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**THE SELF AS "OTHER":
ACCESSING ISSUES OF DIFFERENCE
IN TRINH T. MINH-HA'S
REASSEMBLAGE**

Susan Sinkinson

**A Thesis
in
The Department
of
Art Education**

**Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts in Art Education at
Concordia University
Montréal, Québec, Canada**

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ABSTRACT

The Self As "Other": Accessing Issues Of Difference In Trinh T. Minh-ha's Reassemblage

Susan Sinkinson

The story never stops beginning or ending.

—Trinh T. Minh-ha in Woman, Native, Other

The film Reassemblage by the Vietnamese film maker and feminist theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha, is a work which makes demands on the perception of the North American "self" in relation to the Asian and African "other". As such it has aided in my personal quest to understand art work which challenges Euro-centrism. This thesis is an exploration of how Trinh T. Minh-ha's film and writings have raised my awareness. It is also an investigation of the use of Trinh T. minh-has's film to challenge the assumptions and expand the receptivity oa Art Education students to issues of difference and representation in art.

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INTRODUCTION

The U. S. and the U. S. S. R. are the most powerful countries
but only 1/8 of the world's population
African people are also 1/8 of the world's population,
of that 1/4 is Nigerian.
1/2 of the world's population is Asian
1/2 of that is Chinese.

There are 22 nations in the middle east.

Most of the people of the world
are Yellow, Black, Brown, Poor, Female
Non-Christian
and do not speak english.

By the year 2000
the 20 largest cities on the world
will have one thing in common
none of them will be in Europe
none in the United States.

_____ Audre Lorde (Quoted by Chandra Mohanty (1991) in the introduction to
Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism)

In this thesis I will explore the learning, awareness and understanding that I
have gained through the study of the film maker, writer, teacher, Trinh T. Minh-ha.
An example of my learning will be presented in the form of a group interview of an

Art Education class as an illustrative response to the film, Reassemblage, by Trinh T. Minh-ha.

Inspiration for the topic is based on my experience as 'other' while I lived in India for three months. I stood out. I was treated as a representative of the West. I had a small taste of the experience of people who are visible minorities, in Canada, whether as recent immigrants or as people whose families have lived here a long time. With this experience as a reference, I chose to research Trinh T. Minh-ha, an artist from Asia, situate her work in theoretical context and place her work in an Art Education context. I did this to integrate the awareness I have experienced and learned.

I have chosen the work of Trinh T. Minh-ha as my subject of study for two additional reasons: her art media is film and also she also writes about the intersections of culture, oppression and personal narrative. These themes are important in my work as a film maker and as a feminist. Because of the conditions of the world as described by Audre Lorde in my opening quotation, I believe it is important for me as an artist/educator to learn about art created by artists in or from the "Third World." To me, this means a continual education in identifying and confronting my own ethno-centric bias.

I will demonstrate my process of learning with this thesis by exploring themes raised in the writings of Trinh T. Minh-ha, difference, storytelling and post-coloniality; and those raised in her film, such as Euro-centrism, the use of personal voice, constructed narrative and representation.

I use the film Reassemblage by Trinh T. Minh-ha to explore my understanding of her work. As an illustration, I conducted a group interview with a class of Art Education students enrolled in the fourth year Multi-media course, to consider their response in the light of my understanding. These students demonstrated some areas of awareness and raised questions when they viewed this film was. I explore those areas in terms of theoretical concerns such as: film as representation (documentary, 'Third Cinema', audience response); post-coloniality (authenticity, hybridity, euro-centrism); art education and film (learning/personal narrative, constructed narrative).

The structure of the thesis centres around responses to, and understanding of, the work of Trinh T. Minh-ha. The thesis consists of four chapters. Chapter One deals with my encounter with her ideas, mainly through her writings. I situate them in the theoretical context which has stimulated my awareness and understanding. I discuss my response to her film Reassemblage and contextualize it in terms of my understanding of both the form and content of her work. In Chapter Two I discuss how I conceived of the study, the methodology of the group interview and the theoretical considerations as part of it's design. Some thoughts on the limits of the design of the group interview, I included in retrospect. Chapter Three consists of the Group Interview. In Chapter Four, I discuss the student's responses to the film, Reassemblage, under three categories: audience awareness; relationship of form to content; issues of race, gender and culture.

CHAPTER ONE

In this study, the interview format is used to both uncover and clarify my intellectual process in relation to my thesis topic. This interview elucidates my reasons for choosing to study the work of the writer/teacher/film maker Trinh T. Minh-ha. In it, I also discuss the essence of my ideas.

I have also chosen to interview myself so that I would use the form of personal narrative. I remained in the first person to make my voice clear. Giving voice to my thoughts was a way of revealing my thought processes. Using the first person was also a way to validate my own experience as part of the intellectual exercise of this qualitative study.

Who is Trinh T. Minh-ha? What is her art practice? Why are you interested in her?

I will start with one of those questions: why am I interested in Trinh T. Minh-ha? She's a woman and a film maker, that's the main thing, for me, because I'm a woman and I make films, so I relate to her. My interest in Trinh T. Minh-ha also stems from the fact that her work deals with the interplay between identity, culture, post-colonialism and feminism. These mirror my own interests. I want to further my knowledge of these larger issues and of the ways in which they inform responses and discussions of art emanating from cross-cultural and multicultural intersections. Trinh

T. Minh-ha, as an artist/theorist/writer, of Vietnamese origin, is an example of an artist working with the issues surrounding her experience of being a visible minority in the North American cultural context.

How do Trinh T. Minh-ha's films aid in developing a critical stance?

Certainly the film elicited critical thinking. Because of it, I became aware of my own critical bias, aware of my culture through which I view art. My way of viewing things, feelings, mental critiques, what I know, is all filtered through the culture of which I am a part.

Why do you think her art is relevant to Art Education? In what way?

Both in form and content, Reassemblage offers a means to generate discussion of cultural and ethnic difference as it applies to art practice. My study is intended to contribute to ideas about teaching that raises student awareness of representations which comment on, and highlight, the impact of Euro-centric culture on a multi-cultural world. I am interested in exploring students' (who are also part of the "Canadian mosaic", see Lippard, 1990, p. 249n for a critique of the term) responses to art work that raises these issues. I chose the film Reassemblage, by Trinh T. Minh-ha, as a way of exploring student responses to art work that focuses on these issues. As issues, I refer to the general terms, cross-cultural and multicultural, which contain many facets to discuss. Such a discussion is informed by Lucy Lippard's background:

Since the late '60's, the feminist movement's rehabilitation of subjectivity in the face of the dominant and loftily "objective" stance has been one model in the ongoing search for identity within so-called minority groups. It is precisely the false identities to which deconstructionism calls attention that have led

women and people of color to an obsession with self-definition, to a re-creation of identity from the inside out. On the other hand, over-emphasis on static or originary identity and notions of "authenticity" imposed from the outside can lead to stereotypes and false representations that freeze non-Western cultures in an anthropological present or an archaeological past that denies their heirs a modern identity or political reality on an equal basis with Euro-Americans. (1990, pp. 11-12)

The work of bell hooks, an African American feminist writer, has aided in the formulation of my awareness of the necessity of the recognition of my process. In her book, Teaching to Transgress, hooks (1994) critiques Western cultural discourse, which currently dominates the globe, for not talking about or taking into account alternative discourses to a sufficient degree. Like hooks, Trinh T. Minh-ha also seeks to critique the discourse of dominance, proposing instead a more inclusive vision which provokes viewers to question their preconceptions of the "other". I am interested in some of the commonalities these two women share. Both speak to my sensibilities as a feminist, an artist/film maker and as a teacher.

As an educator, I thought an effective way of introducing the students to alternative discourses was to show an example. Then, I could conduct a group interview to assess their awareness. Specifically, I wanted to discover whether art education students, after viewing one of Trinh's films, could identify and respond to issues such as representation of meaning, ethno-centric bias, documentary as constructed narrative and discuss them during an interview. The interview would give me an understanding of how students might reflect on their reactions to representations of culture through the medium experimental/documentary film. I was curious to know how the film resonated with the art education students in terms of

their own learning and experience (ability to make connections) and also expand their ideas through discussion with class mates due to differing responses. Since these were Art Education students, the group interview could have been viewed as an example of an inclusive teaching style.

As a result of the experience of the group interview, I have continued to become more informed in my practice as an artist/educator due the growth of my awareness of ethno-centric bias which exposure to Trinh T. Minh-ha's work has put into a theoretical context. I now have a vocabulary to further my awareness and the ability to put this awareness into words, to question and to discuss. As a film maker, conducting the group interview was a valuable lesson to see and hear how an audience engaged with the images and sound on many different and complex levels.

Trinh T. Minh-ha, from Vietnam, of Chinese ethnic origin, integrates her own narrative into her film work and her writing. For example, when writing about her background, she asks,

So what's happening to this "tradition"...in defining the Vietnamese identity? It is here that one realizes the potential of the centre as a site of resistance - not in reinstating the authority of a national patrimony, or of an essentialist identity (a mere recovery of the authentic past is in any case an "inauthentic" and unrealistic goal), but in offering an "empty", non-aligned, always-and-not-yet-occupied space where the tension between past and present is politicised, hence neither negative nor simply positive.(1995, p.53)

Thus, I feel her work as an interrogation of her interaction with the world (through film and her writing), can be utilized as a catalyst for discussion.

