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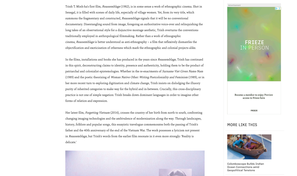
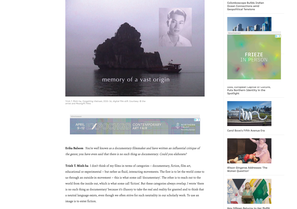
Posted by
Oscar Hill

'There Is No Such Thing as Documentary': An Interview with Trinh T. Minh-ha

The radical filmmaker, teacher and writer talks essentialism in identity politics and why her films are neither documentary nor fiction

BY OSCAR HILL | SEPTEMBER 12, 2019 | 2:00 AM





Trinh T. Minh-ha, Reality Bites, 2018, video still. Courtesy: the artist and Moonlight Films

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Trinh T. Minh-ha, Reconstructing Fiction, 2011, video still. Courtesy: the artist and Moonlight Films

Erika Balsom *You've well known as a documentary filmmaker and have written an influential critique of the genre, you have stated that you have never made a documentary. Perhaps you could elaborate?*

Trinh T. Minh-ha I think that all my films in terms of categories – documentary, fiction, film art, educational – cannot be other than what I call, interrogating documentary. The first is to the much closer to us through our attachments to memory – this is what some call 'documentary'. The other is to reach out to the world from the inside, into which we are immersed and live. But these categories always overlap. I mean there is no such thing as documentary' because it's dynamic is what the term and practice stand for that is constant language-ing, and as long as we are alive we are constantly in a relationship with it. So, what we image is in some fiction.

I went through my second school years Vietnam, Saigon, Paris. I was very critical then of only 'real' enclosure, but when the book came out and was discussed widely among people who claimed authority on identity politics, I could see how I am marked to be more generous in offering images.

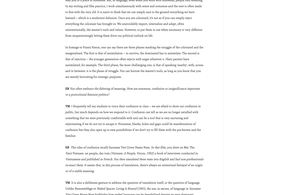
Even as we criticize, we should take into consideration the circumstances that lead someone to assume a black and white oppositional identity, especially if we are from the West. But as we is coming back today, we need to be careful. Some of the people who are now in the forefront of identity politics are not quite black image under President Donald Trump to make their racism and sexism, is very real.

Alongside this renewed hardening of essentialism in identity politics, we also have the affirmation of terms like 'intersectional', for example, meaning hierarchies of critique. This arises from a strong commitment to understanding how to enhance of process, the multivalent positions of gender and sexuality, race, class, capability, religion and culture, ecology and environment. This approach has already in the course of my lecture tours, been taken up by people who, in the past, would have been considered mainstream, and who now, in the current climate, will welcome positions. It can mean, for me, that I have intersectional hierarchies of critique, which today could perhaps help the struggle to organ movements among intellectuals, artists and activists alike.

EB *In your film* Elsa, Neuschwanstein, *the voice-over declares: 'I do not intend to speak about just speak nearby.' What does this mean?*

TMH If you are close to someone, like your lover, or your mother, and you make a film about them, how would you show and talk about them? Every time you speak about them, you are bear the inherent power of objectifying and presuming. You, by our side than. What's wrong with you? My mother, for instance, would certainly not recognize herself, she would cring, tell me to stop it.

When you decide to speak nearby, rather than speak about, the first thing you need to do is to acknowledge the possible gap between you and those who populate your film. In other words, to have the space of representation open so that, although you're very close to your subject, you're also committed to not speaking on their behalf, to that place so on top of them. You can only speak nearby, in particular whether the other is physically present or absent, which implies that you have definitely respected sharing, presenting it from a distance and having been a guest in the framework of the other. Speaking nearby is a process of interviewing with the subject, both in person and in absence. It is a process of dialogue, of exchange, of sharing, of mutual respect. It is a process of collaboration, of mutual learning, of mutual concern. It is a process of authorship in which the voice of the other is not only listening yourself, but the other is also heard, is encouraging the other to speak for herself or himself, and is listening to herself or himself speaking. While this function opens many possibilities in positioning the voice of the film, it is also more demanding to be present.



Trinh T. Minh-ha, Reconstructing Fiction, 2011, video still. Courtesy: the artist and Moonlight Films

EB *In your essay* We Women Terrorists! *(2010), you reference Audre Lorde's idea that the women's work will not dismantle the master's house. Lorde, in her famous essay, argues that the oppressed must develop alternatives to dominant modes of thinking, formulated by women, and thereby phased out the family? This is challenge now because I think that dismantling the master's house is actually a very common strategy in a lot of contemporary practices. I'm thinking especially of artists dealing with digital culture who hyperbolically appropriate modes of virtuosity, attention and experience associated with the criminal rather than try to shape our alternatives to them. Some are the exact but not language. Why do you think?*

TMH In essay film I try under whether it claims to say some culture or to another, the commitment to speak nearby has been extremely challenging. When you do not want to speak as 'human', you talk with the art of Dinda and Sofia and question media. Perhaps you have no desire to be meaning, which may sometimes be interesting to the audience. But, in language, some where you could not speak nearby, you are interested in trying to stay with practices, I will simultaneously with sense and sensation and the ear where speak nearby. In the case of Dinda and Sofia, I'm not sure if I can speak nearby, because I'm not sure what I'm listening to. I'm not sure what I'm seeing. I'm not sure what I'm hearing. I'm not sure what I'm feeling. I'm not sure what I'm thinking. I'm not sure what I'm saying. I'm not sure what I'm doing. I'm not sure what I'm being. I'm not sure what I'm. I'm not sure what I'm. I'm not sure what I'm

ERIKA BALSOM

Erika Balsom is a reader in film studies at King's College London, UK, and the author of *TEN SKIES* (Fireflies Press, 2021).

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