, or to inform for the sake of information; when one refuses to commodify knowledge, one necessarily disengages oneself from the mainstream ideology of communication, whose linear and transparent use of language and the media reduces these to a mere vehicle of ideas. Thus, every time one puts forth an image, a word, a sound or a silence, these are never instruments simply called upon to serve a story or a message. They have a set of meanings, a function, and a rhythm of their own within the world that each film builds anew. This can be viewed as being characteristic of the way poets use words and composers use sounds.

Here I'll have to make clear that through the notion of "poetic language," I am certainly not referring to the poetic as the site for the consolidation of a subjectivity, or as an estheticized practice of language. Rather, I am referring to the fact that language is fundamentally reflexive, and only in poetic language can one deal with meaning in a revolutionary way. For the nature of poetry is to offer meaning in such a way that it can never end with what is said or shown, destabilizing thereby the speaking subject and exposing the fiction of all rationalization. Roland Barthes astutely summed up this situation when he remarked that "the real antonym of the 'poetic' is not the prosaic, but the stereotyped." Such a statement is all the more perceptive as the stereotyped is not a false representation, but rather, an arrested representation of a changing reality. So to avoid merely falling into this pervasive world of the stereotyped and the clichéd, filmmaking has all to gain when conceived as a performance that engages as well as questions (its own) language. However, since the ideology of what constitutes "clarity" and "accessibility" continues to be largely taken for granted, poetic practice can be "difficult" to a number of viewers, because in mainstream films and media our ability to play with meanings other than the literal ones that pervade our visual and aural environment is rarely solicited. Everything has to be packaged for consumption.

With regard to your films you've always been able to show that even what one sees with one's eyes, as you say in your books, is not necessarily the truth. My next question concerns Laura Mulvey's comment on language where any tool can be used for dominance as well as empowerment. Do you think that this is also true of poetic approaches to film?

Oh yes. This is what I have just tried to say in clarifying what is meant by the "poetic" in a context that does not lend itself easily to classification. As numerous feminist works of the last two decades have shown, it is illusory to think that women can remain outside of the patriarchal system of language. The question is, as I mentioned earlier, how to engage poetical language without simply turning it into an estheticized, subjectivist product, hence allowing it

to be classified. Language is at the same time a site for empowerment and a site for enslavement. And it is particularly enslaving when its workings remain invisible. Now, how one does bring that out in a film, for example, is precisely what I have tried to do in *SURNAME VIET GIVEN NAME NAM*. This is an aspect of the film that highly differentiates it, let's say, from *REASSEMBLAGE*. If in the latter the space of language and meaning is constantly interrupted or effaced by the gaps of non-senses, absences and silences; in *SURNAME VIET*, this space is featured manifestly as presences—albeit presences positioned in the context of a critical politics of interview and translation.

Viewers who take for granted the workings of language and remain insensitive to their very visible treatment in *SURNAME VIET*, also tend to obscure the struggle of women and their difficult relation to the symbolic contract. Hence, as expected, these viewers' readings are likely to fall within the dualist confine of a pro- or anti-communist rationale. Whereas, what is important is not only what the women say but what site of language they occupy (or do not occupy) in their struggle. With this also comes the play between the oral and the written, the sung and the said, the rehearsed and the non-rehearsed, and the different uses of English as well as of Vietnamese. So, if instead of reading the film conventionally from the point of view of content and subject matter, one

reads it in terms of language plurality, comparing the diverse speeches—including those translated and reenacted from the responses by women in Vietnam, and those retrieved "authentically" on the site from the women in the States about their own lives—then one may find oneself radically shifting ground in one's reading. The play effected between literal and non-literal languages can be infinite and the two should not be mutually exclusive of each other. Everything I criticize in one film can be taken up again and used differently in another film. There is no need to censor ourselves in what we can do.

I'm also intrigued by your works where you mention "talking nearby instead of talking about"—this is one of the techniques you mention to "make visible the invisible." How might indirect language do precisely that?