Do you also mean as an artist who is of the "Third World" or speaks to Third World concerns?

Yes, although Trinh T. Minh-ha hasn't been living in the "Third World" for a long time, she has said that "in every First World there is a Third World and vice versa", which is a way of highlighting that we have conditions of oppression and poverty existing here and now (1995, p.50). I keep in mind two definitions of the term "Third World". One, is by Tesholme H. Gabriel (1982) in Third Cinema in the Third World:

Initially the term, Third World, was used to designate those states in Africa, Asia and Latin America which called themselves "non-aligned", i.e., committed neither to the Western (capitalist) nor the Eastern (communist) power blocks. The term implies a common economic and ideological purpose. Third World Ideology is "more socialist than the American model and more democratic than the Soviet one"; it is not a Western model of "social democracy" but one that is truly indigenous and places more emphasis on culture as a tool for ideological as well as economic independence.

The term also bears a connotation of rural life, especially on agricultural economy and poverty.

The term "Third World" also refers to developing nations some of which have opted for socialist reconstruction of their society (e.g., China, Cuba, Ethiopia, Angola, Mozambique) and some of which have chosen a capitalist mode of development (e.g., Nigeria, India, Brazil). (p.120)

The second is Chandra Mohanty's definition as a political stance,

for understanding Third World feminist politics: decolonization and national liberation movements in the third world, the consolidation of white, liberal capitalist patriarchies in Euro-America, the operation of multinational capital within a global economy...anthropology as an example of a discourse of dominance and self-reflexivity...(and) storytelling or autobiography (the practice of writing) as a discourse of oppositional consciousness and agency.(1997, p.356n)

Trinh T. Minh-ha, who completed her post graduate education in the U. S. A., talks about her own concerns, about herself outside the culture she was brought up in and how that affects her. She speaks about being an outsider. For example in Woman, Native, Other, she writes:

The story never really begins nor ends, even though there is a beginning and an end to every story, just as there is a beginning and an end to every teller. One can date it back to the immemorial days when a group of mighty men attributed to itself a central, dominating position vis-à-vis other groups; overvalued its particularities and achievements; adopted a protective attitude toward those it classified among the out-groups; and wrapped itself up in its own thinking, interpreting the out-group through the in-group mode of reasoning while claiming to speak the minds of both the in-group and the out-group. (1989, p.1)

"Outside" what and "other" than what?

Other than white. Outside her own culture. Outside of the politically dominant gender. She feels she is an outsider in terms of the messages she wants to give in her art.

Outside her messages? What are her messages?

She is not part of the dominant society. Her messages are about how she is displaced, marginalized. This is a term she often uses in her writing. Trinh T. Minh-ha writes in "Cotton and Iron" in a way that weaves many voices together with her words, as when she uses West African myth: "Poetry is a golden thread...gold is the only metal that becomes cotton without being any less iron...gold is the support of knowledge but if you confuse the support with the knowledge it will fall on you." (1990, p.266) "Cotton and Iron" is an example of how Trinh T, Minh-ha uses poetry to both illustrate ideas and as a form, as if a storyteller, where she can unwind a thought, double back, question, contradict, as in the following, "the centre itself is marginal".(1990, p.271) Marginality can be both a position of objectification and a point to move beyond, or subvert. "Cotton and Iron" also discusses many types of marginality, in terms of race, sexual orientation and gender. It illustrates these ideas

by quoting from culturally divergent authors (Native American, Japanese, Brazilian, African American), which highlight the power and creativity of the margins.

Trinh T. Minh-ha, in this essay, explored such themes as, marginality, dislocation, meaning, creativity, and voice. I received her message in the first few lines when I read "simple and direct in it's indirectness". This quote illustrates the way I experience the form and the content of both the writing and films, her words and images seem simple but I feel disturbed and have to think of the level of meanings Trinh T. Minh-ha implies.

You seem to be skirting around; how exactly does she feel?

As in an example I quoted earlier, her writing is indirect, using stories, quotes, allegories, "if one goes to an object, if one tries to seize it, one would always lose it, and this is for me one way towards understanding truth...a creative event does not grasp, it does not take possession, it is an excursion." (Morelli, Trinh T. Minh-ha 1996, p. 3) Trinh T. Minh-ha also shows what her concerns are by her choice of images, the way she photographs and in the way she structures or constructs both her writing and her film.

What do the images speak about?

They're disconnected, broken, repetitive and contrary to what we've been led to expect from Hollywood, that is, linear continuity in narrative film and television. Morelli in her conversation with Trinh T. Minh-ha, says: "Hybridity, interstices, voids, intervals, in-betweeness...these words circulate in your works and are actually

inherent to your practices of writing and filming, so that your texts (politically, strategically) resist closures and classifications." (1996, p.9)

Are the images themselves dissonant or is the way she uses them dissonant?

By "dissonant" do you mean, the dictionary definition of the word, "discordant", "incongruous", "harmonically unresolved"?

By being different from the Hollywood norm, does she incorporate something dissonant, maybe confrontational?

Well, for instance, Reassemblage seems like a documentary but, it critiques the documentary ethnographic film. The images are mostly of African women in Senegal. Trinh T. Minh-ha was teaching in North Africa for three years then she returned to make the film. Nothing is unusual about the way the images are shot, the exposure, the framing, the colour, so they seem like the usual type of ethnographic film. The difference is in way the images are put together. There is no continuity. Sequences begin at different points, sometimes before sometimes after each other in terms of action. There are abrupt jumps between action that we see as continuous. The images are also repeated. Between some images the screen goes black for several seconds.

Are you saying she's using conventional methods to elicit an unconventional response or using conventional images unconventionally?

She's questioning, or doing things to get an audience to question the ethnographic film, and, to question what they see when they look at film. In particular, if the members in the audience are viewing people from a culture different

than their own, specifically, not North American or North European, not other white people, she tries to get them to question what they are seeing. She does this by interrupting the continuity of both image and sound.

How did you react when you saw Reassemblage? Did you question?

Well, I already knew a lot from Trinh T. Minh-ha's writings and I've heard her speak. I think my reaction was directed by that, so I feel a detached when I view her films, causing me to ask, what is she doing, what does she want me to look at?

You are very aware she wants you to look at something?

Yes, I become very critical.

How do her films do that?

I think it is in the gaps. For instance, in Reassemblage, there is time when there is no image, just black. The sound track has gaps also, not always coinciding with the with the black only picture. What does that gap mean, you ask yourself? It makes you conscious that someone is behind the camera, choosing what to photograph. And in so choosing, the person making the film is speaking their own story, not only speaking about the subject of the images. This, like any other film, is not a copy of reality.

Would you say this is a general critique Trinh T. Minh-ha levels against ethnographic films, where someone goes off to New Guinea or Borneo and presents these people as a reality, a seamless story? Is she saying , look, this is only the film maker's perception of reality ?

I think that is one layer of what she is saying. The other layers depend on what the viewer brings to the film. The intellectual side of us as viewers comments through the lens that we use to view others, to view films through. Also, she is speaking of herself as a person with an exterior to which people respond.

You mean her ethnic background?

Yes, she quotes a poem in Woman Native Other:

MIRROR MIRROR

People keep asking me where I come from
says my son.

Trouble is I'm american on the inside
and oriental on the outside

No Doug

Turn that outside in

THIS is what America looks like.

— Mitsuye Yamada from Camp Notes and Other Poems
(1989, p.89)

You mentioned before that you thought her film was both commenting from the outside in and the inside out?

It's a way of describing what I get from her work. What I was just speaking of, how she feels being in a culture outside of her culture, an Asian woman in North American society and the mixed feelings she has as a result of her experience. By outside in, I mean her criticism about how we view art. How we judge and categorize things from an ethnocentric view point. That Euro-centric sensibility is imbued in our culture.

You said earlier on that Trinh T. Minh-ha's education had taken her outside of Vietnam early on, so can you consider her an authentic voice?

Authentic in what way?

Authentic to her home culture, or is she a hybrid, trying to make people understand her hybridity?

To be authentic is difficult to define as any one thing. Trinh T. Minh-ha explores

The question of roots and authenticity...inauthenticity is condemned as a loss of origins and a whitening (or faking) of non-Western values. Being easily offended in your elusive identity and reviving readily the old racial charge, you immediately react when such quilt-instilling accusations are levelled at you and are thus led to stand in need of defending that very ethnic part of yourself that for years has made you and your ancestors the objects of excretion...on one hand...concentrating on authenticity...diverted from other important issues; on the other hand, I do feel the necessity to return to my so-called roots, since they are the fount of my strength...The difficulties appear insurmountable only as I succeed in making a distinction between difference reduced to identity-authenticity ...(1989, p.89)

I am ignoring the question on hybridity as I have a gut level reaction to it as a term from biology where two 'different' species, or in the case of humans, 'different races' breed and produce a mutant, like a donkey and a horse bred produces a mule (this is where the root of the word 'mulatto' comes from, Young: 1995, p.8)). In terms of "cultural politics", Young writes "hybridity thus makes difference into sameness, and sameness into difference, but in a way that makes the same no longer the same, the different no longer simply different." (1995, p. 26) I agree with Judy Purdon's description of a post colonial identity created from ideas of hybridity "that defies fixity" and contend that art can "show" by representing several things at the same time, this she says is "borderline art" (1995, p.19-20). She quotes the cultural critic Homi Bhabha

...the borderline work of culture demands an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of a continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an

insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic production, it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between space', that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The 'past-present' becomes part of the necessity, not of the nostalgia of living. (1995, p. 20)

Is Trinh T. Minh-ha trying to situate herself within the cultural discourse?

