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In the spiral of time: conversation between Domi Olivieri and Trinh T. Minh-ha

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ABSTRACT

This article consists of a conversation between dr. Domitilla (domi) Olivieri, scholar and activist, and Trinh T. Minh-ha, renowned filmmaker, writer, theorist, and professor. Through questions and answers, the piece starts with Trinh's take on the notion of the intellectual; the dialogue then continues by traversing some of the themes and issues that characterise Trinh's work as a filmmaker and a scholar: films as forms of political and intellectual intervention; the matter of (diasporic) communities, subjectivities, and locations; how the issue of labels and genres plays out in the film industry; the question of audiences; the film as encounter; politics of knowledge productions; matters of time and temporalities. Sustaining the conversation is also an understanding that Trinh's films do not only address issues of (trans)national movements, encounters, technologies, poetry, and rhythms of lives, but they also enact and perform those very movements. Finally, the article discusses Trinh's legacies as feminist and postcolonial practices, and the role of criticism and (non)knowing in her work across genres and registers of filmmaking that are complex and poetic, as well as strongly political.

KEYWORDS

Filmmaker (as) intellectual; film industry; 'trans'; spiral time; (multiplicity of) relations; (non)knowing

This conversation emerges from a long-standing feminist and postcolonial engagement with subjectivity, filmmaking, critical thinking, temporalities, and the politics of representation, that both interlocutors share. Professor Trinh T. Minh-ha, as a renowned filmmaker, scholar, writer, and artist; and Domitilla (domi) Olivieri, as a scholar and activist who has written on and grown alongside Trinh's work, meet here to discuss Trinh's relation to the figure of the intellectual as well as to traverse together her multidimensional filmmaking (and) research practices.

Domitilla Olivieri

For a special issue that focuses on postcolonial intellectuals and filmmaking, it seemed immediately necessary and obvious that your voice had to be included. Yet, at first, I had some resistances in asking you to take part in this conversation, because of some of the connotations attached to an idea of the intellectual. When thinking of 'the intellectual' as

a geo-politically and historically located figure, one cannot but think of undertones of romanticized individualism and superiority, that have to do with a certain tradition of European politics (see for example: Spivak 1990; Hiddleston 2014); as well as with the racialised, gendered and classists connotation of ‘intellectual’ as speaking to a mind-body, reason-emotion cartesian and western hierarchy of values (see for example: Lloyd 1984; Hill Collins 2013). While this understanding of the term has been amply challenged and unsettled by Marxist, feminist, and postcolonial scholars (see above-mentioned scholars, as well as: Said 1994; Ponzanesi and Habed 2018; Hall, Gilroy, and Wilson Gilmore 2021; Ponzanesi 2021), I detect a protracted presence of a kind of intellectual figure in the mainstream contemporary arena, which carries with it the persistence of individual exceptionalism, maintained by ignoring the collective and collaborative emergence of certain ideas. For these reasons and knowing your written and cinematic engagements with issues of subjectivity, relationality, differences, communities, politics, and temporality, I hesitated in approaching you with this topic. Yet, precisely for these very same reasons, it seemed extremely appropriate to invite you to partake in this interview, and to start by asking how you relate to the idea of the intellectual, especially in relation to your artistic and filmmaking practice.

Trinh T. Minh-ha

I thought your focus on the intellectual as filmmaker was interesting because our world is very binary and people in the film industry, for example, consider all documentary films to be issues films. So, documentarians are supposedly all having some kind of issue, and bound to deal with some kind of problem. Like, we cannot even dream, for example. In such a context, any film that makes you think is immediately rejected as being ‘didactic’, ‘difficult’ or ‘complicated’. And, it is not uncommon for me to get viewers’ reactions such as, ‘Why can’t we just say something simply?’ As if the simplest things are not also the most complex, especially when the very person asking took many convoluted turns to get to such a question.