The link is nicely done; especially between "speaking nearby" and indirect language. In other words, a speaking that does not objectify, does not point to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject or absent from the speaking place. A speaking that reflects on itself and can come very close to a subject without, however, seizing or claiming it. A speaking in brief, whose closures are only moments of transition opening up to other possible moments of transition—these are forms of indirectness well understood by anyone in tune with poetic language. Every element constructed in a film refers to the world around it, while having at the same time a life of its own. And this life is precisely what is lacking when one uses word, image, or sound just as an instrument of thought. To say therefore that one prefers not to speak about but rather to speak nearby, is a great challenge. Because actually, this is not just a technique or a statement to be made verbally. It is an attitude in life, a way of positioning oneself in relation to the world. Thus, the challenge is to materialize it in all aspects of the film—verbally, musically, visually. That challenge is renewed with every work I realize, whether filmic or written.

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The term of the issue raised is, of course, much broader than the questions generated by any of the specific work I've completed (such as *REASSEMBLAGE*, in which the speaking about and speaking nearby serve as a point of departure for a cultural and cinematic reflection). Truth never yields itself in anything said or shown. One cannot just point a camera at it to catch it; the very effort to do so will kill it. It is worth quoting here again Walter Benjamin for whom, "nothing is poorer than a truth expressed as it was thought." Truth can only be approached indirectly if one does not want to lose it and find oneself hanging on to a dead, empty skin. Even when the indirect has to take refuge in the very figures of the direct, it continues to defy the closure of a direct reading. This is a form of indirectness that I have to deal with in *SURNAME VIET*, but even more so in *SHOOT*. Because here, there is necessarily, among others, a layered play between political discourse and poetical language, or between the direct role of men and the indirect role of women.

*That leads me to some questions that I had about your latest film because you choose Mao as a political figure and he is also one who plays with language. There is a quote in the film: "Mao ruled through the power of rhymes and proverbs." I think this is a very apt statement about the scope of the film. I'm curious as to "Why China?" You mentioned before about how your next project or your next film is a rupture from the previous one. So was going to China just a complete change from *SURNAME VIET*?*

It's not quite a rupture. I don't see it that way. Nor do I see one film as being better than another; there is no linear progress in my filmic work. There is probably only a way of raising questions differently from different angles in different contexts. The rupture I mentioned earlier has more to do with my general educational background. So why China? One can say that there is no more an answer to this question than to: "Why Africa?" which I often get, and "Why Vietnam?" (*laughter*), which I like to also ask in return. Indeed, when people inquire matter-of-factly about my next film in Vietnam, I cannot help but ask "why Vietnam?" Why do I have to focus on Vietnam? And this leads us back to a statement I made earlier, concerning the way marginalized peoples are herded to mind their own business. So that the area, the "homeland" in which they are allowed to work remains heavily marked, whereas the areas in which Euro-Americans' activities are deployed can go on unmarked. One is here confined to one's own culture, ethnicity, sexuality and gender. And that's often the only way for insiders within the marked boundaries to make themselves heard or to gain approval.

This being said, China is a very important step in my personal itinerary, even though the quest into Chinese culture has, in fact, more to do with the relation between the two cultures—Vietnamese and Chinese—than with anything strictly personal. The Vietnamese people are no exception when it comes to nationalism. Our language is equipped with numerous daily expressions that are extremely pejorative toward our neighbors, especially toward Chinese people. But Vietnam was the site where the Chinese and Indian cultures met, hence what is known as the Vietnamese culture certainly owes much from the crossing of these two ancient civilizations.

Every work I have realized was designed to transform my own consciousness. If I went to Africa to dive into a culture that was mostly unknown to me then, I went to China mainly because I was curious as to how I could depart from what I knew of Her. The prejudices that the Vietnamese carry vis-à-vis the Chinese are certainly historical and political. The past domination of Vietnam by China and the antagonistic relationship nurtured between the two nations (this relationship has only been normalized some months ago) have been weighing so heavily on the Vietnamese psyche that very often Vietnamese identity would be defined in contradistinction to everything thought to be Chinese. And yet it merits looking a bit harder at the Vietnamese culture—at its music, to mention a most explicit example—to realize how much it has inherited from both China and India. It is not an easy task to deny their influences, even when people need to reject them in order to move on. An anecdote whose humor proved to be double-edged was that, during my stay in China, I quickly learned to restrain myself from telling people that I was originally from Vietnam—unless someone really wanted to know (precisely because of the high tension between the two countries at the time). The local intellectuals, however, seemed to be much more open vis-à-vis Vietnam as they did not think of Her as an enemy country but rather, as a neighbor or “a brother.” This, to the point that one of them even told me reassuringly in a conversation: “Well you know it’s alright that you are from Vietnam; after all, She is a province of China.” (laughter)

So it reifies that power relationship . . .