Yes, but from her perspective as illustrated by her stance as she asks the question, "Have you read the grievances some of our sisters express on being among the few women chosen for a "Special Third World Women's Issue" or being the only Third World Woman at readings, workshops, and meetings? It is as if everywhere we go we become Someones's private zoo." (1989, p.82) The anger at the divisiveness of the category of 'difference' is also brought into focus when she quotes "a white sister" who says

Gradually, I began to realize the tremendous gap between my rhetoric about solidarity with Third World Women and my gut feelings ...Our idea of including women of colour was to send out notices. We never came to the business table as equals. Women of colour joined us on our terms...I started seeing the similarities with how men have excluded the participation of women in their work through Roberts Rules of Order, encouraging us to set up subcommittees to discuss our problems but never seeing sexism as their problem. It became clear that in many ways I act the same way toward women of colour, supporting them in dealing with their issues...I'm now beginning to realize that in many cases men do not understand and by understanding choosing to share their power. The lesson we have learned so well as women must be the basis for our understanding of ourselves as oppressive to the Third World Women we work with. (1989, pp. 85-86)

These lines illustrate a process of understanding I began and continue to follow as I learn to look at my relationships with people, artists from diverse backgrounds and my image making from my ethno-centric bias. The task of confronting my own racism and how I contribute to oppression is an on going process which is not only

one of thinking or reading but involves social action. This is illustrated by Mitsuye

Yamada:

...should not be too difficult...for them (white sisters) to see why being a feminist activist is more dangerous for women of color. They should be able to see that political views held by women of color are often misconstrued as being personal rather than ideological. Views critical of the system held by a person of the "out group" are often seen as expressions of personal angers against dominant society. (If they hate it so much here, why don't they go back?) Many lesbians I know have felt the same kind of frustration when they supported unpopular causes regarded by their critics as vindictive expressions to "get back" at the patriarchal system. They too know the disappointments of having their intentions misinterpreted. (1981, p.74)

I wondered if you had thought of these issues within the framework of Post Colonial Discourse?

In terms of Post Colonial discourse, there are many aspects to be discussed. I discovered when reading a critique by Sara Suleri of the debate surrounding what is meant by the word 'postcolonial' which she describes as a "free floating metaphor for cultural embattlement and as an almost obsolete signifier for the historicity of race." (1992, p.759) She includes Chandra Mohanty, Trinh T. Minh-ha and bell hooks in her critique: Mohanty for the way she makes opposites between Western feminism and "ethnically constructed women"; Trinh T. Minh-ha for hooking race and gender metaphorically with postcolonialism and postfeminism; hooks for implying the question of authenticity in feminism, that is, "only black people can speak for black people." Sulari describes the "political untouchability" surrounding the designation of 'Third World Women' and asks the question "Is feminism only skin deep in that it can not move away from biological readings of race?" (1992, pp. 760-763) It is necessary to sort out the vocabulary of the discussion and apply it to the

work of Trinh T. Minh-ha as she writes and makes films consciously using theory or exposing theoretical stances.

Africa is a world away from Vietnam, what right does she have depicting African women?

I think she did that with concrete reasons in mind. This was to have the viewers question what they were looking at, to question spectatorship. Who are we to watch African women, often bare breasted, while we sit in a classroom, in winter, we, many not of African origin ourselves, what right do we have to look at those women and view their society from this different space, out of the context of their space?

So we are not viewing their society in their terms, but in terms of our society, like in conventional documentaries, she's trying to fight against that, right?

I don't think Trinh T. Minh-ha tried to say the viewer should think a particular way but is asking us to situate ourselves as a spectator and be aware of what we bring to the viewing. I think the issue of race and gender is there. From the sound track of Reassemblage :

Filming in Africa means for many of us
Colorful images, naked breast women, exotic dances and fearful rites.
The unusual

First create needs, then, help
Ethnologists handle the camera the way they handle words
Recuperated collected preserved...(1992, p. 98)

She is making the film because she was working there but she was aware that her presence, experiencing that culture, was discrepant with ethnographic film she'd seen.

Two journal articles illustrate my understanding. The first is where Trinh T. Minh-ha (1990) questions the documentary film form in "Documentary Is/Not a Name". In fact, she says "there is no such thing"(p. 52). She discusses truth as meaning, categorization as theory, and, the validity of film as reality. She cites the duality of subject and object. The relation of the spectator to those "out there" is not considered as cultural appropriation for consumption, usually, by the film maker. This essay is a succinct discussion of the theoretical and technical aspects of film making and the resulting derivation of meaning. Although I admire her style of writing that includes references to literature and the use of metaphors used in other writing, this essay gives me a clearer understanding of her position as a film maker.

The second article which helped me to understand Trinh T. Minh-ha's work is by Brian Wallis (1988), "Questioning Documentary". He described the changing nature of what has been called documentary photography. As examples, he cites work by Trinh T. Minh-ha and four other photographers, also women, who employed strategies from the margins of dominance, such as, women's voices, domestic spaces and storytelling, all of which he called discourses on discourse. The representation is what has been called into question, labelling the documentary as cultural construction. Wallis summarized the concerns of Trinh T. Minh-ha's work and described the poetic form, with it's destabilization that forced the viewer to make their own meanings.

Why do you want to show this film to students?

In terms of teaching and as a person from the Western privileged world, I need to ask myself what are the considerations I need to address in viewing art from other cultures? How do I look at art in terms of what the artist intended or how do I get outside my cultural bias'?

Films are one kind of art, an art form, although not all films are pieces of art. The work viewed as part of this study was one of Trinh T. Minh-ha's early films. She taught in North Africa for three years and then returned to shoot the film which she completed in 1982. Trinh T. Minh-ha has made a number of films, all non-fiction except the most recent, a narrative feature. All her films are difficult to categorize and Reassemblage was no exception. She used what seems to be a documentary film form but developed it to become non-linear and lyrical in style. She has, through her writing and her films, developed a critique of the overwhelmingly Euro-centric ways of perceiving culture that the West uses to dominate the rest of the world. (Said, 1978: p. 3) The way Trinh T. Minh-ha addressed issues of race and gender in her art, I find illustrative of these ideas. Film is particularly attractive for Canadian students, I believe, due to their exposure to television and film so continually that people are adapted to be responsive to the medium. This film confronts what people have been led to expect from film.

CHAPTER TWO

So, you think this film is appropriate to show to Art Education students?

Yes, I questioned my own ability to step outside my culture and put myself someone's cultural shoes, to see if I could appreciate the stance of another person, to understand their point of view, to see and hear what they are saying. It is important not only to inform ourselves about art that is informed by diversity of cultures, but also, art that critiques the Euro-centric perspectives. In the present environment (Concordia University, Montreal), students often come from diverse cultures or their parents come from more than one culture. I asked myself, how do students make sense of who they are and what they have come from? As Carol Tizzano has pointed out in her Master Thesis, which used audience response to a TV movie showing African American women as powerful role models, this could be an illustration of how in Art Education we could design curricula that is more multicultural. As she states, many Art Educators have supported (Nadaner, 1981; Neperud, 1969; Masterman 1983) a much more inclusive curricula. Her study concluded that "In addition to improving cultural understanding among participants...could assist in developing multicultural curriculum content and teaching strategies." (1990, p.123)

It was with some of the same ideas as Tizzano that I wanted to interview Art Education students. The purpose of the group interview was to develop a research

question that would explore how students respond to art work by artists from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds. The goal of this research was:

1. to develop ideas about teaching methods that address multi-cultural issues;
2. to explore the impact of gender, culture, and race issues within teaching practice.

I wanted to learn more about the issues that inform responses and discussion of art emanating from cross-cultural and multicultural interfaces. I was also interested in developing strategies for raising students' awareness of ideas of representation which comment on and highlight the impact of Euro-centric culture in a multi-cultural world. Because I was interested in exploring student responses to an art work that raised issues (such as: images of women's bodies, representations of culture, reality, ethno-centricity), I chose the film Reassemblage by Trinh T. Minh-Ha, because both its form and content offered a way of discussing racial and ethnic difference as it applies to art practice. My interest in Trinh T. Minh-Ha stemmed from the fact that she is an artist and film maker whose work explores many of the concepts I am interested in: narrative, identity and culture, post-colonialism and feminism. In this group interview, I wanted to study if students, after viewing one of Trinh T. Minh-ha's films, would respond to these issues and discuss them in the interview session. I thought this would give me some understanding of how students react to representations of African culture through a film constructed to "challenge...the imposition of well defined boundaries". (Trinh T. Minh-ha, 1992, p.162)

Keeping in mind what I wished to elicit from the students, the question informing my intentions for the group interview was - "Does prior knowledge of an artist's identity direct how an audience responds to a film or art work?" - changed to a more explicit question: "What insights can be gained from viewing works by artists from different racial/cultural backgrounds in an art class?"

