9-2017

Trinh Minh-ha's Tale of Love: A Narrative of Resistance

Aparajita Nanda
Santa Clara University, ananda1@scu.edu

Recommended Citation

Nanda, A. (2017). Trinh Minh-ha's Tale of Love: A Narrative of Resistance. In L. Youssef & E. Golson (Eds), Recontextualizing Resistance (pp. 287-294). Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

TRINH MINH-HA'S *A TALE OF LOVE*: A NARRATIVE OF RESISTANCE

APARAJITA NANDA
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY
AND SANTA CLARA UNIVERSITY

Trinh T. Minh-ha's film *A Tale of Love* is loosely based on the nineteenth-century Vietnamese national poem of love, *The Tale of Kieu*, which recounts the life of a woman named Kieu who sacrifices her virtue and prostitutes herself to sustain her family. The filmmaker re-envisions this story in the immigrant reality of the United States, where the modern-day Kieu, engaged in researching and writing about the impact of her poetic predecessor on the Vietnamese diaspora, struggles for her own survival. She supplements her income as a freelance writer by working as a sex worker and a part-time model for a photographer, Alikan. In her capacity as a researcher, Kieu interacts with Juliet, the editor of a women's magazine. *A Tale of Love* is a film about the journey of a woman in love with the concept of love. Trinh is quick to point out the problematic nature of the terms "tale" and "love" as she presents them in her film. For her, the "tale" of Kieu is not a simple reiteration of the story of the ancestral Kieu but a fabrication—a created artefact that in its subject matter, love, has the capacity to "activate things … [and] in their radical ability … yield a multiplicity of readings" (Zournazi 1999, 256). This essay builds on Trinh's definitions by going back to the etymological root of "love" in the English language, which is derived from the Germanic forms of the Sanskrit *lubh* (broadly translated as "desire") (Moseley 2014). I argue that the rather broad possibilities opened up in translation destabilize the term, releasing it from traditional definitions to embrace different possibilities of meaning. In the film's intricate exploration of passion, the politics of the poetics of love becomes visible through various sites of resistance and contextual discourses, such as the use of colour, movement, and space; the

use of iconic symbols such as the gaze and the veil; the state of being blindfolded; the implications of perfumes; and the performative value of dance sequences.

Rich vibrant shades of red, yellow, blue, and green are used throughout the film, marking the clothing, the lighting, and the *mise-en-scène*. The film opens with a visual trope: a field of golden corn with a woman in red fleeing and searching at the same time. The exposition is interspersed by close-up images of the modern day Kieu, wearing a Vietnamese straw hat with flowing red cloth on either side. Three primary colours, yellow, blue and red, represent the three lovers Java, Minh, and Alikan, who are the three loves of the three Kieus: the modern Kieu, the protagonist of the epic poem, and an old woman who claims to be the original of the ancestral Kieu (Kelly 1998). The colour in the lighting is also affiliated to the different loves as Kieu steps in and out of them. Clearly, it is not one love story but a myriad looks at love created by the moving colours, lighting, or camera as it pans along. The constant sense of movement and flux that this method achieves not only contests a monolithic love story but in its precarious existence, creates a sense of resistance to any attempt to contain it within set parameters.

The discourse of resistance easily inhabits cinematic spaces as the narrative defies a simple, linear structure and evolves into an intricate network, where resistance stands written in spaces of dreamlike reality. By refusing to adhere to a single "love" story, the film narrative invites several entries and exits in setting up a fictional pastiche of multiplicity. The whole process involves an evolutionary mode premised on a deep-rooted interdependency, a tension, and a shared kinship between the three Kieus. This play of the modern-day Kieu's self-reflectivity and reflexivity draws on shifting zones of multiplicity and difference that gain resonance from the many Kieus that stretch to infinity, the continuum of shifting positionalities creating notions of agency. The structure naturally becomes conducive to the fluid, nonlinear space that Gwendolyn Foster (1997) calls the "character zone," which Kieu finds populated by reality, dreams, and memories going back to her childhood, transitioning back again to her present engagement through researching and writing about the ancestral Kieu. Both Foster and Trinh note that these flashbacks operate on multiple levels: scripting a bildungsroman, evoking associations with the ancestral Kieu, and staging a primal fantasy of mother-daughter recovery. In all, they bring back memories of freedom and home that also evoke a sense of innocence. Nostalgia and lost innocence play a critical role here, reinforced by the image of water that could be read as an agent of cleansing or absolution as the child Kieu sits near a body of flowing water

or the adolescent Kieu traverses through the rain with her lover. By weaving these tender, often pristine memories into her written narrative of the ancestral Kieu, the present-day researcher writes her resistance into a handed-down story of a sullied woman, a mere victim of patriarchal society.

