

WHEN THE MOON WAXES RED

REPRESENTATION, GENDER
AND CULTURAL POLITICS

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Routledge
New York London

Published in 1991 by

Routledge
An imprint of Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc.
29 West 35 Street
New York, NY 10001

Published in Great Britain by

Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane
London EC4P 4EE

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Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Trinh, T. Minh-Ha (Thi Minh-Ha), 1952—

When the moon waxes red : representation, gender, and cultural politics / Trinh T. Minh-ha.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-415-90430-7 (hb). ISBN 0-415-90431-5 (pb)

1. Motion pictures—Philosophy. 2. Feminism and motion pictures.

I. Title.

PN1995.T66 1991

791.43'01—dc20

91-14059
CIP

British Library cataloging in publication data also available.

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Mechanical Eye, Electronic Ear, and the Lure of Authenticity*

In the quest for a scientific use of film, there is, typically, a tendency to validate certain technical strategies, in order to ensure the defense of the ideological neutrality of the image. The purposeful, object-oriented camera eye does not allow any filmed event to be simply fortuitous. Everything must be bathed with meaning.

*Some call it Documentary.
i call it No Art, No Experiment,
No Fiction, No Documentary. To say some
thing, no thing, and allow
reality to enter. Capture
me. This, i feel, is no sur-
render. Contraries meet
and mate and i work best at
the limits of all categories.*

* Paper delivered at "The Documentary Today: A Symposium," Film in the Cities (Minneapolis), 10-12 November, 1983. First published in *Wide Angle*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (1984).

Translated or scientifically interpreted. Contrary to what many writers on documentary films have said, the striving for verisimilitude and for that "authentic" contact with "lived" reality is precisely that which links "factual" ("direct" and "concrete" according to another classification) films to studio-made films and blurs their line of distinction. Both types perpetuate the myth of cinematic "naturalness," even though one tries its best to *imitate* life while the other claims to *duplicate it*. THIS IS HOW IT IS. Or was. The unfolding scene is captured, not only by an individual, but also by a mechanical device. The mechanical bears testimony to its true existence and is a guarantee of objectivity. "Seeing is believing." The formula, dear to both fictional and factual films, assumes that cinema's role remains that of hypnotizing and propagandizing. The more sophisticated the recording technology, the closer to the real the film practice is said to be. (Documentary) films that appeal to the objective, scientific mind are those eager to "tie cinematic language to scientific rigor." With the development of an increasing,

Reassemblage. From silences to silences, the fragile essence of each fragment sparks across the screen, subsides and takes flight. Almost there, half named.

There is no hidden unity to be grasped. Yours. Perhaps a plural moment of meeting or a single significant note, on the run. To seize it as substance is to mistake the footprints made by the

unobtrusive technology, the human eye is expected to identify with the camera eye and its mechanical neutrality. The filmmaker/camera-operator should either remain as absent as possible from the work, masking thereby the constructed meaning under the appearance of the naturally given meaning, or appear in person in the film so as to guarantee the authenticity of the observation. Such a boldness or a concession (depending on how you interpret it) denotes less a need to acknowledge the subjectivity of an individual's point of view (if it does, it is bound to be a very simplistic solution to the problem of subject and power), than a desire to marry impersonal observation and personal participation. This happy synthesis of the "universal scientific" and the "personal humanist" is thought to result in a greater humanity and at the same time a greater objectivity. In the progression toward Truth, it seems clear that one can only gain, never lose. First, conform to scientific demands, then show scientists are also human beings. The order is irreversible. And the ideology adopted is no other than that of capturing

shoes for the shoes themselves. To fix it as pure moment pure note is to restore it to the void.

The nature of many questions asked leads inescapably to intention-oriented answers. On the frontline, every single intervention on my side has its reason of being. True. But the truth of reason is not necessarily the reality of the lived. Filming supposes as much premeditation as experimentation. Intentionally unintentional then?

The fools are interesting people, a film says. And i look outside. Can't do without rest. Can't the fools be fools too?