The way people raise questions is usually very complicated. This is why I think it’s relevant to refocus on the pensive image or on cinema as research and exploration as in my context. Partly, because I have what some call a dual career: on the one hand, being a filmmaker, writer, music composer and visual artist; on the other hand, being also a scholar, a university professor and researcher. How these two careers (rather than being ‘dual,’ they are actually a multiplicity) have often been set up against each other is strongly experienced in my daily reality – for example, in how you are not fully accepted in any milieu, be it that of film, art, music; creative, political or academic writing; how you are (mis-) presented or (mis-)located in public events, or how you are praised and rejected, made to feel special and diminished at the same time. You are always an ‘inappropriate other’ as I previously wrote, and it’s necessary to go into this duality and see how we can work with it.

Well-known are the pitfalls of intellectualism, and the cocooned context in which intellectuals function, the kind of vain role we could play, and the way groundless, freewheeling products of the mind are centralized and venerated. These could just go on unfolding without much concern for how they fare in daily reality and communal lived activities. With the case, for example, of structuralism and post-structuralism,

the question arising often concerns how positioning proves to be political even and especially when it disclaims its politics. In a feminist, postcolonial context, to take positions begins with, let's say, understanding how everyday language used to name and define our world is far from being neutral, and how ordinary thinking predominantly functions by the light of Western metaphysics. In my everyday reality, there is further a basic difference between the intellectual and the academic, since not every academic is an intellectual and vice versa, intellectuals are not necessarily academics. Similarly, 'theory' is often loosely claimed in academic framework, but worth noting is how theoretical writing remains rare among academics. Such a differentiation is important in the setting of U.S. universities, because the question of what an intellectual is and what theory is often tends to be taken for granted.

For me, more than being defined by the link to a university, the academic's identity has to do with the compartmentalization of knowledge and the dependence on systems of 'expertise.' The academic operates within disciplines, and often treats knowledge as acquisition via accumulation. Whereas the intellectual could refer to a function whose engagements expand much wider – such as placing oneself as a member of humanity or non-humanity, or as a vessel for world events in the everyday. More specifically here, as a creative recipient for cinema, music and the other arts engaging forms of thinking that, while focusing on the specific, would be relevant across contexts, locations and times.

So, we are dealing immediately with the production of knowledge, and the diverse forms by which it is spread and circulated, like the production of discipline and discursive modes; the centralization of master narratives; and among others, the consolidation of systems of evaluation according to set categories with their mechanisms of exclusion and marginalisation. Rather than complying with these control-and-discipline by-products of the mind, often related to entrenched academic work, intellectuals try to engage further, by returning to basic questions of existence as generated by a certain situation, a certain community, and applicable across cultural contexts. In doing so, you also question the limit and the scope of your own role, your accountability, your daily activities and the tools that define your creative work. This is what puts the intellectual and especially the public intellectual at stake: always coming back on the work itself, and situating its production processes – so that the critical finger raised does not simply go the other, but also comes back to oneself.

DO

This connects to another aspect that scholars have associated with the idea of the intellectual, that is the question of audiences. You wrote that 'Each work made is for me, a bottle thrown into the sea' (Trinh 2017, 172), which hints at which audiences you speak to or with, or rather at how you relate to your audience. I wonder if this has something to do with the transnational – if we want to use the prefix trans – dimension of your work that exists in the content matter of your films, as well as in how your books and films have been traveling. You have discussed the complexities of experiences and theorizations of traveling, crossing, and traversing in other occasions; but

I am wondering how you relate this to your own practice as an intellectual, as a filmmaker, and an artist, since such roles are said to speak to defined and possibly different audiences.

TMH

I've gotten a lot of questions around audience. I've also given a lot of answers concerning audiences. That's one of the first thing people always ask when they encounter a film, a writing or a project in which not everything is immediately accessible to their own knowledge; or simply anything that presents a thinking outside the box and doesn't abide by the conventional criteria of logical positivism. In the repetitious question, 'Who is your audience?' I could often detect a covert hostility ('If I don't understand, then who could?' or 'I could understand, but what about the others?'), which I attribute to the person querying not giving enough credit to the audience. We come into a film with a multiplicity of background and it is with this multiplicity of views that my film accordingly offers different pathways, different entries and exits to each viewer. There is more than one door to choose and any person in the audience can have an access of their own that is not merely personal when they engage with the film's workings.