Yes, right . . . (laughter). On a personal level, I did want to go further than the facades of such a power relationship and to understand China differently. But the task was not all easy because to go further here also meant to go back to an ancestral heritage of the Vietnamese culture. I’ve tried to bring this out in the film through a look at politics via the arts.

I think Wu Tian Ming’s commentary in the film gives a very good description of the present state of the arts in China. I have another question. In your book When the Moon Waxes Red there is a chapter on Barthes and Asia. This is where you talk about his notion of the void and how it is important not to have any fixed notions of what Asia is supposed to be about. You’ve stated that SHOOT FOR THE CONTENTS is precisely about that void, but one of the difficulties about creating a space where there can be a void is the fact that some people are unnerved by it; there is also the possibility of reifying stereotypes, of reifying the notion of Asia as other or as exotic, or feminine, or mysterious. Do you think that this was something you had thought about carefully in making your film or in the process of making your film did this issue come up?

It always does, with every single film that I have made. And the risk of having viewers misread one’s films through their own closures is always there. The only consistent signs that tell me how my films may have avoided falling into these ready-made slots is the controversial and at times contradictory nature of the readings they have suscitated. But to say the space of the Void can reify stereotypes is already to reify the Void. Perhaps before I go any further here with SHOOT, I should ask you what in the film makes you think that people could fall right back on a stereotyped image of China?

Possibly when there are different scenes of China. In the film one cuts from one location to another, so you see scenes that are in northern China and then the next few frames you see Xishuanbana from southern China and they are all conflated as one image or representation of China. I saw this film with several China scholars and they were very concerned with the image of China as being enigmatic, as a space that is a void which cannot be defined, and the possible reification of China as a mystery.

Are these scholars from here in the States or from China?

These aren’t Chinese friends.

Maybe that is one difference worth noting, because as I mentioned earlier, there is no speaking subject that is apolitical, and sometimes I have had very different readings of my



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earlier films from Africans than from African-Americans for example; not to mention Euro-Americans . . . although generalizations are never adequate, and you will always have people who cross the lines. First of all, to take up the point you make about conflating the images from different cultures across China: the film has a structure that momentarily calls for this deliberate violation of internal borders, but other than that, this structure is devised precisely so as to emphasize the heterogeneity of Chinese society and the profound differences within it—hence the impossibility to simply treat China as a known Other. If you remember, it is at the beginning of the film, when Mao's concept of The Hundred Flowers is being introduced that you see a succession of images from different places in China. This is the very idea of the hundred flowers which the visuals indirectly evoke. But as the film progresses, the cultural differences that successively demarcate one region from another are sensually and politically set into relief, and never do any of these places really mix. The necessary transgression and the careful differentiation of cultural groupings have always been both structurally very important in my films, in *SHOOT*, as well as in the three previous ones.

As far as the Void is concerned, the comment certainly reveals how people understand and receive the Void in their lives. For some, "void" is apparently only the opposite of "full." As absence to a presence or as lack to a center, it obviously raises a lot of anxieties and frustrations because all that is read into it is a form of negation. But I would make the difference between that negative notion of the void, which is so typical of the kind of dualist thinking pervasively encountered in the West, and the spiritual Void thanks to which possibilities keep on renewing, hence nothing can be simply classified, arrested and reified. There is this incredible fear of non-action in modern society, and every empty space has to be filled up, blocked, occupied, talked about. It is precisely the whole of such an economy of *suture* (*laughter*), as film theorists calls it, that is at stake in this context of the Void.