We all see differently. How can it be otherwise when

movement (objects) of life or restituting it (them) in a raw manner, and revealing the authentic reality by a neutral camera as well as a neutral cineaste, whose role is to interfere/participate as little as possible, therefore to hide technologically as much as feasible. Human interventions in the filming and editing process are carried out "scientifically" and reduced to a minimum. The cineaste still selects the framing, lighting (be it natural or artificial), focus, speed, but s/he should follow validated technical strategies and avoid all montage—regarded as an artifice likely to compromise the authenticity of the work. The question at issue is that of greater or lesser falsification. Although the selection and treatment of the material being filmed already indicate the side s/he chooses (with its ideological bias and constraints), lesser falsification—such as editing in the camera (sic) or exposing cuts as black spaces in the structure of the film—often implies no falsification. At least, this is what one senses through many documentary filmmakers' discourse and what their works connote. For despite their denial of conventional notions of objectivity

images no longer illustrate words and words no longer explain images? Which progression? Which folding?

What self expression? i mis-express myself more than it mis-expresses me. Impresses itself on me. Until it enters. Penetrates. Entsnarers. Now i see and hear myself decensoring.

Jump-cuts; jerky, unfinished, insignificant pans; split faces, bodies, actions, events, rhythms, rhythmized images, slightly off the beat, discord; irregular colors, vibrant, saturated, or too bright; framing and re-

and contempt for romantic naturalism, they continue to ask: how can we be more objective?, better capture the essence?, "see them as they see each other?" and "let them speak for themselves?" Among the validated strategies that reflect such a yearning and state of mind are: the long take, hand-held camera, sync-sound (authentic sound) overlaid with omniscient commentary (the human science rationale), wide-angle lens, and anti-aestheticism (the natural versus the beautiful, or the real/native versus the fictional/foreign). To value the long take as an attempt at eliminating distortions is, in a way, to say that life is a continuous process with no ruptures, no blanks, no black-outs. The longer, the truer. Hollywoodian montage also aims at the same: building up the illusion of continuity and immortality. For death strolls between images and what advanced technology holds out to us are the prospects of longer and longer life. The fusing of real time and film time may denote an intent to challenge the codes of cinematic tricks as well as a rigor in working with limitations. But the long take is rarely used as a principle of construc-

framing, hesitations; sentences on sentences, looped phrases, snatches of conversations, cuts, broken lines, words; repetitions; silences; chasing camera; squatting position; a look for a look; questions, returned questions; silences.

For many of us, the best way to be neutral and objective is to copy reality meticulously. Repeated.

Discontinuity begins with non-cleavages. Inside/outside, personal/impersonal, subjectivity/objectivity.

tion in itself, involving not only the length but also the quality and structure of shot. In most cases, it is defended on the grounds of its temporal *realism*, and the goal pursued remains chiefly that of preventing reality from being falsely interpreted or deformed through the removal of expressive editing techniques. The same may be said of the hand-held camera. Emphasis, here again, is laid on coherence of cinematic space, not on discontinuity (the hand-held camera can be used precisely to deny and shatter that coherence). The traveling shot gives the image a touch of authenticity: the movements of the person filming and those of the camera are said to intermingle, even though nothing in the result yielded seems to suggest a radical departure from the conventional realist account of an action. Walking about with the camera does provide the camera-operator with greater freedom of movement, hence greater ability to catch people either unaware or acting naturally, that is to say while they are still "alive." The camera changes situations, especially when it remains static on a tripod, and when the operator has

They can't do without cleavages. i always blink when i look. Yet they pretend to gaze at it for you ten minutes, half an hour without blinking. And i often take back what i've just shown, for i wish i had made a better choice. How do you go about framing life? We linger on, believing everything we show is worth showing. "Worth?"

That's not imposing, that's sharing. i frequently accept similar formulas . . .

to move from one "observation post" to another. But what so often goes unchallenged here—in the tripod as well as hand-held camera—is the assumed need to offer several views of the same subject/object from different angles, to follow or circle him/her/it; and the exigency for an identification between the camera's eye and the spectator's eye, as well as for a "perfect balance" between the movements of the camera/operator and those of the subjects being filmed. Omniscience. The synchronous recording of image and sound further reinforces the authentic contact with the lived and living reality. Given the present state of technology, the use of sync-sound has become almost mandatory in all factual films. So has the practice of translating and subtitling the words of the informants. There is a certain veneration for the real sound of the film (an electronic sound that is often spoken of as if it is "real life" sound) and for the oral testimony of the people filmed. There is also a tendency to apprehend language exclusively as Meaning. IT HAS TO MAKE SENSE. WE WANT TO KNOW WHAT THEY THINK

"Breaking rules" still refers to rules.