The question about a film's audiences often hides the fact that the spectator thinks the film is not accessible, and takes for granted that their reactions could be representative of general audience reception. But no one should take on that kind of role of *speaking for* the audience because even in a dominant context the audience is highly diversified. For example, academics do not necessarily understand my films better than others – especially those who act as experts or authorities in their fields. The same applies to art audiences: when they come to see a narrative film of mine like *A Tale of Love* (1995), they react to the film with the same expectations as those any consumer of commercial films has, looking for story, plot, conflict, acting, meaning and message rather than entering through the door of the sensual thinking body or through the dimensions of affect, for example. When one makes film, not merely 'to cater to the needs of the audience' (a favourite line from the film industry), one is bound to work with uncertainties: rather than pre-existing the film, the audience is what I have been building across cultures and contexts with every single film I made.

I remember the first time *Reassemblage* (1982) was screened there was only one viewer in the room aside from the programmer. But we had a good discussion with the film afterwards. And even though it's a bit sad to have only one viewer at a public screening – since every filmmaker would have loved to share the film with more people – the fact that I had one viewer deeply engaged, was then already a success. So building my own audiences with each film made is part of how I see independent filmmaking. The audience does not simply exist out there, whose needs you must cater to. This is the mainstream mindset, for which the relation to the spectator is that of a commercial supplier to the mass market. Far from being a consideration for the consumer as the question pretends, it's all about control and lining the supplier's pockets. For me, saying there is an audience out there whose needs you must respond to is very irresponsible. Further, audiences' expansion need not be viewed only in terms of numbers or of tickets sales, but also in

terms of diversity and ability to reach across communities, cultures, national and transnational contexts and more I have, in that sense, a very wide audience for my films and cannot ask for better.

DO

In addition to the very prominent role the market and other economic aspects have in mainstream Hollywood cinema, there is also a widespread yet implicit norm in this commercial cinema: the idea of clarity (or transparency); the standard that a film must be clearly legible, clearly visible; it must represent something, or tell a story, in an unambiguous manner. Throughout your projects, instead, you have in many ways resisted, or at least worked within and between, any sharp and obvious demarcation of what we can call the visible and the invisible. In your films, you have engaged with the complexities and implications of making sense, of sensing. So, also in relation to the transnational or wide reach of your work, at the same time as you address very specific stories and social and cultural contexts, there is also an engagement with a very broad scale of relations, as you touch on questions of time, memory, visibility, subjectivity, etc . . .

TMH

In the previous question you raised concerning the transnational dimension of my work, the term *trans* itself could be viewed across many contexts. ‘Transnational’ could sound quite suspicious, as it often applies to multinational corporations and their economical powers – the 1% that owns a disproportionate portion of economic wealth in the U.S., versus the 99%, as the 2011 Occupy movement called it. One could easily recognize how corporate mentality thrives in the film industry, and how the public’s evaluation and consumption of movies remains conditioned by the marketing mind. So transnationality in that context does not interests me, but *trans* in terms of an event in itself, and *trans** with an asterisk, for example, as a way to indicate indefinite inclusion in gender and sexuality, is for me, very significant in its scope. Because it implies not only that the crossing is indeterminate, but also that this crossing, this in between is actually the very place of dwelling, the place where you can affirm an identity or take a stance in your undertakings.

That’s how I would situate my work: in that very place of the ‘*trans*’ – transcultural, transnational, transdisciplinary, transgressive, transgendered, transpositional (as in music). We are dealing here also with the multi- and trans-sensory – both the integration and the crossing of different senses while going beyond them. People usually think of cinema as primarily visual – an art for the eye. It’s not wrong. But for me, it’s certainly not what makes the film; because we have the other senses that are very important, like, the music and sound dimension, the hand and the haptic dimension. Further, ancient East Asian literature speaks, for example, of ‘listening to incense’ and of ‘eating wisely’ in reading. There’s no linear logic for the senses. A film could touch not simply the eye, the ear or the mind, but the whole of the body. In other words, cinema is an experience of the body. Voice and rhythm, for example, are elements that could affect very strongly the body, and in certain films

of mine, like *The Tale of Love*, I was trying to deal with the senses of smell and taste as well, even though we know that in cinema these senses are very difficult to convey.