Nobody who understands the necessity of the Void and the vital open space it offers in terms of creativity, would ever make that comment (which is mystifying in itself as it equates void with enigma and mystery), because the existence of everything around us is due to the Void. So why all this anxiety? What's the problem with presenting life in all its complexities? And, as we have discussed earlier, isn't such a reaction expected after all when the authority of specialized or packageable knowledge is at stake? Among other possible examples, I would also like to remind us here, that when the film opens with a remark such as "Any look at China is bound to be loaded with questions," that remark is both supported and countered by the next statement, which begins affirming "Her visible faces are miniscule compared to her unknown ones," but ends with the question: "Or is this true?" As in a throw of the dice, this casual question is precisely a point of departure for the film and the reflection on the arts and politics of China. It is later on followed by another statement that says "Only in appearance does China offer an everchanging face to the world." So the knowable and unknowable are never presented as being mutually exclusive of one another.

A distinction that may be useful here is the one theorists have made between a "radical negativity" and a negation. The negation is what the negative, dualistic reading of the void points to; while a radical negativity entails a constant questioning of arrested representations—here, of China. This is where Barthes' statement on the stereotyped being the antonym of the poetic, is most relevant. There are a few immediate examples that I can mention (although specific examples never cover the scope of the issue raised, they just tell you about the single problem involved in each case) in terms of the choices I made in the film to prevent its readings from closing off neatly within the knowable or unknowable categories. Again, the question of language: the dialogue between the two women narrators features not only a difference in ideology but also a difference in the modes of speaking. Both modes can easily be mis/identified: one as the illogical, elliptical and metaphorical language of poetry, and the other as the logical, linear and dogmatic language of political discourse. If the film is entirely done with only one of these two languages, then the risk of it falling into the confines of one camp or the other is very high. But in *SHOOT*, you have both, and the narrators'



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dialogue is also punctured all along by the direct speeches of the interviews, or else by songs which offer a link between the verbal and the non-verbal.

Also by the text itself where you have English and Chinese characters as well as Confucius and Mao . . .

Exactly. Sometimes, it is strategically important to reappropriate the stereotypes and to juxtapose them next to one another so that they may cancel each other out. For example the fact that in the film, the "Great Man" can be both Confucius and Mao, makes these two giants' teachings at times sillily interchangeable. Such a merging is both amusing and extremely ironic for those of us who are familiar with China's history and the relentless campaigns Mao launched against all vestiges of Confucianism in Chinese society. The merging therefore also exposes all wars fought in the name of human rights as being first and foremost a war of language and meaning. In other words, what Mao called "the verbal struggle" is a fight between "fictions." The coexistence of opposite realities and the possible interchangeability of their fictions is precisely what I have attempted to bring out on all levels of the film, verbally as well as cinematically. If the only feeling the viewer retains of *SITOO* is that of a negative void, then I think the film would just be falling flat on what it tries to do; it would be incapable of provoking the kind of vexed, as well as elated and excited reactions it has so far.

You mention the viewer quite often, and in another interview you once said that audience-making is the responsibility of the filmmaker. Can you talk about who your viewers are, what audience, or for whom are you making a film, if such a purpose exists?

There are many ways to approach this question and there are many languages that have been circulated in relation to the concept of audience. There is the dated notion of mass audience, which can no longer go unquestioned in today's critical context, because mass implies first and foremost active commodification, passive consumption. Mass production, in other words, is production by the fewest possible number, as Gandhi would say (*laughter*). And here you have this other notion of the audience, which refuses to let itself be degraded through standardization. For, as Lenin would also say, and I quote by memory, "one does not bring art *down* to the people, one raises art *up* to the people." Such an approach would avoid the levelling out of differences implied in the concept of the "mass" which defines the people as an anonymous aggregate of individuals incapable of really thinking for themselves, incapable of being challenged in their frame of thought, and hence incapable of understanding the product if information is not packaged for effortless and immediate consumption. They are the ones who are easily "spoken for" as being also smart consumers whose growing sophisticated needs require that the entertainment market produce yet faster goods and more effectual throwaways in the name of better service. Here, the problem is not that such a description of the audience is false, but that its reductive rationale reinforces the ideology in power.

