

Oscillations of Otherness: Disinterestedness and the Capacity of Affect in Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Reassemblage*

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Abstract

This paper explores the affective capacity of Trinh T. Minh-ha's experimental documentary, Reassemblage: Fire Light to the Screen. Examining Trinh's unconventional use of sound and image, I argue that Reassemblage's disruptive aesthetics have the affective capacity to produce, rather than represent, new subjectivities wherein the line between subject/object, filmmaker/viewer, self/other, and insider/outsider begin to dissolve. In so doing, the paper builds an unlikely theoretical alliance between Gilles Deleuze's delineation of affect, the Kantian notion of disinterestedness, and feminist scholarship on aesthetics. Paying particular attention to the space in-between an interested and disinterested aesthetic approach, the paper stresses that one must engage in an oscillation of otherness in order to reconsider both the distance and proximity between self and other.

Keywords: *Trinh T. Minh-ha, aesthetics, affect theory, disinterestedness, feminist film theory, experimental film, feminist art philosophy*

1. Introduction

"Truth and meaning: the two are likely equated with one another. Yet what is put forth as truth is nothing more than a meaning. And what persists between the meaning of something and its truth is the interval, a break without which meaning would be fixed and truth congealed"— *Trinh. T. Minh-ha*¹

The experimental film *Reassemblage: Fire Light to the Screen*, by Vietnamese filmmaker and feminist theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha, is a work that calls into question conventional documentary aesthetics that engage in processes of othering. Shot in Senegal in 1981 (released 1982), the film uses various editing techniques in unexpected ways to expose colonialist undercurrents in traditional ethnographic filmmaking practices. In *Reassemblage*, montages are disordered, voiceovers repetitious, scenes reoccur with slight difference, the narrative is non-linear or absent, and music is interspersed with intervals of silence; all of which serve to interrupt the spectator's passive gaze. As the audience navigates their way around *Reassemblage's*

disorienting aesthetic in search of narrative, the question that arises is not what the meaning of the film is, but who assigns meaning and how. Likewise, this paper answers not what *Reassemblage* is about, but, rather, what it does. That is, I argue that *Reassemblage's* disruptive aesthetics have the affective capacity to produce, rather than represent, new subjectivities wherein the line between subject/object, filmmaker/viewer, self/other, and insider/outsider begin to dissolve. In so doing, the paper builds an unlikely theoretical alliance between Gilles Deleuze's delineation of affect, the Kantian notion of disinterestedness, and feminist scholarship on aesthetics.

The bulk of feminist scholarship on aesthetics critiques Immanuel Kant's disinterested approach to art, arguing that there cannot be a separation between subjective political interests and works of art (Eaton 2008; Lauter 1990). Nonetheless, this paper follows the trajectory of feminist theorists who revisit principles of disinterestedness anew (Brand 1998; Daniels 2008). Beyond revitalizing disinterestedness as a useful tool for feminist aesthetics, the paper treads new territory; I claim, the oscillation between interest and disinterest is *the* condition necessary for an affective, and, therefore, more politically nuanced, art encounter. Ultimately, the paper stresses that *Reassemblage's* affective

¹ Trinh, T. Minh-ha. "Documentary Is/Not a Name". *October*. 52 (1990): 76. Print.

aesthetics produces new ways of thinking, feeling, and being with/as/through the self and other.

2. Disrupting Representations of Otherness

Conventional ethnographic documentary film uses a particular set of filming and post-production techniques to authenticate its representations of a culture. Trinh explains:

Lip-synchronous sound is validated as the norm; it is a “must”—not so much in replicating reality (this much has been acknowledged among the fact-makers) as in “showing real people in real locations at real tasks.” (Even non-sync sound recorded in context are considered “less authentic” because the technique of sound synchronization and its institutionalization use have become “nature” within film culture.) Real time is thought to be more “truthful” than filmic time, hence the long-take... and minimal or no editing (change at the cutting stage is “trickery,” as if montage did not happen at the stages of conception and shooting) are declared to be more appropriate if one is to avoid distortions in structuring material. The camera is the switch onto life. Accordingly, the close-up is condemned for its partiality, while the wide angle is claimed as more objective because it includes more in the frame; hence it can mirror the event-in-context—more faithfully (*Documentary* 80).