DO

Staying a bit longer with this aspect of the aesthetic and considering how politics and aesthetics are related to each other in your films; I wonder if you can elaborate a bit more on the body, on rhythm, on the 'how' of your filmmaking, which speaks to an embodied, political way of relating to the world.

TMH

As related to the trans space discussed earlier, my films have been categorized in many different ways; some of the categories are clearly contradictory while others are quite fine. It's just that I'm not quite there, in the category given. I'm either at the edge of it or somewhere else. For example, one of the categories attributed to my work is the 'essay' or 'essayistic' film; which is fine, they designate it for Chris Marker's film as well. And although not a genre, it has become a popular category, claimed for a wide number of 'new' documentaries this last decade. This being said, I have also received feedback from people who said, as genre-breaker my films are totally anti-essay [laughs]. So, again, I'll come back to the notion of trans as something that is not quite here, not quite there; something that is in between, but you can always be here and you can always be there. All depends on how one performs the essay – as a transformative way of raising questions so as to invite people to expand their reality further, or as a conventional analysis steeped in expository and explanatory reading. How about a 'trans essay' film?

Because of their embodied practice and politics, as you've just pointed out, sometimes people also qualify my films as 'personal' or 'subjective.' This may come from the attention given in my films to the intimate realm of affect, in which the viewers' 'hearing eye' and 'seeing ear' are actively solicited. But again, these films are neither subjective nor objective, because such a binary based on the duality between subject and object is not relevant to my context. The way I work with film is to let events come to me – intimately, not indifferently. There's an outside-in movement in the 'documentary' approach that lets the world come to you. And there's an inside-out movement in the 'fictional' approach that leads you toward the world from within yourself. Those two movements are always overlapping.

With such inefficient categories I find myself constantly unaming, not naming and naming a new. The same applies to the notion of crossing and transgressing boundaries. Some people think of my films as travel film, or, even worse, as 'travelogue'. The term could be used in its focus on 'travel' but that category has nothing to do with the films I made. If we use the word travel, we would have to open it up. What is traveling here? Is it simply opposed to dwelling? Reformist anthropologists may have been dealing with travel practices in relation to their textual products, but conventionally, the movement of the researcher is always that of mobility – going to places to do research – while the subject studied is considered to be static – available for data gathering and retrieving. For me, there's no such binary in the relation of traveling and dwelling; each has its own intrinsic movement. In this sense, we are always traveling in life and we dwell while

traveling. We are traveling in every daily activity, even if we stay in the same place – the way for example the spectator sitting in one place is traveling with film and with video. I would accept the term travel as such, used in its transformative sense, as it leads us back to the notion of trans discussed earlier.

DO

We could maybe even add that, instead, the more prevalent understanding of ‘travel’ is loaded with implications of travel as discovery, as appropriation of the other, with all its colonial implications; which is precisely the opposite of what your films do. So I want to come back to your filmmaking, in the sense you talked about earlier, as a process in which ‘the world comes to you’ (possibly as ‘the world comes to walker’ Trinh 2016, 53). This is another aspect that makes your films very distinct from a certain kind of essay film that has a specific end-goal, already somewhat predetermined from the beginning. Conversely, you have spoken about your process of making films as one of encounter. How do your films emerge from encounters, and how does an initial idea become a film despite, or thanks to, the uncertainty of what that encounter will entail?