The question "for whom does one write?" or "for whom does one make a film?" was extremely useful some thirty years ago, in the 60s. It has had its historical moment, as it was then linked to the compelling notion of "engaged art." Thanks to it, 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." But thanks to it also, the notion of audience today has been pushed much further in its complexities, so that simply knowing for whom you make a film is no longer sufficient. Such a targeting of audience, which has the potential to change radically the way one writes or makes a film, often proves to be no more than a common marketing tool in the process of commodification. Hence, instead of talking about "the audience," theorists would generally rather talk about "the spectator" or "the viewer." Today also, many of us have come to realize that power relationships are not simply to be found in the evident locations of power—here, in the establishments that hold the means of production—but that they also circulate



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Serve the People

(Mao)



among and within ourselves because the way we write and make films is the way we position ourselves socially and politically. Form and content cannot be separated.

Furthermore, in the context of "alternative," "experimental" films, to know or *not* to know whom you are making a film for can both leave you trapped in a form of escapism: you declare that you don't care about audience; you are simply content with the circulation of your work among friends and a number of marginalized workers like yourself; and you continue to protect yourself by remaining safely within identified limits. Whereas I think each film one makes is a bottle thrown into the sea. The fact that you always work on the very limits of the known and unknown audiences, you are bound to modify these limits whose demarcation changes each time and remains unpredictable to you. This is the context in which I said that the filmmaker is responsible for building his or her audience.

So of importance today, is to make a film in which the viewer—whether visually present or not—is inscribed in the way the film is scripted and shot. Through a number of creative strategies, this process is made visible and audible to the audience who is thus solicited to interact and to retrace it in viewing the film. Anybody can make *REASSEMBLAGE* for example. The part that cannot be imitated, taught, or repeated is the relationship one develops with the tools that define one's activities and oneself as filmmaker. That part is irreducible and unique to each worker, but the part that could be opened up to the viewer is the "unsutured" process of meaning production. With this, we'll need to ask what accessibility means: a work in which the creative process is offered to the viewer? Or a work in which high production values see to it that the packaging of information and of fiction stories remain mystifying to the non-connoisseur audience—many of whom still believe that you have to hold several millions in your hand in order to make a feature of real appeal to the wide number?

You've answered on many levels but your last point draws attention to the state of independent art and experimental film here in the U.S. Could you comment on your experience with or interactions with those who try to categorize your work as documentary, as ethnographic, as avant-garde feminist, as independent? Could you talk about the process of independent filmmaking instead of more mainstream films?

Independent filmmaking for me is not simply a question of producing so-called "low-budget" films outside the funding networks of Hollywood. It has more to do with a radical difference in understanding filmmaking. Here, once a film is completed, you're not really done with it, rather, you're starting another journey with it. You cannot focus solely on the creative process and leave the responsibilities of fundraising and distribution to someone else (even if you work with a producer and a distributor). You are as much involved in the pre- and the post- than in the production stage itself. Once your film is released you may have to travel with it and the direct contact you have with the public does impact the way you'll be making your next film. Not at all in the sense that you serve the needs of the audience, which is what the mainstream has always claimed to do, but rather in the sense of a mutual challenge: you challenge each other in your assumptions and expectations. So for example, the fact that a number of viewers react negatively to certain choices you have made or to the direction you have taken does not necessarily lead you to renounce them for the next time. On the contrary, precisely because of such reactions you may want to persist and come back to them yet in different ways.

In my case, the contact also allows me to live out the demystification of *intention* in filmmaking. With the kind of interaction I solicit from the viewers—asking each of them actually to put together "their own film" from the film they have seen—the filmmaker's intention cannot account for all the readings that they have mediated to their realities. Thereby, the process of independent filmmaking entails a different relationship of creating and receiving, hence of production and exhibition. Since it is no easy task to build one's audiences, the process remains a constant struggle, albeit one which I am quite happy to carry on. Viewers also need to assume their responsibilities by looking critically at the representative place from which they voice their opinions on the film. Ironically enough,

those who inquire about the audience of my films often seem to think that they and their immediate peers are the only people who get to see the film and can understand it. What their questions say in essence is: We are your audience. Is that all that you have as an audience? (*laughter*). If that is the case, then I think that none of us independent filmmakers would continue to make films. For me, interacting with the viewers of our films is part of independent filmmaking. The more acutely we feel the changes in our audiences, the more it demands from us as filmmakers. Therefore, while our close involvement in the processes of fundraising and distribution often proves to be frustrating, we also realize that this mutual challenge between the work and the film public, or between the creative gesture and the cinematic apparatus is precisely what keeps independent filmmaking alive.

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