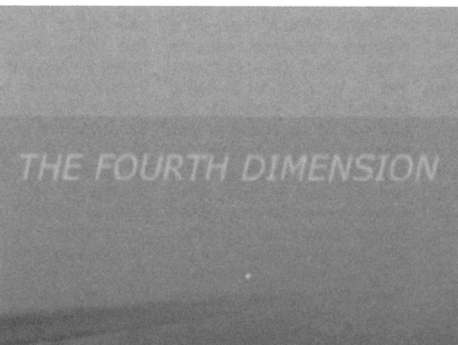
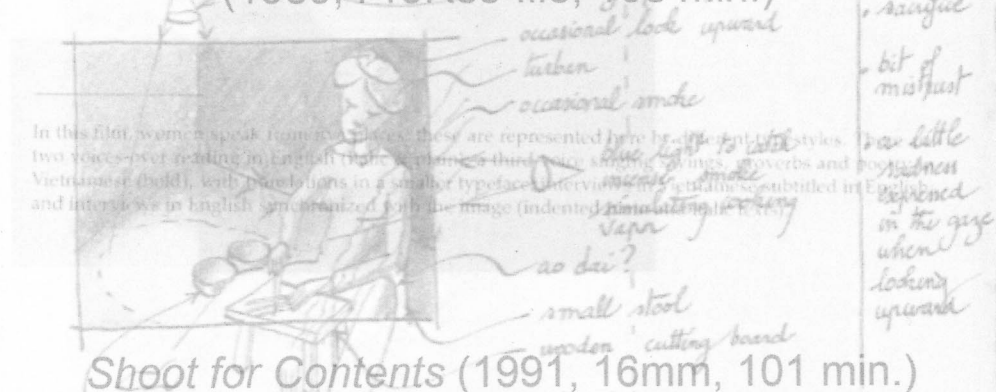


06-15-17.10.2020



Surname Viet Given Name Nam

(1989, ProRes-file, 408 min.)



Shoot for Contents (1991, 16mm, 101 min.)

Making films so as to make real, to persist and to resist what has come to be accepted as real. To show a real while questioning who, what, how that real could be. Digital technology offers the possibility of working intensely with

time in its liquidity and with indefinitely coexisting layers of temporalities, as ancient and modern meet on the light canvas, but in times of coercive politics and transnational terror, slowing down so as to learn to listen anew is a necessity. This is particularly relevant as one turns to digital systems in filmmaking, for the digital is here a way of living rather than a mere technology and the question is not so much to produce a new image as to provoke, facilitate and solicit a new seeing. In the interplay of hear and see, silence and sound, stillness and movement, the hearing eye and the speaking ear are constantly solicited, and form and formless are the two facets of a single process of life and death.

LIGHT SEEN IN PLAN

An image is powerful not necessarily because of anything specific it offers the viewer, but because of everything it apparently also takes away from the viewer.



The Fourth Dimension (2001, BetaSP, 87 min.)

Today, when one goes on a journey, the travel is ritualized through the visual machine. The image, coming alive in time as it frames time, is there where the actual and virtual meet: in the process of ritualizing Japan's "hundred flowers," it is the encounter between self and other, human and machine, viewer and image, fact and fancy that determines the field of relations in which new interactions between past and present are made possible. Shown in their widespread functions and manifestations, including more evident loci such as festival, religious rite and theatrical performance, "rituals" involve not only the regularity in the structure of everyday life, but also the dynamic agents in the ongoing process of creating digital images at the speed of light.

Non being is what we use in working with being . . . when we start taking care of this utter silence, life speaks to us in a different language, one in which we catch glimpses of stillness in movement and feel movement arising in stillness. Velocity in stillness. Some viewers have spoken at length on such dynamics and on what they see as unexpected moments of stillness in the midst of rapid cuts and movements in The Fourth Dimension. Speed is here not opposed to slowness, for it is in stillness that one may be said to truly find speed. And rather than merely going against speed, stillness contains speed and determines its quality. Speed at its best in digital imaging is still speed. The speed of a flower mind.

Problems and issues change all the time, with each single moment. What we are witnessing today . . . if we do not think in terms of linear progress, but rather in terms of a spiraling, multidimensional here-and-now—where everything in the present carries with it its past and its future. The seed of the future is always already there, in the present, in the past.