Even as interpolated spaces rewrite a narrative of simple victimization, such exclusive "male" spaces as the public area of the road or an industrial setting, particularly at night time, are infiltrated and appropriated by the woman. Women traditionally belong indoors, limited to the domestic space that vouches for their daughterly or wifely innocence and/or chastity. Patriarchal society allows intermittent forays into the street, a public space, but usually lays a strict curfew—the woman needs to be home by early evening. The night belongs to prostitutes, women of loose morals who often stand alone as they solicit customers. In *A Tale of Love*, the modern-day Kieu walks alone at night in front of stripclubs with neon signs blazoning "Roaring 20s, Live Nude Girls." She affiliates herself with the sex workers and claims back womanly space as she rejects a helpless victimized status imposed by society upon prostitutes and the ancestral Kieu. Her defiant act of transgression takes on an added resonance of power as in another night scene (this time in an industrial setting) Kieu is seen talking to a man in a raincoat and a hat—his face virtually covered and therefore unrecognizable. It is only at the very end of the scene that we recognize the man as Alikan. By denying recognition of the "man," Kieu appropriates male space for resistive empowerment.

The play on the visual in the above example leaves a signature mark that skilfully incorporates Laura Mulvey's famous overturning of the "voyeuristic-scopophilic" male gaze (1975, 17). Alikan, the photographer Kieu works for, uses her as a commodity on display, a consumable spectacle to satisfy the visual hunger of the media culture. In his attempt to "look" at the woman Kieu, as he packages her for disposable sale, Alikan titillates his own sexual desire by touching her body and justifies his action with a quick rejoinder that after all, "a story of love is a story of voyeurism" (Minh-ha 1995, 99). The secret pleasure that Alikan derives is peremptorily brushed off by Kieu as she reminds him of the conditions of the contract that denies any physical touching. Any gendered discourse is again radically displaced when Kieu spies on Alikan and another model. In her instant claim of voyeuristic space, traditionally the arena reserved for the privileged gaze of Alikan, Kieu reverses the gendered dynamic to empower herself. As she looks at both Alikan and the model, she turns them into objects of speculation and becomes privy to their relationship without their knowledge. Building on this appropriative terrain, one could

cite a number of other examples of female voyeurs who further complicate the gender-line divide in the film.

The trope of voyeurism gains immediate potency as it moves beyond the simple binary juggling of empowered and disabled vision to include the literal and metaphorical politics of the veil, a surface that acts as a double bind in admitting a two-way gaze—one promising opacity and the other transparency. The metaphorical implications of the veil stretch back to the curtain that protectively encloses the sleeping beauty, Kieu, in one of the opening scenes of the film. With the advent of Kieu in the real world, the reiterative need of the veil becomes a charged phenomenon. Alikan insists on Kieu covering her head in order to hide her from the "public" male gaze and claim her as his own exclusive property—an object available to gratify his visual pleasure. And yet, simultaneously, the veil that drapes the woman allows a mysterious semi-exposure that tantalizes the male gaze of the consumer; after all, Alikan is a photographer who would sell the pictures. Either way, the veil becomes synonymous with a deliberate attempt to dispossess the woman of her agency. Nonetheless, the veil empowers Kieu. Although she covers herself with the veil and abides by the dictates of male authority, her looking through the veil undermines the patriarchal strictures to render them defunct and inscribe a narrative of her own as she "loves [and looks] improperly" (Kelly 1998, 80). This space of resistance is further enriched as she keeps mentioning Alikan's "dissecting/dismembering shooting technique" until the latter quips, "You really resist not having a head don't you?" (ibid.). The veil and the headless female body are stitched into the relational fabric of Alikan and Kieu. Alikan is obsessed with everything that is veiled, including his models. He instructs Kieu not to look back (an act of defiance and a possible instance where Kieu would reflect and ponder over the situation); he follows her to the dressing room and even out in the streets, donning dark glasses (a symbolic extension of the veil in the film, one that hides and yet reveals). As he follows Kieu down the street, he takes no chances, hiding and looking as he seems fit, and yet ultimately loses Kieu. Ironically, however, as Alikan moves on, Kieu emerges onto the street and looks around with a knowing smile flickering on her lips. She puts on her dark glasses as she follows Alikan for, after all, as Kieu puts it, "Is there really such a thing as an innocent veil?" (Minh-ha 1995, 117).