Who participated in the group interview, where it was conducted and what was the data you collected?

The group consisted of nine university students, all of whom were in Art Education or in Studio Arts, therefore they had a common educational level which Vaughan advised is important when conducting a planned discussion. (1996, p. 53) In order to elicit a range of perceptions, Merriam (1988), suggests the environment be a non-threatening, relaxed forum for giving responses on the questions related to the topic. As I was the students Teaching Assistant, in a two-semester course and I had developed a level of trust. The group interview was audio taped in a small projection room immediately after viewing the film. We gathered around a table, munching on chocolate chip cookies I had brought. Comfort foods like this create an informal atmosphere conducive to discussion. The students responded with enthusiasm. I was able to elicit detailed analyses of their perceptions. The group interview and analysis is included as part of this study.

Did you find, from your group interview for your thesis, that most of the students were open to the sort of inquiry that you yourself were undergoing?

The students did respond in a critical way both in terms of what the artist was critical of and in eliciting an examination of themselves as well.

I chose the group interview technique to use as a research tool to inform my thesis. This was after I had found the means to design the interview for my needs. My research on interviewing began with Bell, who described the focused interview, as opposed to the unstructured type, as "a framework...established by selecting topics around which the interview is guided." (1992, p.72) I hoped to discover the ways that students respond to an experimental film in an art education context by using questions to elicit that information. The group interview design was also similar to a focus group. It consisted of a group of people, who had common characteristics, in this case, being studio art and art education students. They discussed, in a planned way, perceptions that related to my topic (Krueger, 1990, p.18). In the design of the interview, I utilized suggestions by Krueger, who stated that the environment should be a non-threatening relaxed forum for giving responses, ideas, comments on the questions related to the topic (1990, p.20).

In order elicit the group discussion, I designed the group interview from researching two methods, the focus group model, described by Krueger, and the case study research method by Merriam (1988).

I found that focus groups, derived from market research, were designed to provide qualitative data about attitudes, perceptions and opinions, which was exactly what I wanted. For my needs in the design of the interview, the focus group provided

a method to gain understanding from the discussion as opposed to testing a precise hypothesis.

The object of the questions was to provoke discussion among members of the group. (Vaughan, 1996) In designing questions, Merriam's case study research identified the following classifications of questions: 1, opinion; 2, feeling; 3, experience; 4, knowledge.

Developing Questions

1. "Opinion/value questions" are designed to learn what people think about the world (or a specific art object, film) and personal ideology or belief affects the response. (Merriam, 1988, p.78) For instance the question;

. Can you tell me about other films or ideas that this film reminds you of?,
was a good way of initiating the interview as it is often easier to solicit opinion through comparison. Two other questions for this type were:

- . Can you describe the aspect of the film you liked/found most interesting?
- . Can you describe a part of the film that you did not like or find interesting?

2. "Feeling questions" are designed to elicit and understand the emotional response of the respondent to their experiences and thoughts. (1988, p. 78) These questions were designed to solicit descriptions about the participants feelings during various moments of the film.

. Describe how you felt watching (whatever scene, action, sound) you liked in a section of the film.

- . Describe how you felt watching whatever scene you didn't like.

. When you felt these emotions, what was it about the film that made you feel that way?

3. "Experience/behaviour questions" evoke ideas of what it might be like to imagine being present in the film space.(1988, p. 78)

. Describe what might it like to be in (such a scene as related to the opinion questions)?

. Does the film relate to your own experiences in life?

4. "Knowledge questions" determine what information the participant has about the topic. (1988, p. 79) These questions were to find out if the participant has prior knowledge of; film/documentary aesthetics or theory, the location of the film, or the film maker.

. Can you describe where this film might have been shot?"

. Where do you think you might go to see this film?

. Have you any thoughts or ideas about the person who made this film?

Do you agree that your study has implications not only for Art Education but for the field of Multicultural Studies?

Multicultural studies sounds like a much larger area of study than I intended. In my study, I explore more fully the post colonial theory as relates to film, narrative, feminism and education.

This study is an inquiry I have used to see if by using a medium I am interested in, made by an artist I am interested in, could provoke students to discuss,

question, and be critical of themselves when viewing art from artists of diverse backgrounds, experiences and ethnicities. I asked the question whether this is a useful teaching tool for raising students' awareness of art made by people from other cultures. The students' response was a vehicle to provide me with a tool for a discussion of my understanding of how students reflect on the representations viewed constructed by an artist who critiques the ethno-centric bias of 'Western' audiences.

CHAPTER THREE

The Group Interview

1. Does this remind you of any other film you've seen or experiences you've had?

S. - I think we need a bit of time to reflect on it for a little while. I just find it's not a typical film, there's no conventional film techniques. It's like a structure of waves, they begin and end but there's no real beginning and no real ending and it's so reflective of film making and what we conceive of watching a film, what we expect it to be when we watch a film and it totally breaks all the conventions. I think it's really interesting but I have to think about it further.

2. Yes, I can understand that, but just gut level reactions, off the top of your head, it doesn't have to be in depth analysis but coming right out of it, how do you react?

S. - I just assume there is something missing in the sound track.

No there isn't.

N. - Was that the way she or he just wanted to do it? It just looked like a technical problem so it bothered me.

S. - I think that's what she's playing with.

Je. - Yes. Yes.

S. - Like I was saying earlier, it's not a conventional film. She's talking about how Western kind of society imposes certain structures on film making and how to see the African society. She talks about "copying reality meticulously" and speaking about the "discourse of images as eternal" like photography...

B. - I don't think she's necessarily saying it's Western, I think she's talking about her experience in going there and trying to be objective, whatever that means.

S. - But I'm talking about how we interpret it, not what she was doing but seeing film from a Western perspective, like N. was saying, well there's gaps in the sound track. I don't know about you but it gave me time to reflect on what she actually had to say.

Je. - Yes, yes.

S. - And it became photography, it was like a mixture of film making and photography.

B. - That's the cutting, don't you think?

S. - You're right.

B. - So many cuts, constantly, she could have planned it out to fill the other half, if she wanted...

J. - Even with the sound track, it came across as a poem, the whole thing was kind of like a poem.

3. What did you really like about the film and what did you really hate? I shouldn't put the two together like that...

J. - I liked the sound track.

4. What about it?

J. - It was so unusual and different from what you would expect from a documentary and I think that's what made it feel more like a poem.

G. - Do you watch " Au course autour de monde?" Every week they have movies from everywhere in the world, very often they talk about triboux (tribes) in Africa. Like when we saw the Akwnu... people for example, they talked about them their problems, so I saw that film as reportage, it made me think about " Au course autour de monde" they have a structure, research and interviews, things to say. It's really controlled. But they have the resources.

Na. - Maybe that's why I'm not surprised with the sound track, I like it, the way it works in the movie, you know with MT sound, the surprise thing. You know when you saw the monkey, suush, right there she changed fast to another subject.

S. - She talks about the abc's of photography even, there's a lot. I find she's constantly talking about film making, the dialogue. You were talking about other shows, the films I've seen on Senegal or African countries are, you know, a lot of women with breasts, maybe that's their cultures but it's always seen from an ethnographic point of view, from the outside looking in, never from the inside looking out. It's always trying to get these objective point of view's and I think she was playing with that.

Je. - Yes she was.

Na. - But it sort of gave the same effect.

5. When you said it reminded you of those shows... was that something you liked or didn't like?

G. - It reminded me of "Aux courses autour de monde" because I like those interviews, because the people going in those countries, most of the time it's their first time that they go to see those tribaux and they have a really naif (innocent) and open mind and they are free to show what they want, not something politique.

Na. - Something different. It's not like you are watching TV and see the same thing, and they all talk about the same thing.

G. - No, they are really free they don't have to focus on the strict...it's just that they have to construct it that's interesting.

6. But you were saying it not like that for you, S.?

Je. - Yes, I agree as well.

S. - I find that's interesting because it wasn't, like you were saying, G., it's not like a theme, it's not trying to prove a point. It,s like in all documentaries they have to have an objective, like the way we write essays or compositions, there's a certain... objective.

Na.- Yes but they have five minutes.

S. - Even when you write essays in school you are told to organize you ideas in a certain format that controls the way we read it, there's a certain format that makes it easier to read one essay after another if they are all using the same format.

G. - Let's say that somebody who's been there for a while... and decides to put all those things together and say something, as we have those films from when we

were a child and we put them together, we are simplifying at the same time, not in the documentation way but just as the fact that the person was there and that's what she saw.

J. - To me there's a lot of layers of meaning. On one level it's that and then there's all these other metaphors and...

7. So, what kind of metaphors, what do they mean for you?

J. - Like the carcass in the end, well, I'm not sure, I'd have to think about it more , whether it was really significant.

B. - I don't think it was at all actually. I thought it was really a visual thing, that what she was saying was interesting but not essential to any thing you saw.