TMH

If my films are different from other filmmakers’ works that I love, it’s mainly because of the way one engages basic notions such as, among others, those of the individual and the communal or of the external and the internal. These need not be binaries. When you go to a place, the question of encounter is very important, because you can do all the research you want before and yet, not carry around the knowledge-baggage. What happens in an encounter is an in-between that belongs to neither self nor other. And film itself is a form of research, albeit a research in every single step taken with the processes of filmmaking and building audiences: writing, shooting, editing, music composing, public debate, and more. These are all based on materials that do not pre-exists but come with heightened attention as body and mind go on the alert in the encounter.

I would not necessarily come into a project by having some personal idea or feeling ahead of time – even though I can only make a film when I feel very passionate or strongly about the subject. However, the film doesn’t come merely from ideas or subjects. It comes from the whatever . . . the processes whereby the material comes to you – or as mentioned, from letting the world come to you at every step. The focus here is not on projection – the way colonials hubristically talked about their discovering the world, while the world was already there. Columbus’ ‘discovery’ was not really a discovery. In my last film *What about China?* (2022), one of the Chinese narrators actually mused on the fact that by 1405, almost a century before Columbus embarked on his voyage, the Chinese marine explorer, Zheng He, had already travelled around the world seven times. So the world is there; emphasis could here be given to receptivity or to travel as a mode of reception rather than to self-projection via ‘discovery.’ How do you receive? This is a praxis I would attribute to a feminist stance, because women are tuned to reception rather than mere projection; to receiving life and nurturing it rather than being driven by

destruction In going forward, one also knows when, where, and how to go backward, or to stay put in order to receive. This walking so as to receive the universe is very important. In film, the material that comes to me tells me the way each film should be made. There is no centre per se, whether that centre is a subject that you have chosen, or yourself. The film comes together in a multiplicity of relations.

DO

Another feminist characteristic recurrent in your approach to filmmaking, is the intention of provoking a new seeing, rather than only producing a new image (Trinh 2005, 13). I find this extremely relevant, especially in a time of proliferating production and sharing of images, including images of critique and resistance to inequalities and injustice. To what extent is this one of the ways in which your work as a filmmaker becomes an act of political, as well as artistic, intervention?

TMH

Here we come back to the notion of the intellectual instead. Take any verbal statement in my films for example. Each is written in such a way as to have at least two dimensions: one related to the culture, the people, the subject of research, or with what is shown on the screen; and the other pertaining to the properties of film or video, and the collaborative process of its formation. This is what I've called the twofold commitment. Placing oneself as an intellectual, that is, as a member of the human or the non-human, one engages a specific subject while reaching out wide, across locations and contexts. And this double commitment doesn't stop there. It would further provoke other non-binary ways of thinking capable of shifting our mind, as it grounds itself in what we call reality only to expand it. In other words, the true discovery doesn't come with the seeking of new contents or new technology, but with the advent of a new seeing.

When you're trying to get out of the box, being in a box is also very important. The film is in a way a box, because it offers you a framed reality. A frame can be very confining, or it can provide you, via its very presence, an opportunity to undo it indefinitely. This is what thinking, speaking, showing outside the box entails. So, to provoke a new seeing, it is not enough to focus on odd subjects and produce new images with a feat of technology, you would have to challenge the old seeing – yours included – and work on both the internal and external realm of the 'how' and the 'what' of the film. In other words, your film would have to address the *feminist viewer*, who could be of any gender.

In the feminist struggle, there is also a dualistic situation of content versus form, or vice versa. Certain feminists are mainly focused on content or on women as content, while others are more concerned about the master's house and the master's tools that determine the way women make films and receive films. One does not go without the other, but the second approach tends to be more invisible and hence, remains critically more important, not only to filmmaking, but to the filmmaker as the first viewer of the film. You're both maker and viewer, and could easily put yourself in the consumer's shoes. That's why even though every film made is a bottle thrown into the sea, working with the audience is not contradictory. The viewer's look is always incorporated in my films, but the audience does not drive the film. As research, the film is still a groping in

the dark, waiting for the form to manifest itself to the maker-cum-viewer. The film *Reassemblage* (1982), for example, offers you a way to turn the mirror around. Looking at Senegal, or at women and Senegalese village life, you are also looking at yourself looking at them. Here, the reflexivity at work functions not only between film and viewer, but also between all the elements of cinema and its apparatus: how they interact with one another, how they affect and trans-form one another in the process.