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The first question to Minh-ha came from a man, who asked, vehemently: 'Who is this film for? Who's the audience for this film?' Minh-ha took a moment, then said: 'I make films for sensitive people.' Her audience fell silent, maybe stunned by her brilliant tactic, which leaped over patterned responses. Minh-ha allowed for the contemplation of positions, by escaping the usual discursive traps. It's the hardest thing to do, and in art and politics the most imaginative and stimulating.

Terrassen 06-15-17.10.20

Cinemateket, Gothersgade 55, 1123 (KBH)

Erica Balsom: In your first film, *Reassemblage*, the voice-over declares: 'I do not intend to speak about; just speak nearby.' What does this mean?

Trinh T. Minh-ha: If you are close to someone, like your lover or your mother, and you make a film about them, how would you show and tell? It's quite difficult. Every time you speak about them, you can hear the other person's voice challenging and protesting: 'No, I'm not like that. What's wrong with you?' My mother, for instance, would certainly not recognize herself; she would deny, talk back and try to rectify. 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 leave 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, in their place or on top of them. You can only speak nearby, in proximity (whether the other is physically present or absent), which requires that you deliberately suspend meaning, preventing it from merely closing and hence leaving a gap in the formation process. This allows the other person to come in and fill

that space as they wish. Such an approach gives freedom to the viewer. I don't intend to account for it being taken up by filmmakers who recognize it as a strong critical stance.

By not trying to assume a position of authority, I actually freeing yourself from the endless criteria generated by the film industry and its claim and its hierarchies of knowledge. While this is a liberating gesture, it also opens up a space for the possibilities in positioning the voice of the film; it is also a space for the viewer to fill in the gaps.

EB: One of the pairs that you balance in *Forgetting Vietnam* is the land and the sea. In this ecological film, within your practice – one of many threads that we find throughout the film. What do you think feminism contributes to questions of environmentalism, ecology or the anthropocene today? And, to reverse the question: what do ecology and the anthropocene bring to a decolonial feminist practice?

TM: The answer is related to what I said before about the many tools at our disposal and the forces of nature. When you do not conceive of these in binary opposition, but rather as forces that co-exist and mutually sustain one another, then the human

is not opposed to the non-human. Your comment on ecology relates to my latest book, *Loveland: Walking with the Dispossessed* (2016), which addresses the climate disasters we are now experiencing. Something I forgot to mention when I began the project in 1995: I am a woman rower who takes people from one shore to the other. I have experienced this physically or spiritually – the shore can be that of life and death, the shore can be something very small, defining your ego or your small self, or something very large, where you are in tune with the world. It is very telling that in Vietnamese popular sayings and songs, as well as in legends and myths, the rower is, most of the time, a woman. You can still recognize this starting point in the film; the woman is in the songs and is very prominent at the end. But, by the time I returned to the project in 2012, my father was very sick. And, in the process of completing the film, I lost him. The journey toward his death and his passing opened a door for me to what I call the non-human. Not that it was not there before, but his departure made it very intense for me. So, the film shifts toward Vietnam as a body of water. This is

viewed in the thousands of rivers and waters that criss-cross the country and the three huge rivers that define it: the Red River in the north, the Perfume River in the centre and the Mekong or the Nine Dragon River in the south. This water flows deep and wide, from the Tibetan Plateau to the South China Sea. In the process of working with Vietnam as primarily water, the two forces catching my eye in the film are the sea and the boat: again, the human and the non-human. Here, it's not the person in the boat – neither the boater nor the boat passenger – but actually the boat itself and the sea. It's a way of shifting our attention to the part that we are not the centre of the world. Sometimes, viewers tell me they can't identify with the people in the film, which turns out to be mainly a reaction to the absence of interviews and personal stories. But this film is not about an individual story or about individual lives as representative of the culture – I was not presenting characters or the story of a few selected individuals. It's very much about water (or Nuôcthe name that also refers to 'country' in Vietnamese) and the 'water way' in relation to the forces of nature as they define Vietnam, Her people and Her culture.