One of the most compelling evocations of the veil occurs when Alikan and another woman, otherwise nude, are simultaneously blindfolded, demolishing the "male as subject and female as object" equation. The diaphanous veil, here replaced by a strip of cloth, receives an added

impetus by the red colour of the cloth. Red, the colour of passion, fuels sexual desire and enhances the inflammability of libido by deliberately imposing a stricture on sexual foreplay as it transitions from the zone of male ocular consumption to tactile female sensual eroticism. The scene moves beyond its cinematic framing to reposition the voyeuristic gaze as the spectator's, implying that they are a participant in the consumptive politics of voyeurism. The male spectator can no longer merely satisfy their scopophilic desire from the "safe" perspective of the beholding character, but by implication partakes of the situation. And for the first time Alikan, who was a voyeur in control of the power and subjectivity bequeathed to him by the gaze, stands objectified within the trajectory of the spectatorial gaze that provides the audience with the excitement of looking at sexualized bodies without being looked at in return—the ultimate pleasure of a voyeur.

Kieu further undermines the discourse of power and control signified by the veil by deliberately donning an outfit made of chains, a type of an imposed veil that forms a trope of further containment and "caging." She proves the invalidity of the "net and chain" outfit by citing the story of the Chinese king and his wives. The king had deputed his general to train his one hundred wives in the arts of war. The women merely laughed at the general's efforts until the latter implemented "absolute law" and beheaded the king's two favourite wives to set an example for the others. Instantly the other wives, in a unanimous decision, followed the absolute order and killed themselves. By refusing to acquiesce and yet abiding by the letter of the law, the women succeeded in virtually demolishing the patriarchal imposition. Trinh comments, "This is how war and death are introduced into the realm of laughter and disorder. You either lose your head on your own by conforming, or you will be decapitated. Society widely rejects films that think aloud, especially when they are made by women who hold on to their heads" (Kelly 1998, 86). In *A Tale of Love*, though Kieu is sought by Alikan to be the headless body, by thinking aloud about her role Kieu opens up a space of questioning that denies simple decapitation by playing with the changing positionalities of "who is being looked at and by whom?" (Hawkins 1995, 197). In fact, just before Kieu becomes verbally aggressive towards Alikan, she takes the veil and puts it on herself. Later, when she enters the studio and flips through a book displaying nude pictures of women, she seems to take her subjectivity back.

Contesting the ocular easily leads Kieu to a prioritization of the olfactory in her relationship with Juliet. Through Juliet and her perfumes, Trinh explores the state of being in love as represented by the sense of

smell and the eroticism of a hypnotic reality that survives between reality and perception; as Juliet in the film says, "by the time you realize it, it's too late. You're hurled into the dark corridors of buried memories. And you walk around crazed, feeling like a murderer again" (Zournazi 1999, 255). Trinh points out that each scent unfolds a love story as it dips into memory and imagination to effortlessly tell a love story. She cites Nietzsche—"All my genius is in my nostrils"—as she recognizes that "fragrance is the area of creativity in which women have excelled" (ibid.). This feminine space, though it may be superficially read as a seductive space where perfumes enhance the female appeal to the predatory male, conveys a statement of female empowerment by opening up a "precarious [if] rarefied zone of love and resistance" (Kelly 1998, 79). Juliet transports the power of the ocular into the olfactory, saying, "Perfumes and colognes are also veiled" (Minh-ha 1995, 108). Her adjectival definitions of fragrances as "captivating, sensual and free" build up an erotica where "[e]very perfume unleashes a love story" that, as Juliet puts it, "evokes and provokes" memories. Each perfume conjures up a dreamlike state "re-calling" or inventively creating the many love relationships Juliet and the nineteenth-century Kieu have had, and the present day Kieu may have. The mystique of perfumes further captivates male desire as it enhances the implied sexual innuendos of "the strange alchemy of a body in love." Perfume becomes a story, "light, fluid, limpid … and sensual," that envelops the woman, the "veil" of fragrance apparently enhancing her desirability for the man and heightening her sensual commodification (Minh-ha 1995, 109, 119, 118). By a subtle reversal, however, it can also be argued that as the man stands enthralled by his object of desire, he fails to realize that he has been en-thralled[1] forever.