On the lookout for "messages" that may be wrested from the objects of observation.

Music is the opium of cinema.

Why not put in some natural sounds instead of silences? someone asks.

Images. Not only images, but images and words that defy words and com-

AND HOW THEY FEEL. Making a film on/about the "others" consists of allowing them paternalistically "to speak for themselves" and, since this proves insufficient in most cases, of completing their speech with the insertion of a commentary that will objectively describe/interpret the images according to a scientific-humanistic rationale. Language as voice and music—grain, tone, inflections, pauses, silences, repetitions—goes underground. Instead, people from remote parts of the world are made accessible through dubbing/subtitling, transformed into English-speaking elements and brought into conformity with a definite mentality. This is astutely called "giving voice"—literally meaning that those who are/need to be given an opportunity to speak up never had a voice before. Without their benefactors, they are bound to remain non-admitted, non-incorporated, therefore, unheard. One of the strategies that has been gaining ground in ethnographic cinema is the extensive if not exclusive use of the wide angle. Here again, the wide angle is favored for its ability to reduce false interpretations and is par-

mentary.

A sliding relation between ear and eye. Repetitions are never identical.

To say nothing, no thing, and shut that spinning verbal top.

Or shatter that outer, inner speech, which fills in every time space, allowing me to exist as a crystallized I.

Hear with that mechanical eye and see with that electronic ear. The text is not meant to duplicate or strengthen the verisimilitude of the images. It can,

ticularly valued by filmmakers concerned with, for example, indigenous peoples' complex kinship structures and their notions of the community, the group, or the family. This time, the creed is: the wider, the truer. Close-ups are too partial; the camera that focuses on an individual or a group proves to be heavily biased, for it fails to relate that person's or that group's activities to those of their kin. So goes the reasoning, as if a larger frame (one that contains more) is less of a frame, as if the wide angle does not, like the close-up, cut off life. Moreover, the wide angle is known to distort images. Thus, when it is used exclusively and unquestionably throughout a film, even in instances where there is only one person in front of the camera, it voluntarily deforms the figures of the subjects, giving the spectator the impression of looking constantly through an aquarium. Some filmmakers will not hesitate to answer to this that the aesthetic quality of the visuals is of secondary importance. No Art here. A beautiful shot is apt to lie, while a bad shot "is a guarantee of authenticity," one that loses in attractiveness but gains in truth.

at best, strip them of their usual chatter.

The tyranny of the camera goes unchallenged. Instead of alleviating it and acknowledging it, many declare it arrogant and walk on unpressured.

Surely, "there is more to Art than the straightness of lines and the perfection of images." Similarly, there must be more to Life than analogy and accumulation of the real.

A fiction of security. When i spoke about relationships i was immediately asked: "between what?" i have always thought "within what?"

Which truth, finally? And which reality, when "life" and "art" are perceived dualistically as two mutually exclusive poles? When *dead*, shallow, un-imag-inative images are validated on pre-text of their "capturing *life* directly?" It is, perhaps, precisely the claim to catch life in its motion and show it "as it is" that has led a great number of "documentarians" not only to present "bad shots," but also to make us believe that life is as dull as the images they project on the screen. Beauty for beauty's sake sounds hopelessly sterile in today's context of filmmaking. However, between a film that is not slick (that is to say not concerned with aestheticism per se), one that wallows in natural romanticism, and one that mechanically or lifelessly records the seen, there are differences. And differences, I believe, never offer two absolute oppositions.

For "between" can be endless, starting from you and me, camera/filmmaker/ spectator/events/persons filmed/images/sound/ silence/music/language/ color/texture/links/cuts/ sequences/ . . .

The very effort will kill it.

They only speak their own language and when they hear foreign sounds—no language to their ear—they walk off warily, saying: "It's not deep enough, we haven't learned anything."

Illustration on next page.