G. - I agree with that.

S. - But you did see the carcasses there was also the foreboding fire, that was going to burn everything down.

B. - Yes I know, but I really can't believe she was trying to manipulate you with that.

S. - But I think it had to do with her film making objectives. I think she was filming what she saw and didn't want to control it or put it into a format. It's almost like what she felt is what we got. There was very little editing that went into it. Or it seems that way. There might have been a lot of editing.

Je. - I think there was.

C. - There was all those parts that were placed in, moving shots.

S. - Yes but it was almost an intuitive thing, it wasn't a thought thing, it was like poetry.

C. - It would keep flashing you back, it reminded me that this is going on as we sit here, this action, they would show the people working so hard and always smiling. How simple their life is but how happy they are just doing that and then I'm thinking I see the animal dead and it was disturbing but it was like was disturbing but it wasn't. Maybe they just let them sit and nourish the earth and its part of a cycle.

G. - You know what I thought when I saw those women working? They could find a way to construct a kind of machine.

C. - But that's the whole point of it all.

G. - But I thought, ok this is the way I think as a white people here, if they had a sort of machine they could spend more time with their child. Yes, then they're going to have this machine and then this... machine is going to happen and then...
Laughter.

C. - But here they are, the children are by their side.

S. - But you have to realize there's this camera person standing there in front of them so they are smiling.

N. - But they are always smiling. It's very realistic in a way.

S. - I've never been there.

N. - In a way under this smiling attitude they still have their unhappy things. If you asked them if they would like to have a mouline (grinder), something to grind

with, they would want one. Of course, because it's really, really hard to be a woman. She does the whole work, everything...

G. - They don't have time to take care of their kids.

N. - Take care of their kids, like play with them, but actually the kids are very happy there, they are very close to adults. Adult work in groups and kids work just beside them. I don't think it's as separate as what we have here.

G. - You're right.

N. - It's just different . I don't want to judge it.

8. What does it feel like for you having been there, to watch this?

N. - It's sort of nostalgic, things that I knew, maybe my reaction is different. There was a little excerpt in the film where she talks about the amoine(?), maybe she didn't use that word, but things that are exotic but once you've been there and been involved you see it differently.

9. What's different do you think? You've heard people's reaction, what's different?

N.- This would be hard to say, what is exactly different. I don't know. You know, it's like going back to your old street, and, you know, your house, you know it. I see it like something that I know, not totally. Sometimes I try the reverse situation what would it be like for somebody from a village to see a film. Probably they see an American film, they see this as exotic. Some people live like this but others just maybe 15 minutes away there is a village where there is a movie.

G. - I didn't know that.

N. - It's not as different as we think.

Na. - Maybe it's because all the time we see movies we never see African TV.

G. - It's just like we when we see a village that is very far from the city...

Na. - But always when I've seen the life of Africa I saw that.

C. - But it's just like people see Canada as like, igloos.

N. - But it's not the same thing because unless the villages are far, away from everything, just because they live far from everything else doesn't mean that they're not aware, they might have a funny idea (of here) of what it is but they have one.

S. - It's interesting when you talk about other countries see us as igloos and we see Africa as this. This is our representation of Africa. But they have cities that are bigger than Montreal. People that go there to make films want to take out what's ethnographic not what's the same.

Na. - It would be interesting if they did both views, cities and..., not to make a comparison, a mix or something.

N. - I think you would have the same comparison if you go to a village in Quebec, what is village life, what is urban life.

Na. - Are you sure? They have a car they have water, nothing change.

N. - You mean the comparisons are not as big?

Na. - Not at all, you've all the news, everything is the same, except in the village now and then you get a cow or something.

N. - Are you thinking of technology, or are you talking about mentality? But Montreal is not Quebec and Toronto is not Canada.

G. - But here since the last 30 years or maybe 40 has dramatically changed. My grandparents coming from the farm, with my mother and they were like twelve kids and they come in the cities and work in the usines (factories) and have a small space, like three rooms for twelve people. I'm just the next generation.

10. Are you making a comparison, between village life in Africa and a generation ago when families were more together, more tribal?

G. - Personally I don't feel so far away from that sort of living of my grandfather.

N. - I find that interesting because over there people think that the way we live now has always been like that. If you push it they don't necessarily assume that. But they say, you white people, you don't live close to your families or they started telling me about the structure of how we live, which is not always right, but, I'm telling them, just my Mum was living very similar to you guys, just my Mum, one generation. Then they changed their opinion about how they feel after because I'm telling them that the traditions that my Mum told me about, my Mum was from the village, so almost two generations, people from Montreal, you could say it's one generation, the difference, but my Mum is...

S. - If you think about what people from other cultures see of our, or North American society are American films, which is New York, and everybody elsewhere thinks that Canada, North America is one big city, as we see Africa as one big bunch of tribal communities which is not so but it's the impression that we get through film

making. It's how film making directs us to see or ethnographically plot out how we see different cultures.

J. - But she does that deliberately, I think, but on the other film she did on Vietnam, Shoot For The Contents, it's the same she doesn't show any cities...

S. - But there's a comment in that. She's also so much aware of what she's doing.

G. - Just as we are talking, I find something interesting that they do with the materiel (objects, things, material) you see their hair the way they have les peignes (combs), you see the way they build their houses, they have those bijoux (jewelry), everything around them is manual, they take it from the earth and then they transform it. Everything is built. This is something I really like and see all the time.

S. - It's like an artistic community. It's not a pretentious art. Everyone's an artist.

Na. - They take le materiel primaire and transform it and here you can't do that.

S. - Well, it's done for you. You don't think about it as much. I don't know, I guess this is what the film makes you think.

11. Can I just ask about more gut reactions, anybody have any strong emotional reactions to any parts of the film?

C. - I did. Here this is going on right now, this contrast. Two parts that really struck me. One where they showed, I don't know, the albino, I think. Is that how it is?

B. - A real albino.

S. - A black and a white.

B. - It was so red.

S. - Yes I could see, he was really red, but I thought he was out in the sun a lot.

Na.- Oh, yes I see, no pigment.

C. - Anyway, they showed they focused on this and then the shot of the dark skin and then they showed these trees, out of focus and then all of a sudden this older kid popped up with the same (pigment). It was just so strange how she filmed that, your eyes were sort of, then bang there it is again. And then another part was a little baby carried around, the little Americanized doll, the Cupie doll, it's like an American symbol almost. I was wondering how that fit in. It's almost like The Gods Must Be Crazy, or something. How did that get there? Then they said later that the American tourists would come and give them candies. I thought what was that like for them to have...

G. - When I saw that kid with the doll, I thought that he cried and that doll is not enough to make him smile. You see the bonhomme (little boy) crying with the doll.

S. - To me it wasn't, like normally when you see those kind of pictures it's directed for you to see oh, poor little kid, look at the doll, it's really emphasized and glorified. In this context it was totally downplayed. It's like she was looking at the kid who was crying and he just happened to have a doll.

N.- I'm not sure I saw it like that just because I see it as reality.

C. - That's how I see it too.

S. - But it wasn't focused, you know glorified, the way we see Oxfam, suffering children.

12. What was that feeling, C., can you describe what made you feel that way?

C. - For me it seems, that they really are happy, I mean everybody gets sad but there's just such a sense of community and it's so basic.

13. So, you felt an affinity or closeness or a...envy?

C. - Yes, almost like an envy or a sense of loss in this society where it's just so strange the comparison and that's very basic and very simple and they've kept that very simple all throughout and that little doll showed a little bit of American culture coming in but the baby was still very close to the mother. The children were very close to the mother. Then they talked about the different views on men in that society. The last question was, "Do you have a husband all to yourself?"

G. - It's funny that people mention how close the children were to their mother, it's an indice (indication) for us that something seems to be, we see a kid with his mother and we say, oh, kid close with the Mum, stay with the Mum, does it mean that we don't have this particular thing, different from our culture?

C. - No, no, in general nowadays kids are just put in their daycare and their parents are home at 7 at night and their parents are just..., it's reality.

N. - From what I saw the biggest difference was not necessarily the time and the care and the love, because I think people love their kids here. Over there they are beaten a lot, you know, these kids, so they're not always...

C. - No, I don't want to get into a discussion about that.

N. - But the difference is the body, they are always close to the body, so even if the mother is preoccupied or whatever she still has the baby close to the body where we tend, Mummy's not feeling good, we tend to a little bit separate people from our body if we are not really into it. But there the Mother can be mad, pissed off with the kid but still she's going to carry the kid on her back. So it makes people more mellow because there's no distinction with I want to love you and I have time now or I do not have time leave me in peace. I think we have more borders between when we have time and when we don't.

G. - She's right.

Na. - We always see the woman with the child. Where's the men? We always see the children with the woman. Generally, here they are together with the father. I didn't see one time the men with the...

S. - But the men weren't even in the picture. The film was very directed towards that society and the men were just, they were in the background they were really not important there. Kids were important but when they got older they were just accessories.

G. When I remembered seeing the men, they were praying or smoking, but not working.

Na. - I saw one man working but it's a different culture and they have something else, like we have something else.

N. - They're just segregated. Men work on one side and women work on another.

C.- They didn't show it. We have no idea what...