Sound, scent, and image seem to merge and activate memories of the various loves of Kieu: Java, the voice of love; Minh, the nostalgic smell that rain evokes; and Juliet, with her trail of fragrances. The stories of her loves reach out to those of the ancestral Kieu and are augmented by this narrative mirroring. Thus, Juliet (whose name harks back to Shakespeare's play) is at once a real person and a fictional character in the film; a fictional character to whom several thousands of people address their love letters, seeking advice from her but knowing full well that she does not exist. The love stories in these letters, written by three thousand men and women, add a unique richness to the narrative. They create diversions and instigate disruptions that in their unfinished state instil a sense of perpetual process and polyvocality.[2] Though Juliet says that they "often sing the same song," the tonal variations create different versions that again help to undermine the monolithic structure of a single love story (Minh-ha 1995,

135). As Trinh T. Minh-ha says, "A story told is a story bound to circulate." In these circulations, always in the plural, the stories remain open-ended, intense engagements with "love" that refuse a closure (Minh-ha 1999, 134). This rejection of closure takes on a highly reflective form in the improvised dance that Juliet suddenly breaks into in response to Kieu's thoughts on love, death, and friendship. Trinh stipulates that this dance is a physical response to what Juliet hears, that the performance is, "a painted rhythm … a form [that] resist[s] the closure of meaning wherein movements of the mind and body synchronize" (Foster 1997, 244).

Trinh T. Minh-ha's *A Tale of Love*, despite the title's promise of a story of tender affection, presents an intense, multi-layered narrative of passion going back to its etymological Sanskritized root *lubh*, or desire. The story of the nineteenth-century Kieu acts as a foundational trigger that proliferates and simultaneously draws on the several love stories of the modern-day Kieu to create a complex pastiche that plays with accepted discourses and traditional cinematic tools to write a story of female empowerment and resistance. The lethal quality of its resistance gains more resonance as it works within the given parameters of a traditional love story only to undermine it forever.

Notes

[1] The etymology of the word goes back to "en-" and "thrall" ("slave") (Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 10th ed.).

[2] I would like to distinguish between polyvocality and multivocality. Of course, both terms refer to "a number of voices." Trinh T. Minh-ha, in "Speaking Nearby," defines "multivocality" as "the bland 'melting-pot' type of attitude in which 'multi' means 'no'—no voice—or is used only to better mask the Voice—that very place from where meaning is put together. On the other hand, multivocality can open up to a non-identifiable ground where boundaries are always undone, at the same time as they are accordingly assumed" (Chen 1992). In *Tale of Love*, Juliet, while reading the love letters, tells Kieu that they all sing "the same song," and yet we remember she is talking about three thousand letters. Her seemingly incredible assertion gains plausibility if one goes back to the etymological roots of the word *polyphony*. *Polyphonia* in Greek refers to a variety of tones, whereas the French *polyphonos* refers simply to many tones or voices. Apart from the meanings of *multivocality* that Trinh enunciates above that erase, mask, or open up "voice," I would like to suggest subtle, nuanced differences in the tone of the renderings. For the etymological roots of *polyphony* refer to Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 10th ed.

Works Cited

Chen, Nancy N. "Speaking Nearby." A Conversation with Trinh T. Minh-ha. *Visual Anthropology Review* 8 (1) (1992): 82–91.

Hawkins, Kim. "The Off-Screen Voyeur." In *Cinema Interval*, edited by Trinh T. Minh-ha, 195–9. New York: Routledge, 1995.

Foster, Gwendolyn. "A Tale of Love: A Dialogue with Trinh Minh-ha." *Film Criticism* 21 (3) (1997): 89–114.

—. "Character Zone." In *Cinema Interval*, edited by Trinh T.Minh-ha, 227–45. New York: Routledge.

Kelly, Margaret. "The Veil Image." In *Cinema Interval*, edited by Trinh T. Minh-ha, 75–89. New York: Routledge, 1998.

Minh-ha, Trinh T. *Woman, Native, Other*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999.

—. *A Tale of Love*. Women Make Movies Release. New York, 1995.

Moseley, Alexander. "Philosophy of Love." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: A Peer Reviewed Academic Resource.* http://www.iep.utm.edu/love/.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16 (3) (1975): 6–18.

Verhoeven, Deb. "A Scenography of Love." In *Cinema Interval*, edited by Trinh T. Minh-ha, 3–15. New York: Routledge, 1999.

Zournazi, Mary. "Scent, Sound, and Cinema." In *Cinema Interval*, edited by Trinh T. Minh-ha, 247–66. New York: Routledge. 1999.