DO

Is this also why you also resist the notion of a dualism between form and content, and you talk about rhythms, forms, in the plural, and forces, as crucial aspects of filmmaking, and a framework that avoids reproducing a clear-cut separation between the how and the what?

In other words, it seems to me that rhythm, and the way you work with rhythms, is a not fully graspable yet very embodied force, an undercurrent that drives your films significantly.

TMH

You have pinned down a strong drive in my films. I consider a work without rhythm to be flat, unmusical and hence, lifeless. It will not succeed, for example, to bring to life the situations you powerfully experience in lived contexts. A strike could appear so weakened on screen, as compared to what you have experienced onsite. You have to work on the properties of cinema or video to resurrect its lived power in relation to the body. Rather than simply showing a weakened event, you are recreating its impact as an embodied experience. So, rhythm is not merely an aesthetical device, in my films. Working on rhythm could open up to all kinds of relations in the film. You can see, hear or experience rhythm with your whole body. Rhythm felt in touch, taste, smell or thoughts could all be explored.

Looking at two or four women pounding millet together in an African village, for example: while one goes up the other goes down; why is it that they never clash with their pestle? Isn't it a question of both innate bodily rhythm and social rhythm? Pounding in counterpoint is what allows for the seamless performance of this activity day in and day out, without any collision. So this is one way of looking at a film. Another way of looking at it is through the rhythm of the visible and the invisible. As in every struggle, we like to think of our action as that of bringing to visibility what has been kept invisible. And because 'invisibility' is often the condition of marginalized groups, we fight for visibility and claim the space of representation for ourselves. But this is just a step in the struggle; for it is in the very forms of visibility, that invisibility is also generated. In Hollywood films, giving women a main role, for example, is not necessarily empowering women; it all depends on how one treats the main role, which can be very disempowering when it comes to women's agency. Women could be visible, but only in certain roles and contexts endorsed by patriarchal society. Here, visibility actually heightens women's invisibility.

What is visibly shown in the film is not necessarily what determines a strong cinema experience. Sometimes you need to speak directly to bring out something indirect. Other times you need to go through the indirect to bring out something direct. When you work on your body, doing Yoga, for example, you're not just doing some physical exercise. You

go through the physical to act on the non-physical. Activating the field of energy that we each are is an ancient practice in Asia. Film practice is quite similar; if you are not attentive to the undercurrents of the film, to the forces that underlie the film, then you are just exerting eye effort. Certain spectators said, ‘Well, anyone can make *Reassemblage*’, and I agreed: technically, anyone can make it. But the one thing you cannot reproduce, which remains unique to each one of us, is the spirit of the film. Its field of energy, its rhythm, its light – visible and invisible –, its embodied experience.

DO

When talking about the visible and the invisible, I was thinking about *Forgetting Vietnam* (2015); in terms of telling a history that is felt and experienced, but not necessarily visible. In the film there is a way of working with the visible and the invisible that challenges a certain, Western, conception of time; where present, past and future are understood as distinct moments on a supposedly one-directional line. *Forgetting Vietnam* (2015) is also, in a way, a returning to a place where you worked before, and of course, a place you have a personal connection to. In this context, a question of legacy emerges for me. So, although it might seem an unfitting question considering your way of working with nonlinear times and temporalities, I am interested in hearing how you relate to your own work in terms of your past, present, and future projects. More specifically, how do you approach this question of time in relation to your legacy or your experience of it?