Na. - I know it's focused on women but still, never one man there. But here if you tried to film only women you would have men across there, it's not bad it's just...

B.- I just saw that as, once again, what her position in it was that she was a woman and much more interested in hanging out with the women. What you said about it being really simple? I think in a way the film makes it seem simple because you just see them doing these repetitive acts which are almost mesmerizing and you can concentrate on what she says. But what she says really doesn't tell you anything about them as people at all.

14. How did you feel about that, B.?

B. - Personally I have a big problem with documentary and objective stuff because I not sure I believe anyone can be objective. So I liked it but I really saw it as a visual thing. I didn't feel like, it's the sort of film where you are given these nice images and you can look at them and then because there's nothing else going on you can really think about what she says. But what she says isn't much, she just kind of hints at things.

S. - But I think that's good.

B. - I'm not saying it's bad.

S. - But most of the documentary I've seen , sponsored by National Geographic, they direct you how to see. What she's talking about is creativity and of creativity.

B. - And it reflects on her which is better because that's all she can talk about anyway, really.

S. - Exactly, that's what I like about it. She's very much aware that she's a film maker and this is her perspective and you know that throughout the whole film. It's not like this is an objective representation. But she doesn't tell you much and I think the part I like are...

J. - On another level she was just using that format of the documentary expressing other things like poetry, the little comments and things and the way the sound track was done...

S.- So, you're saying it could have been Israel or anywhere.

J. - No, I'm not saying it was about Israel, it was about that whole thing that was a metaphor for something on a deeper level.

15. I think this might relate to what you are saying in a way, if you were to put yourself in this film, who would you be, where would you be, what would you be doing?

J. - Yes, I could pretty easily, in fact my gut reaction was something like what C. was saying, wanting to be there, the primitive, the music the drum beats and the

women with their breasts bare. Kind of like you were saying a longing in a sense of loss for a pre- technological...

Na. - But we can't change anything, it's her perception, if I be there it maybe totally different.

C. - But that's the point, to show us to make us think.

B. - But that's what I've been trying to say, I don't get any of that, I don't reflect at all because I really think it's her.

16. Is that a separation for you, B.? So you really can't imagine yourself there?

G. - The reason why we can't imagine ourselves being there is that you saw the image, you really saw that there was a distance like between her and the image, it's not as if she was there with them. Like in some films we see that the people there have a relationship with those around, you see that they know each other, exchanges, they've been talking and something happen with them together.

17. So, you're saying that it would have helped you to see what the film maker's relationship with the people was?

N. - Maybe, yes.

S. - We are used to documentaries where you hear the people speak and it's subtitled, we know what they are saying they speak but we don't understand a word they say and if you were there you would'nt understand a word they say either.

J. - That whole scene where she had a bit of sound track there in a language then repeated ..

S. - There was just a little bit there, we don't know what they were saying.

G. - I would like to know nnnnnnnnnnn, what is that!

S. - But that would direct you.

G. - No, but direct me but why do I have to strain ears for what I hear, it's human language?

S. - But if it's translated is that exactly what they're saying?

G. - No, just an idea about what they are saying.

Na. - Maybe they talk about...

G. - I really feel there was the image, the wall, the viewer.

S. - But if you were there in person you wouldn't be able to speak to these people either, they would speak in a different language than you.

Na. - But maybe I try to speak with them. Like before when I didn't speak English, or in Colombia I didn't speak Spanish but I would say un minito (just a minute), and I tried so much, I speak , I do everything I can to understand them. Maybe it's in me. When I go somewhere I can just try. I don't want there to be a big difference between them and me. I'm in another country, don't look at my colour, I'm human.

G. - Still we can talk with people. I spend all day long with people who don't speak the same language and I finally get to say something and we understand each other in a really short time. It's surprising how much you can get to understand someone even if you don't speak the same language, amazingly surprising.

B. - To me this is always the conversation we get into when we talk about documentaries, there's almost no point in having it, because it all comes down to the same thing, which is, she could have done that...

Na. - But it's her point of view.

B. - But even someone who did it it's, still in front of the cameras, it's still a tape recorder, all these things filtering.

S. - But she also talks about film making as an ethnographer so if she goes into another culture and she looks at it from her point of view which she's constantly...

B. - I think it's a good approach, I like it.

18. But for you Na., you were saying you were frustrated?

Na. - Not frustrated, but curious about what they were saying.

19. But a certain barrier for you?

G. - To push farther...

Na. - In English she had an accent. But with the image I caught a lot, I have the habitude (habit) to not understand.

20. Where do you think this film might be shown?

S. - Well, anywhere, festivals.

21. Why do you say festivals?

S. - People would get very irritated if they saw it on TV.

G. - You think so?

B. - Because it's too experimental.

J. - Experimental, at an art show, art gallery.

Na. - Maybe it's experimental, but for me I liked, because you know the professional things are, you know on the TV is always the same thing, this is something different, maybe it's me but I like different things...

C. - It's for the general people, they just want to sit there.

22. Do you think it would go on TV?

G. - Why not?

S. - I think it would be good if it was on TV.

Na. - You know the time, I look at this thing? Back from work it's five o'clock in the morning, I sit and look at all the reportage, I love that, woops, it's seven o'clock.

G. - Instead of those series.

Na. - Yes, no complication, after that you question yourself.

23. Do you have any ideas about the film maker?

B. - She's must have had an artist's background.

C. - The formal aspects of the way it was shot.

Na. - Because she wants to make something different. Play with...

G. - ...images?

24. You look doubtful, G., what?

G. - First I didn't understand everything she said, because I don't understand English very well, second I keep my first idea, there was somebody, maybe a

woman,...around, she seems to be interesting about the travelling she did, she's been in the place for a while...

25. Do you think it's a woman because of the voice over?

G. - Yes and also because she also filmed a lot of women and talk about women and at the same time for me she was like, you have her, us, and what we see and it's like something away. I don't feel it was like somebody was there and getting through the culture, really like...

B. - She's probably not white, with a name like that. Is she Vietnamese?
Yes.

C. - I was thinking about it, but I wasn't...

G. - It was more interesting about the image than what she said.

S. - It's more interesting the camera angles, because we are so used to looking at documentary made by men they are usually higher...

26. Do you have some idea about the film maker because of that?

Na. - She's small.

S. - But it gave a bit more intimacy, you're not looking down at people you're looking slightly up.

C. - Yes it was very intimate.

J. That's why I felt drawn into it. I felt she wasn't there, except when she spoke she wasn't there much, I felt drawn the visuals, like the way it was intimate, the close-ups..

B. - The way they look into the camera.

S. She talks about "the circle of looks" and there's lots of circular camera movement, going around and talks about...

C. - Going around, yes, very pleasing.

27. Would you have wanted to know something about the film maker before seeing this film?

B. - No.

G. - No, no, because for letting us free to...

Na. - ...Open minds, I came late and I thought you had ...

G. - Some films need that because you are shocked or unhappy about things you don't understand, but in this way when you can see the movie without information it's good, personally I don't feel like something don't work because I don't know or don't understand something.

N. - Did anyone mention the breasts? It bothered me, so they don't have a T-shirt on, so what? You keep showing tits, you know, show it like you show a head, a back, but when you show it more than anything else, you can get away with it if you are a woman but if you are a man, oh my God!

G. - I felt that too, it was too much.

S. - She was talking about that, what we see of African culture, we see women without shirts on..

G. - It's a very long time that people see it's not oooh...

S. - But it was overbearing and I think she wanted it to be like that, she wanted us to think it's enough now, it's intentional.

B. - There were other things that were repetitious

S. - It annoyed me too, but I think that was good.

G. - Cliché.

A. - The tits was to make us aware of..

S. - She talked about it too. This is how Western society sees African society.

B. - Yes, she mentioned that.

S. - Then she showed a line of tits.

A. - In a lot of those anthropological films the people are like plants or animals, depicted in the same way as natural history films are, so the beauty of it is important, but this the colours are a bit odd and the film old looking. But the way she framed the shots it sort of broke that down a bit. Like when she went for the earrings, focusing on the beauty, so I thought that she was using film to represent people as if they were natural objects rather than human subjects, the idea that are these people or are they butterflies?

N. - But these people are butterflies, not to mean that I see them as like this but it's part of their culture to be very coquet (proud of their appearance), they love to show off these people, they just love it and for me it was just part of real Senegalese culture to show this woman with earrings, I just thought it very natural.

A. - I'm not talking about the coquettishness or the pride or the strutting, I'm talking like it emotes like natural history.

N. - I understand you, it's just that I have different layers of reaction to anthropological film. I only know Senegalese culture, even if I see film from Zaire I

don't know if it's all true or if it's not. Sometimes I notice that Western people are so used to the discourse of we don't want to be colonialists in our way of doing things, like how can they show them as cute people yet they want to show themselves that way.

A. - They're not showing themselves like that. In terms of what we see this isn't their everyday life this is a representation of their everyday life. What we see is Trinh T. Minh-ha's representation of them as they are represented by other ethnological film. In a way the subject is indifferent because it's much more about anthropological film than it is about Senegalese people.