Trinh T. Minh-ha: What you have just seen is an excerpt from a film that is quite long, and it takes almost two hours to build up precisely this sense of what you were talking about earlier, Homi, the sense of specificities and of differences within the culture, like the many names that Vietnam has had. The sense also that the more one looks into one's own culture, the more one sees there is no such thing as a place that one can just return to safely. Every time one tries to retrieve or to rescue what is thought to be retrievable and representable in the authentic Vietnamese culture, for example, - it loses itself like ripples widening on the surface of water. It's a reality that cannot be contained, that always escapes, but that one cannot escape. In this very short excerpt, the 'you' (even you) referred to by the women interviewed points immediately to the role of a witness-confidante-listener who, although trusted as an insider, holds a border position in relation to the culture. So there is this constant shuttling across thresholds of insideness and outsideness even for someone who is from within the culture: just as one exists oneself from one's culture to inhabit it anew, one also returns to it as a guest, rather than as a host or an owner, to hear its voices afresh.

Homi Bhabha: At the formal level, I find the way in which what I call this re-inscriptive history (which I think is really shown by the film), the formal way in which it occurs across a range of films made about specific cultural locations, minority groups, or diasporic narratives, is in antagonism with the documentary form, that is documentary as a mimetic or realist form which presented, but institutionally, informationally, and conceptually, this notion of emergent cultures or of emergent peoples as belonging to a culture. From there you begin to have the pluralistic multicultural history of documentary filmmaking and even anthropological filmmaking where the distance was established. But the difference was always kept at bay, because those communities were always seen to be somehow self-contained. What I find both in *Surname Viet* and in *Shoot for the Contents* is as well as in a number of films by black British filmmakers, Asian-British filmmakers too, is the use of documentary and then this re-inscription, taking it apart, not obscuring, not saying that that moment does not exist historically, cinematically in representation, it does exist, but continually hybridizing it, righting its margins, reassembling, disassembling it and so on. What's very interesting in your films, and also in the excerpt you showed us, is the way in which it is women who play this liminal role. The moment in which the repetition goes out and then comes back in, that turn, or fold, in the repetitions, is really a liminal space, which is occupied very much by women. I'm thinking specifically, for those of you who know

the two films, of the woman at the end of *Surname Viet* who says 'our history is always at the borderline.' Sorry, I'm speaking in her voice, in a way much less poetic than hers, but it's something like 'our history is always on the borderline of this north and south, but I speak from somewhere in both places, in between, and I will not accept this division, and I will not think truth decides itself in that way.' In *Shoot for the Contents* there is a continual calligraphic marking, remarking and unmarking of the dragon, which is being painted, and in *Surname Viet* as well as *Shoot for the Contents*, but even more explicitly in *Surname Viet*, there is a notion of woman and dragon, and Chinese history and dragon. It's almost as if the indirection of Chinese history which you talk about and the liberating indirection of the woman as witness on this liminal borderline come together. The question that arises is this: Does this liminal woman too easily fit in to the formal procedures of the film, in terms of the woman as liminal witness and the way in which we witness the pleasure that the film gives, form that cusplike moment. Do you think somebody could say that it all fits in too easily and the reality is much more grainy and gritty than that?

F. First, concerning the antagonism you mentioned between the documentary form and the activity of re-inscriptive history, I think one of the ways of approaching repetition as a political strategy and as an aesthetic device – at once as a negating and an affirming activity in its resistance to representation is to ensure that in the making of documentary (or of any other genre), one does not censor oneself. The fact that the loudest claims to representative truth and information have been voiced and legitimized through the documentary form does not mean that in order to bring about change, one has to banish it and adopt other, more adequate, forms. When handled creatively, repetition is a way of affirming difference. Rather than using it routinely to reproduce the same, one can use it, to continue saying what one has said, to shift a center, to lighten the burden of representation, to displace a form from its settled location, and to create new passages based on several homogenous insider's point of view, or a first person 'unmediated' account of the culture, the film engages the politics of the interview while entering Vietnam's history through collective and individual gaps. That is, not in an easily recognizable way, through chronology, linear accumulation, and succession of facts on Vietnam (this is any book one can find in any book of Vietnamese history), but rather