TMH

This links very well with the question of visibility and invisibility. In cinema, time is the fourth dimension. I’ve precisely made a film on *The Fourth Dimension* (2001) in my encounter with Japan and with the digital film event (also the title of one of my books, Trinh 2005). The question of time and of new technology as related to the small, the portable, and the mobile is very prominent in the experience that I had of the culture. A compelling dimension of film, which often remains invisible onscreen, time is strongly experienced via the body. Time conveniently conceived of as past, present and future could, in the relation between the West and the Rest, or between modern and ancient, lead to a series of damaging ‘mis-’ and ‘dis-’: misinterpreted, misconceived, misjudged; discriminated, disfranchised, disallowed, etc. Even terms like post-structuralist, postmodern or postcolonial are often misunderstood as an ‘after’ in linear time; but for me time is a spiral: we are going in continuously widening or tightening curves, but we never come back to the same place as in circular motion. As such, does the post come before or after? Is it a nascent, a thriving or a dying phase of a movement?

In my take on new technology or what I called the digital *way* (Trinh 2013) – a path rather than a technique or a technology – there’s no binary between old and new. On the contrary, what is at the forefront of new technology actually lead us back to ancient practices and put us in connection with – how should we call them? – wise people, our

ancestors. The virtual, the dimension of non-being in being is very prominent in ancient Asian thinking; between the visible and the invisible, there's the barely visible, the unseen-and-yet-there, the 'flying white' and the void, for example. These aspects are very important in thinking about time and space. Linear time could so impoverish our reality as to leave us stranded in illusory classifications. In 'post-' what comes before, during, and after all meet, not in the present, but in now time – the very moment of consuming or of making, the immediate time of an action or no action. Not quite temporalities, but the now of spiritual practice. Time in its spiralling course enables us to evoke 'memories of the future' (*Forgetting Vietnam* 2015) and to see how the future is already in the past, and the past, in the present.

For me, legacy comes in multiplicities – in gifts received from my many encounters with events, communities and people who have left a strong impact in my life. For example, you have the legacies of indigenous societies, which have deeply inspired me when I wrote on storytelling in *Woman, Native, Other* (Trinh 1989). You have the legacies of African American playwrights, whose works I was introduced to when I first came to the States; they have informed the way I worked in Africa. Here, the archival is not limited to the written or to the material world; rather, it pertains to a rigorous ear capable of preserving genealogies, oral history and memory, and trained to excel in music, poetry as well as public speaking. People carry whole archives in their body – the archival body.

Of course, you also have the legacies of ancient East Asian arts, with which I fare quite well but even here, you never go back to the same point. Tradition for tradition's sake is rather spiritless. You return to the ancient to create a new seeing – a different way of living that expands with non-binary thinking, which for me is also what underlies the feminist struggle. 'Nonbinary' could be carried out in every dimension of life. It's always a twofold commitment, but each one of the two or twos in my context is a multiplicity. When mountains and rivers appear in ancient East Asian thinking, they refer to forms and forces that regulate our lives – masculine and feminine, solid and liquid, immobile and fluid, high and low, etc. So in speaking to old and new technology, rather than referring to what comes before and after, one could focus on the fact that our market-driven society never fails to make old and new incompatible. Incompatibility regulates the relation between old and new in our throw away society. Techies often tell you, 'Oh, this is old technology, no longer supported after three years. We have to move ahead. Better buy a new one.' But actually, what does 'moving ahead' means in the spiral of time? It could be simply going back and back and back, but never to the same point.

At the core of this discussion on time and legacies in feminist and postcolonial practices, also lies the question of criticism. For me, critical thinking is a creative activity. Let's say you're doing critical work on a text of Clarice Lispector – a writer I find most inspiring. You are not simply talking about her writing or her text, you are also creating something like a second track to go with it. Criticism is not a mere matter of pointing a finger to something that is external to your own practice, since you can't turn a blind eye to the form of your own writing and thinking. And vice versa, what is called art is also critical thinking. Filmmaking as research is a form of thinking itself.

DO

To conclude, I want to come back to something we touched at the beginning, but now returning to it through these nonbinary and non-dualistic frameworks you have articulated in relation to art and critical thinking. We talked about how your work, as an intellectual, encompasses your activities as a filmmaker, an artist, a writer, as well as a teacher, and academic. We also discussed the risks and the limits in categorizing neatly your artistic and cinematographic practices, and as distinct from your academic interventions. I am wondering if, for you, there is something about approaching art and critical thinking through the lens of spiral time, and inside-out and outside-in movements, that also points towards a different understanding of the very act of knowledge production, and therefore maybe also of the feminist, postcolonial intellectual.

