

Reading response, April 10th

The goal today is to empty the sign and infinitely to postpone its object so as to challenge, in a radical fashion, the age-old aesthetic of "representation." [148, Roland Barthes *The Reality Effect*]

'Realness' is not exactly a category in which one competes; it is a standard that is used to judge any given performance with the established categories. [129, Judith Butler *Bodies That Matter*]

Can the expansion of Western culture from the sixteenth to twentieth Century be described in terms of a growing totalitarianism of the grid? [98, Bernhard Siegert (not) *in place, The Grid, or Cultural Techniques of Ruling Spaces*]

Documentary *Is, or, Is Not a Name*. The title of Trinh T. Minh-ha's states and then simultaneously refutes the congruence of two nouns that each make a claim to reality, 'name' and 'documentary'. The claim, as Trinh details later in the essay, is "the license to name, as though meaning presented itself to be deciphered without any ideological mediation." [95] To name is to call into being by roping what is thought as raw material with methodological, scientific nooses, and detaining its figuration in the demanding and stymied syntaxes of the Center. To name is to frame and render a lived experience by subjugating it to language's topology. Framing and rendering are workflows in a technology of representation that synthesizes thought as an epistemological format that we might call 'noun'-thinking: that which is not named, is not.

Representation's compression is not particular to language. It punctuates every which 'Reality's portrayal. "Visual and verbal constructs yield meaning down to their last detail." [97] The knowledge regime of the Center erects an architecture of names, a proto-physical media whose constitution parameterizes space by coining the visual and sensorial field. We can speak of techniques of representation and their efficacy only with reference to their incorporation and/or non-incorporation into the nominal architecture's aesthetic. As Minh-ha presents in her essay *The Language of Nativism: Anthropology as a Scientific Conversation of Man with Man*: "language as a form of knowing will always provide you with Your Other." [53] There are some principles in linguistic physics that will not be contravened.

It must be with great self-consciousness, then, that Minh-ha names her essays and films. Other examples being: *Sur Name Viet Given Name Nam; Inside Out Outside In; The infinite play of empty mirrors*. In our given case study—*Documentary Is, or Is Not a Name*—the title attempts to inflect the legitimacy of the very medium through which it comes. The periodical slash in Minh-ha's writing is a concise syntactic expression of her project with language, as she has expressed it in interviews and elsewhere: to effect a sounding of reality's architecture. It is through this figure that she calls into question the politics of legitimacy at hand in the act naming, exactly as she acts to name her essay. Her semiotic project is to bring about a resonance, to reverberate a sound through the structures of the Center. Acoustic media, which has trod the heels of the visual in epistemological Spectatorship for some time, offer a way to expressively trace the Center's architectural figuration. We will hear, Minh-ha hopes, something from this hollow expression.

Despite this acoustic metaphor, however, there is no medium that fundamentally lays a greater claim to reality—not image, not sound, nor the word, which seemingly synthesizes both in its psychic mechanism. Each has media-specific artefacts. Minh-ha's work as both a film-maker and theorist speaks to her unequivocal association between medium and reality. As she says in an interview with Nancy N. Chen, "every single work I come up with is yet another attempt to inscribe this constant flow from the inside out and the outside in." [435] In *Documentary Is, or Is Not a Name*, Minh-ha critiques the fact that film theory proposes to think 'about' film, when in fact film theory is a conceptual medium, and thus will not be accorded a superior critical distance: film theory only thinks **with** concepts that film raises. Explaining this, Minh-ha offers, "Concepts are no less practical than images or sound." [78] This claim is Walter Benjamin's location in her thought: her project, like Benjamin's, is to declaim conceptual thought as nothing less than another apparatus, and to declaim against the apparatus that conceptual thought denotes. Film, language, and thought are technologies of truth that always only re-present—that is, mediate—reality. "Reality," I quote from the essay, "is more fabulous, more maddening, more strangely manipulative than fiction." [88]

Her de-notation of conceptual thought is most incisively a claim against the syntax of the Center, which she at one point calls the media-hegemony of truth. The straw-man of the Center's representation at the time this essay was written in 1980, is anthropological and ethnographic film-making. Minh-ha's best known film, *Reassemblage: From the Firelight to the Screen*, released two years after this essay in 1982, depicts footage from her fieldwork in Senegal. During a range of shots selected to contradict the conventions that she details in another essay¹—conventions that include the long shot with a wide lens, and the synchronous recording of image and sound—Minh-

¹ *Mechanical Eye, Electronic Ear, and the Lure of Authenticity*.

ha offers the guise of explanation at times in film's essayistic overdub: "Ethnologists handle the camera the way they handle words." "Documentary; because reality is organized into an explanation of itself."