G. - That's what I mean when I said still we had the viewer and the distance, we don't see her living with them, her experience of them, the relationship with them, we don't see them acting in an intimate way, as if they were in a bottle.

A. - I found it a very interesting strategy, made me very self conscious about those films, I think of National Geographic. S. - At first when I saw it I thought this was an artist who definitely did not go to film school, there was not sound at the beginning, I didn't really get her intent until later.

A. - I found it very unarty for an experimental film.

S. - I found it very arty.

A. - To me it had the self-conscious look of an amateur film maker, it reminded me of the film... made of his grandfather, the cutting right in the middle of, then stuck together, accidental, but of course it was self-conscious on her part.

G. - But do you think she put it together but really not controlled, but couldn't she do it carefully...

N. - Without it seeming like a technical mistake, you can say few works but why do you have to cut the sound,... change the structure...?

S. - You see it as an amateur who is there taking a document of what is going on not a film maker who is trying to direct you to see something.

B. - This is very controlled. She makes you question all that.

SEPARATE INTERVIEW WITH A STUDENT WHO HAD TO LEAVE JUST BEFORE GROUP INTERVIEW

28. What was your reaction to the film?

A. - I felt bored or disinterested. I had to work at viewing. I wasn't in anyway being seduced. I kept asking, is this what she had filmed or is it archival footage? I was becoming more and more analytical, from shot to shot, I wanted to know exactly what was happening. My fantasy was she went to Africa and filmed it herself. Then I thought she chose the footage. Then I thought, she's playing with my perceptions by reorganizing it, I started to see the manipulation. I wanted it to be an art work about Africa: I wanted to see Africa. I thought she was making anti-aesthetic decisions so that we would react to it negatively. We create our own reality. How that is done is created by the seduction of narrative and the beauty of images. This was an de-aestheticized experience, rough, fragmented, hard to hear, incoherent, fuzzy,

repetitive. She refused to be omnipotent. I think she's more of a philosopher than a film maker.

29. Did you relate to this film?

A. - When I was travelling in Nepal, I felt more and more isolated. I felt the impenetrable complexity of cultures and became very aware of my own prejudices, bias' and assumptions that I have and take for granted, especially about Africa. At first I didn't question what I saw, then I felt ashamed or embarrassed about my prejudices, not against people but for how I felt about Africa, exotic, bare breasted, pots on head. Actually I was born in Africa, Ethiopia, and have pictures of me as a baby being held by an African woman. I felt bad, ashamed, but I thought it was self righteous of Trinh T. Minh-ha to make me feel this way.

30. Where would you see her film being shown?

A. - To a very limited audience. Only intellectuals, in a university situation probably.

31. Would you have wanted to know about the film and the film maker in advance?

A. - It would have helped me to know something about her because there was so much going on. I wanted to know what she was trying to say. It would have been good to know the techniques she used, otherwise, it just becomes too frustrating. She's true, though, she doesn't pander to people.

CHAPTER FOUR

Analysis of Group Interview of Art Education Students

I tape-recorded, and later transcribed the group interview. In the transcript, I refer to the participants by the first initial of their first names. This method has been adhered to in the following analysis.

Following Bell's method of categorizing data and building on the initial interview questions, I identified three themes and used them to analyze the responses gathered from the group interview. The themes were: one, the meaning of the film and its resonance for the viewer; two, the audience awareness of the relationship of the film form to its content as they perceive it to be; three, the relationship of the audience response to issues and representations of race, gender and cultural difference.

After sorting through the interview according to the categories, I found the students had wonderfully diverse responses and ways of expressing themselves. I felt as if I had documented an important event due to the detail and insightfulness they demonstrated by their discussion in answering the questions. I have discussed the specific answers under headings suggested by the categories used to

sort out the interview for analysis.

Audience Awareness

In the midst of the students' responses to the film their ideas regarding the films' meaning as well as it's resonance, that is, their own perceptions of it, emerged. For example, J. found many layers of meaning and thought metaphorically about the images in the film, "like the carcass in the end...I'd have to think about whether it was really significant". B. then responded with her interpretation: "I thought it was a really visual thing, that what she was saying [as part of the sound track] was interesting but not essential to anything you saw." While agreeing with B.'s reading of the film as being composed for visual effect, S. reacted emotionally to the juxtaposition of the images such as the carcasses and "the foreboding fire, that was going to burn everything down" by injecting her own sense of meaning about what was possibly happening.

Although the students could draw certain parallels between Africa and Canada, such as the shift from rural to urban life, they also realized that rural and urban life here in Canada are not all that different from each other. As G. said:

But here since the last 30 years or maybe 40 has dramatically changed. My grandparents coming from the farm, with my mother and they were like twelve kids and they come in the cities and work in the usines (factories) and have a small space, like three rooms for twelve people. I'm just the next generation...I don't feel so far away from that sort of living of my grandfather.

In addition, the students construed meaning by talking about the African setting, using their own past as a reference point. "They have a car, they have water...except in the village you get a cow or something." Obviously village life and urban life here

in the present do not differ widely, in terms of living conditions, whereas in Africa we don't know about their living conditions. These comments were made during a discussion of peoples' assumptions based on what they saw. For example, images of Africa shown in Canada often show aspects of village life, small groups of people, slow pace of life, but one student remarked there are cities in Africa bigger than Montreal. A student who had lived in Senegal commented on the reverse situation where Africans she met had believed that North Americans have always lived at the present level of technology and urbanization. Indeed, she also commented that they did not perceive that we, in the West, had any positive attachments to family life. This perhaps based on the images and narratives they had been exposed to. Viewing the film elicited these comparisons and others based on the critique of the ethnographic documentary form as perceived by the students as they discussed this film.

The students noticed that, in the film, bare breasts were a recurring visual motif. This annoyed some of the viewers who contended that, because the film maker was a woman, she could get away with it; had the film maker been male, he would have been criticised for focusing on breasts. Other students, although irritated by the persistent use of the breast motif, thought that the film maker was trying to make the point that ethnographic films reinforce stereotypes about 'the other'. Still others detected in this the film maker's deliberate strategy to present people as objects to be viewed as if in a zoo or other forms of wildlife, which was thought to be part of the

critique offered by the film to provoke comparisons to ethnographic or documentary film form.

Relationship of Form To Content

In responses to questions the students identified many techniques used by the film maker to communicate her ideas. Some thought the gaps in the sound track were mistakes, while others welcomed these as a pause for reflection. A comment was made about the fragmented sound track, which included sounds of insects, African people speaking, wind, drums, poetry and dialogue spoken by Trinh T. Minh-ha: "She's talking about how Western kind of society imposes certain structures on film making and how to see the African society. She talks about 'copying reality meticulously' and speaking about the 'discourse of images as eternal' like photography".

The editing was also a point of discussion. One student thought perhaps the film was very intuitively made, with little or no editing. However, upon hearing other students comment on the number of cuts there were in the film, she revised her opinion. She realized, when another students said, "so many cuts", that the film maker had chosen abrupt cuts, juxtapositions, jump cuts (where the action abruptly changed to another point in time), which drew attention to the construction of the film. Another student noted that there were "all those parts placed in, moving shots" that emphasized the editing. By employing this disjointed style, Trinh T. Minh-ha suggests, that the viewer question whether non-fiction films present objective reality, or merely construct their own versions of reality.

"Even with the sound track it comes across as a poem, the whole thing was" a student commented, giving her impression of the form of the film. Another student said that the film maker used the documentary form to be expressive in a poetic way. The techniques, used by the film maker, noticed by the students, were the circular movements of the camera which emphasized the roundness of the houses and the low camera angle which was thought to give a feeling of intimacy and might have indicated the small stature of the film maker. The odd colours and the framing, broke down the beauty of the images which caused the viewer to question rather than merely enjoy the images.

In a lot of those anthropological films the people are like plants or animals, depicted in the same way as natural history films are, so the beauty of it is important, but the colours are a bit odd and the film old looking. But the way she framed the shots it sort of broke that down a bit. Like when she went for the earrings focusing on the beauty, so I thought that she was using film to represent people as if they were natural objects rather than human subjects, the idea that, are these people or are they butterflies?

In describing her perception of the film's form, G. said: "I really feel there was the image, the wall, the viewer." G. later elaborated: "we had the viewer and the distance, we don't see her (the film maker) living with them, her experience of them, the relationship with them, we don't see them acting in an intimate way, [it is] as if they were in a bottle." This statement describes the student's impression of being kept at a distance because of the disjunctive nature of the film's form, not only the film's way of getting across meaning or demonstrating it by way of the form but also the impact on the student. One person thought she could identify the film maker's purpose and technique:

I started to see the manipulation...I thought she was making anti-aesthetic decisions so that we would react...negatively...This was a de-aestheticised experience, rough, fragmented, hard to hear, incoherent, fuzzy, repetitive.

This observation indicates an awareness of the consciousness of the style of the film.

The ambiguous quality of the soundtrack, which was disjointed, and unclear, led the viewer to question the film maker's intention, which was not explicit.