TMH

Yes, we can close this multithreading conversation here. We don't always have to operate with the knowing mode, approaching a subject as if we have to know all about it, and have that knowledge be unquestionably wrapped up for the spectator. A non-knowing mode, which is not ignorance, allows us to wander, wonder, and start afresh. This has been a constant in my work, while challenging history, his-story or Western historicization in its linear accounts of events has been a recurrent thread in my films, more comprehensively so in the last film, *What About China?* (2022). Equally important in the politics of representation is the emphasis on the transformative everyday and on multivocality in its poetic, musical, *and* discursive dimensions. This being said, as a proverb in this last film goes, 'A bird does not sing because it has an answer. It sings because it has a song.'

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Trinh T. Minh-Ha is a filmmaker, writer, composer and Distinguished Professor of the Graduate School, Departments of Rhetoric and of Gender & Women's Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. Her work includes numerous books, such as *Lovecidal. Walking with the Disappeared* (2016), *D-Passage. The Digital Way* (2013), *Elsewhere, Within Here* (2011), *The Digital Film Event* (2005), *Cinema Interval* (1999), *Framer Framed* (1992), *When the Moon Waxes Red* (1991), *Woman, Native, Other* (1989); nine feature-length films (including *Forgetting Vietnam* 2015, *Night Passage* 2004, *The Fourth Dimension* 2001, *A Tale of Love* 1996, *and Surname Viet Given Name Nam*, 1989, which have been honored in numerous retrospectives around the world; several large-scale collaborative installations, including, *In Transit: Between and Beyond* (in coll. with L. M. Kirby, Manifesta 13, Marseille, France), *Old Land New Waters, 2007-2008* (3rd Guangzhou Triennale, China 2008; Museo Revoltella, Trieste, Italy, 2018), *L'Autre marche* (Musée du Quai Branly, Paris 2006-2009), *The Desert is Watching* (Kyoto Biennial, 2003), and *Nothing But Ways* (in coll. with L. M. Kirby Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 1999). She was the recipient of many awards, including the Wild Dreamer Lifetime Achievement Award at the Subversive Festival, Zagreb, Croatia, 2014; the Lifetime Achievement Award from Women's Caucus for

Art, 2012; the Critics Choice Book Award of the American Educational Studies Association (AESA) for the book *Elsewhere Within Here* 2012; and the Trailblazers Award at the MIPDoc (International Documentary Film Event) in Cannes, France.

Domi Olivieri is an anthropologist, activist, researcher, and teacher in the field of gender studies, media and society. I am active in academic, artistic, and other political spaces and have been involved for many years in feminist, queer, anti-racist, anti-capitalist militant activism. I work as assistant professor at the department of Media and Culture Studies at Utrecht University. My research and didactics are in the field of feminist, queer, postcolonial and decolonial theory, documentary film, visual anthropology, media, and cultural studies. Committed to bridging the distance between academic and non-academic communities, I collaborate with festivals, community projects, NGOs, arts and activist groups. My publications include: ‘On Resisting Paradise’ in the exhibition catalogue *Barbara Hammer: Evidentiary Bodies*; ‘Shattered images and desiring matter. A dialogue between Hito Steyerl and Domitilla Olivieri’ in *Carnal Aesthetics: Transgressive Imagery and Feminist Politics*; ‘Diasporic proximities: spaces of “home” in European documentary’ in *Transnational Cinemas*; and a special issue of *Feminist Media Studies* entitled ‘Affective Encounters: Tools of Interruption for Activist Media Practices.’ My latest works focus on documentary practices, time and spaces of the everyday, the politics of othering and mediated encounters, forms of social and political relationality and contestation, activist interventions in neoliberal academia, and rhythm in (documentary) media. The last ongoing project is entitled ‘Slowing down (in) Academia.’

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