through popular memory, with its 'bold omissions and minute depictions'; through women's personal stories; through songs, proverbs, and sayings – particularly telling across generations as to the situations they struggle with; in other words, through nonofficial, undervalued sources of information. Many times I have been asked why I showed footage of the Vietnamese refugees in the fifties, and not of those in the seventies, when I was dealing with the latter's situation. And I have also been asked why, in focusing on arts and politics in China in *Shoot for the Contents*, I did not make a film more specifically, let's say, on 'Madame Mao', as a viewer puts it, on the cultural revolution, or on the post-Mao period. For me, there are many ways to approach history – here we come back to this question of repetition and difference – and one way, as suggested by the film, is to see it not so much as a succession of periods and of governing individual names (through which history is often reduced to neat, straight lines and to a finality), but rather as a manifested field of interrelated creative energies and social individuated forces across the specific times and places. Such an approach allows one to unsettle the terms of established hierarchies and to continually reinscribe history while apprehending it in its hybrid dynamics, its density, and multilayered thickness.

When one deals with such a vast culture and country as China, it is necessary – at least for me, for example – to confront such giant, mythical, and political figures as Mao and Confucius, not as individuals, but at once as two passé cultural monuments and as two overlapping fields of historical forces that continue to define China's faces today. Although for anyone caught in the binds of linear history it may appear very contradictory to put these two names together, for me it is clear that Mao ruled through the repetition and adaptation of old popular sayings, or 'through the power of rhymes and proverbs turned into snuggly captioned slogans' as one of the narrators in the film said. Because he deliberately resorted to oral traditions to convince the people, he can sometimes sound exactly like Confucius whose 'feudal' vestiges he tried so hard to extinguish. Both of them returned to this 'treasure of ancient Chinese stories, songs and sayings while blazing new paths. It was through this 'verbal struggle', as Mao called it, that Mao succeeded in spreading his words widely among the peasantry and to create his own version of Marxism. I think it's important to show this intensity of experience and density of history which, when split open, yields new possibilities of times spaces in the most familiar realities of the culture.

For this, showing the repetitive but continually changing calligraphic painting and unpainting of the dragon you've mentioned seems most adequate. As a creation of people's imagination, an allegory of both power and change, a symbol of the Word creator, as well as a guardian

of immortality in many Asian cultures, the dragon is evoked here in its multiplicity and perpetual metamorphoses, both through numerous names, functions, and appearances, and through the stories that indirectly comment on the political transmutations of China. As one proceeds with the film, the moves or the gestures one makes invent the movement and the trajectory one is to take. To paint a dragon is to paint a form of power, which is in itself a multiplicity of powers. But to paint a dragon without clouds, as the calligrapher reminded me during the shoot, is to miss the point and to paint no dragon at all (hence the shot, in the closing section of the film, of the man and his brushwork showing a dragon with water and clouds). Dragons are thunder and rainmakers; they are feared and revered for their power to control the waters or to make themselves accordingly visible or invisible. So without clouds, a dragon lacks dimension, substance and reality. Deprived of the essential elements to survive and to create, it can, literally speaking, neither dive deep nor rise high to take flight. The same holds true for the nature of power. To paint or assume power, one has to paint and assume the elements of change. Otherwise, as a statement in the film says, 'the five colors will blind a man's sight.' Since the five colors refer to the dragon, one can translate, 'power will blind a man's sight'; and since filmmaking involves both a play of colors and the power to direct and create, one can further translate, 'the five colors/ the dragon/power will blind a filmmaker's/viewer's sight.'

Keeping in mind how power appears from a painting, I'll take up the question you raised concerning the way women occupy a liminal space and how this fits too easily with the formal procedures of the two films. I certainly agree that reality is always more complex than whatever we come up with to frame it. But I would say first, that in my work form and content are inseparable. So to have women fear primarily and precariously in that liminal space is as much a statement adds dimensions to a political as an aesthetic choice – a choice that invites rather than excludes other possibilities (even when they seem contradictory) and other occupations by marginalized social groups. The many links suggestion these possibilities are constantly evoked, some of which tend to situate the subjection of women while others turn out to be liberating despite the difficulties involved. For example, in *Shoot for the Contents* the dragon is not always associated with women, even though the important roles of the translator and the narrators are deliberately given to women. The same may be said of the color red whose meanings are multifold, and while it is stated that 'the word red' (in Chinese) is a symbol for woman, such a statement adds dimensions rather than excludes them, for it refers specifically to one of the many multiply dependent possibilities of red.