Another group-member was annoyed by the soundtrack's lack of clarity. This frustrated yet another student, who felt that it impeded her ability to penetrate beneath the surface image to gain real understanding of the cultural contexts presented in the film. As she explained it, whenever she met people of a different racial and cultural, background, she tried to get them to understand her: "don't look at my colour, I'm human." Conversely, it was the least she could do, she felt, to understand them as real people. The ambiguity of the film also serves to raise questions in the viewer's mind of the impact of the power of one culture on another. That the intent was not necessarily explicit was further reinforced by another student, who wondered out loud about the pervasive intrusion of American culture after viewing the film's image of an African child with a pink doll. Another member of the group took an entirely different tack, commenting that the hypersensitivity of liberal western discourse, might actually distort the way Senegalese people might want to represent themselves.

A concrete summary of the understanding the students reached is illustrated by the following quote:

I have a big problem with documentary and objective stuff because I am not sure I believe anyone can be objective. So I liked it but I really saw it as a visual thing. I didn't feel like it's the sort of film where you are given these nice images and you can look at them and then because there is nothing else

going on you can really think about what she says. But what she says isn't much, she just kind of hints at things.

When the last student was interviewed singly, having not had the benefit of the group experience, she was more frustrated with the ambiguity of Trinh T. Minh-ha's style and stated that she would have welcomed background on the film maker. However, the student ended by saying in an admiring tone of voice "she doesn't pander to people."

Issues of Race, Gender and Culture

The students' responses indicated that they were attracted to the film's images and interpreted them in a variety of ways. The film's technique, discontinuous and disjointed, gave an ambiguous impression from which many different meanings were derived. These were raised and discussed by the students.

The group's discussion of their reactions to the film can be separated into three areas: race, gender and culture.

One student commented on the "impenetrable complexity of cultures" which counters the prevalent impression one receives from documentaries that purport to be a window on a society. Here, a major paradox of the ethnographic film - that it seeks to present 'objective' reality, while, in actual fact, presenting only the film makers particular vision of that reality - was highlighted.

In discussing film's impact in terms of viewing other cultures, one student came to the point where "you question yourself". Awareness of the constructed nature of difference came up during discussion of the perceptions of cultures. For instance, many people in the group were unaware that many Africans, even in

villages, had access to films and television; in correcting this misperception we were fortunate to be informed by a student (not of African heritage) who had lived in Senegal, mentioned earlier, she was also able to relate how Africans can have faulty judgements about North America based also on representations they have seen.

Thus, judgements can be easily made based on what can be seen; smiling for the camera, is it coquettishness, is it happiness, or is it representative of a piece of time which does not deny other times of pain and suffering? All these constructions were talked about in the group. A discussion occurred when a comparison had been made describing the people having been filmed as if beautiful butterflies, that is, represented in a fashion similar to that in natural history films. The Senegalese people "love to show off...they want to show themselves this way", was the judgement of the student who had lived in Senegal. As with all images, particularly film, which gives a greater illusion of reality than many forms of images, developing critical awareness by students about the implications of representation can be done by approaching the analysis from many directions.

In terms of gender, many observations were made by the students about the film. The repetitive manual labour of the women was noticed and confirmed by the student who had been in Senegal. One student speculated about inventing a machine to perform repetitive tasks so that the women in the film could spend more time with their children and then commented that was the way she, as a white person, was thinking. In fact it seemed from what was shown in the film, as was pointed out by students in the group, in Africa, children are with their parents most of the time and

very close to their mother's body when young. The student who had lived in Senegal said that, although child rearing practices are not necessarily ideal in Africa, she admired the body closeness in relation to mother-child behaviour here.

The students noticed that there were hardly any men depicted in the film. Certain judgements surfaced about men not working or not considered important by the film maker until it was remarked that the society was segregated along gender lines, but that this was not discussed in the film. Thus, omissions and repetitions had a function which the students accessed, through group discussion. Accenting how non-Africans see African society through representations is the example of one student's realization who:

...became very aware of my own prejudices, bias and assumptions that I have and take for granted, especially about Africa. At first, I didn't question what I saw, then I felt ashamed or embarrassed about my prejudices, not against people but for how I felt about Africa, exotic, bare breasted, pots on heads. Actually, I was born in Africa, Ethiopia, and have pictures of myself being held by an African woman. I felt bad, ashamed, but I thought it was self righteous of Trinh T. Minh-ha to make me feel this way.

Awareness of attitudes of racial difference surfaced in a variety of ways in discussion about the film and the intentions of Trinh T. Minh-ha. For instance, a student was shocked at the image of the albino African child and a doll a child was carrying which was pink in colour. This led another student to observe

normally when you see those kind of pictures it's directed for you to see, poor little kid, look at the doll, it's emphasized and glorified. In this context it is totally down played. It's like she was looking at a kid who was crying and he just happened to have a doll.

Elements of romantic idealization were indicated by two of the students, who exoticised what they perceived to be the lifestyle the film depicted. One of them

wanted "to be there, the primitive, the music the drum beat and the women with their breasts bare...a longing for the pre-technological." This is an attitude where one group thinks of another group as exotic and thereby makes a distinction of difference.(Said, 1978) Other students commented that they were attracted to the unusual, the handmade, houses and jewelry, which could be romanticising the labour-intensive life of the people filmed. The student who had lived in Senegal observed that we in the West tend to view the handmade as artistic. She said the women there would love to have a machine to cut down on the continual work they must do to prepare food. It is not racist to admire a certain lifestyle in a romantic framework, but a less idolizing attitude was injected when a student said "If you asked them...something to grind with, they would want one...it's really, really hard to be a woman. She does the whole work".

Finally, I when looking at the interview itself, I asked how did the questions work? What might I have done to improve the experience?

Reflections On The Process

Most of the questions followed the format I planned in advance. I followed this somewhat rigidly, not taking the chance to follow the lead of the discussion or to probe a point further when the opportunity presented itself. The time constraint of an hour and a half, due to the space restrictions, was a factor in my desire to conform to the pre-planned questions. One third of the questions were asked to clarify something in the discussion. Occasionally the question I asked did not follow accurately or gauge the direction of the discussion. For instance question sixteen, "Is that a separation for

you B.? So you really can't imagine yourself there?", appeared to stop the student rather than provoke further thought. Question nine, "What's different do you think? You've heard people's reaction, what's different?", seemed to be a leading question rather than summing up what a student had said, although my intention had been to clarify. Question twenty-four, about prior knowledge of the film maker, did not seem really necessary by the end of the interview. I wished I had asked the students to write for ten minutes, their impressions and thoughts, about what their perceptions of the film and whether it would influence the way they saw, made or taught art.

Summary of Group Interview

My purpose in doing this interview was to gain insights into the ways students respond to art which is critical of Euro-centric views of art. The students responded, interpreted and evaluated both the form and the meaning of the film. By analyzing the structure and content they discussed their perception of the intention of the artist and the impact of the film on them. The discussion was varied: critical, analytical, questioning, comparative and descriptive. The student's art background was evident and informed the depth and breath of their responses both in a sensual and intellectual way.

There were various kinds of reactions to the film and to the perceived intentions of the film maker: responses to the visual and auditory information showed two trends. The sensual response, one, analyzed what was seen and heard and projected their feelings and experiences to construct meanings or connections. Others watched and listened carefully and applied frameworks to make a textual analysis,

and, two, attempted to grasp what the film maker was trying to say. Occasionally a student responded to the sensory input by having emotional reactions and then thoughtfully made meanings. The film was also placed by students as part of a theoretical debate which demonstrated the participants understanding of the many levels of meaning that can be constructed when analyzing a film. The wide ranging discussion raised many issues of what we see when viewing multi-cultural art. This is evidence that a group discussion can stimulate thinking and new insights about the artwork for the group participants.

The levels of meaning raised by viewing the film and discussing their responses to it, indicates ways this kind of technique might generate exploration of multicultural issues through the art work as a motivation tool. Cross cultural art challenges art education students to enter in to an exploration of an artist's world view even if the perspective is quite different to their own. This can expand ways of responding to art work different from, or critical of, Euro-centric ideas about art. This is important because so many of today's art courses have students from diverse ethnicities. Possibly, presentation of readings by and about artists from culturally diverse backgrounds would widen student understanding further. I have yet to explore this strategy. By this I do not mean simply exposure to 'ethnic art', a little bit of art produced by First Nations, Inuit, South American, African or Asian artists, but discussion that attempts to identify and confront our own cultural bias'.

While this project was very useful in identifying possible strategies that address issues of race, culture and gender in responding to art, I would do some

things differently in the future. Although in general the responses to the open-ended questions elicited replies where the students summarized aspects of their experience of viewing the film, I think I could have followed the direction of the participants to deepen my understanding of what they were thinking. In a group situation there is the personal response and then there are developed those in reaction to what other members have said, this can make a stimulating context for eliciting attitudes and beliefs, if the group animator is skilled. Knowing just when to intervene with the appropriate question and when to let the discussion percolate is a skill. This is a subtle process in which it is possible to gain an understanding of a wider range of attitudes, values and perceptions of art education students from many racial and ethnic backgrounds. In conclusion, this group interview offered me to ways of initiating of initiating discussion about issues of difference in art. It offered me a platform from which to explore my own process of awareness of my ethno-centric bias in order to work toward furthering diversity in artistic practice and in culture.

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