The film works to reverberate the architecture of filmic mediation by re-sounding its stymied syntaxes, just as the slash and other comparable figures in her writing do with the architecture of language. These gestures are always self-conscious, because they both reckon with and repudiate the syntactic impossibility of representing that which lies beyond the borders of the Center's regime of names; namely, the Other. Minh-ha is understandably critical of the colonial anthropologist; but she is also critical of the insider-anthropologist (she who mediates her own culture) as the claim to this representative authority reinscribes the legitimacy of a knowledge regime in which it writes itself. It figures anthropology as a discipline, and presupposes to "give voice" to the Other. This gesture places the Other within "the Master's sphere of having,"² where difference can only be admitted once it is appropriated. The voices of Others, as Minh-ha notes in *Outside In Inside Out*, are "mostly used as devices of legitimation whose random, conveniently given-as and taken-for-granted authority." Culture is mediated at every level. I quote in length from the end of our essay:

In short, what is at stake is a practice of subjectivity that is still unaware of its own constituted nature (hence the difficulty to exceed that simplistic pair, subjectivity and objectivity); unaware of its continuous role in the production of meaning (as if things can 'make sense' by themselves, so that the interpreter's function consists only of choosing among the many existing readings); unaware of representation as representation (the cultural, sexual, political inter-realities involved in the making; that of the filmmaker as subject; that of the subject filmed; and that of the cinematic apparatus); and, finally, unaware of the Inappropriate Other within every I. [77]

To repeat myself, Minh-ha's work looks to expose that the scientific, classificatory thinking of the Center is but one geometry in the landscape of figurations of semiotic space. This geometry is a technology of representation that performs dimensionality's reduction through a media-specific dialect, bordering what is representable, and thus what can be considered Real. I want to make one further step in way of our essay's introduction, which is to put Minh-ha's Reality in touch with her colleague's at Berkeley rhetoric, Judith Butler. I think this conversation rings an important chord regarding both Minh-ha's views on the figurations of Reality, and also on the ethics of her critical/poetic method. Quoting from Butler's *Gender is Burning* chapter in *Bodies that Matter*:

There is no subject prior to its constructions, and neither is the subject determined by those constructions; it is always the nexus, the non-space of cultural collision, in which the demand to resignify or repeat the very terms which constitute the 'we' cannot be summarily refused, but neither can they follow in strict obedience. [124]

Butler's take on **subjectivation** addresses the epistemological border between subject and non-subject, the constitution of which border Minh-ha's reverberations also look to critique. The semiotics of the Center, tainted with what Minh-ha calls "the Cartesian division between subject and object that perpetuates a dualistic inside-versus-outside, mind-against-matter view of the world"[83], designates a feminine non-space of materiality that is waiting to be signified by a masculine geometric regime that incorporates it as Space. This is the boundary at which meaning is contested.

The border becomes the decidedly politicized concept that structures the Center's spatial imaginary. What lies within the border is graphed, quantified by principally uncontested abstractions such as 'numbers', or 'shapes'—and what lies beyond is incommensurable, for the Center lacks the theoretical instruments to measure it. Indeed, Minh-ha and Butler's use of the term 'Real' perhaps better suits its deployment in mathematics than in the philosophical and psychoanalytic traditions of the term that their work so poignantly problematizes. Both endeavour to inscribe the figurations of non-Euclidean geometries by marking the paradoxical nature of their dimensionalities when reduced to Cartesian representation. But Cartesian thought is the architecture of the Center. The notion of materiality itself is gendered. The Other's concept will not relent. Theory is tasked with materializing the Other's disenfranchisement within the very structures that keeps it stateless; a project which, as Minh-ha acknowledges, contradicts itself. This is an unstable exercise. As Minh-ha tells Nancy Chen:

If the project is carried out precisely at the limit where anthropology could be abolished in what it tries to institutionalize, then nobody here is on safe ground. [440, interview w/ Nancy N. Chen]

LJK.

DIDN'T TOUCH:

- Truth dramatized (prosopopeia)
- the interval: the 'frame-rate' of representation
- influence of Minh-ha's later work on borders, refugeeism, immigrants. Endless war in Loveicidal.
- Time: I only addressed the border through space, but you could just as easily figure this in Time. Johannes Fabian, shared Time (though Minh-ha's filmic techniques that rely on real time.)

² 84, *All-Owning Spectatorship*