Wide-angle framing, synchronized image and sound, talking heads, and authoritative voiceover narration give the illusion that reality is captured, rather than constructed. Disrupting these techniques, Trinh uses sound and image in startling ways to interrogate traditional documentary filmmaking practices. Thus, *Reassemblage* exposes the artificiality of the film medium; Trinh challenges the documentary genre as one that simply delivers truth and meaning about another culture through “honest” depictions of reality.

In the opening sequence of the film, African drumming and a cacophony of voices emanate from a black screen. Listening to and feeling the rhythmic texture of the music, a sense of anticipation arises as we wait for the first image to appear—one that will correspond with the sound and provide meaning to what is heard. After a minute, the music cuts out unexpectedly, and the viewer is jolted into silence as the first series of images colour the screen. Instead of an image that compliments the previous sound of drums and voices—such as a scene of people

drumming and dancing—what appears is a roughly edited montage of everyday day life in a Senegalese village. Images cut from people working to children playing as Trinh’s heavily accented voice disrupts the silence: “Scarcely twenty years were enough to make two billion people define themselves as underdeveloped². I do not intend to speak about, just nearby”. The music continues just as abruptly as it stopped only to cut out moments later for Trinh’s second narrative interruption: “A film about what? A film on Senegal, but what in Senegal?” Reflecting on this question, our expectations of ethnographic film surface: we expect an anthropological film with a coherent narrative to provide objective knowledge about Senegalese culture. In its place, fragmented visuals accompanied by non-diegetic sound repeat throughout the forty-minute film, throwing the relationship between documentary, truth, and representation into question. Likewise, the dissonance between sight and sound pull apart the comfortable ménage à trois between ethnography, reality, and meaning, making conventional documentary viewing habits uncomfortable, if not impossible. Unable to passively sit back and receive knowledge, viewers become intensely aware of the film’s form. In this way, *Reassemblage* exposes the limitations of documentary filmmaking practices by revealing both the filmmaker’s role as well as the spectator’s in constructing otherness. With documentary film’s subjective interests exposed, the question of how to represent the other becomes not only an aesthetical concern, but also an ethical one.

Beyond challenging representations of otherness, I argue that *Reassemblage*’s aesthetic interruptions have the affective capacity to *produce* new subjectivities. Expanding on Baruch de Spinoza’s distinction between affection (*affectio*) and affect (*affectus*), Gilles Deleuze (1988) explains that ‘affection’ is the corporeal trace, the state of the affected body, and ‘affect’ is the movement from one state to another in the affected body. Unlike emotion, which is semantically and semiotically formed, affect is a visceral impingement on the body, an incomprehensible sensorial event that escapes discursive knowledge. Affect operates in excess off—or beside—linguistic systems and discursive power. As Carolyn Pedwell and Anne Whitehead note, “affect thus cannot be reduced to either ‘discourse’ or ‘emotion’, but rather exceeds

² Not accidentally, at the time Trinh filmed *Reassemblage* it had been twenty years since most African countries became independent (including Senegal). Thus, here, she speaks to the imposed definitions on the newly post-colonial Africa.

these categories..." (116). For Brian Massumi (2002), affect is 'a shock to thought'. Similarly, for Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth "affect arises in the midst of in-between-ness: in the capacities to act and be acted upon" (1). Affect, therefore, is a force, a relational intensity felt through sensation that changes the body from one state to another.

As an interruption to the senses, *Reassemblage's* potential to affect manifests with Trinh's shocking use of disjointed image and sound. The film jolts the viewer from a comfortable place of passivity to an acute awareness of how otherness is constructed. Revealing documentary film's meaning-making processes, *Reassemblage*, therefore, has the affective *potential* to alter how we come to feel and know (cultural) difference. Nevertheless, interruptive aesthetics alone do not guarantee that *Reassemblage's* potential to affect will actualize. The spectator's aesthetic approach to the film is equally important in considering how affect transpires during the art encounter.

3. The Moment of Disinterestedness

Discussing different aesthetic approaches to art, Kant, in the *Critique of Judgement*, remarks that aesthetic judgments, particularly judgements of beauty, are 'subjectively universal'. That is, although judgments of beauty are based on individual subjective feelings, they also claim universal validity. According to Kant feelings about beauty differ from feelings of pleasure in that the former is disinterested. In other words, while we seek to possess pleasurable objects, we simply appreciate beauty even though it does not appear to have any practical use. Because individual wants and needs do not come into play when appreciating beauty, our aesthetic response is, according to Kant, disinterested and thus universal.

Kant describes disinterestedness as the first moment in an aesthetic judgement of beauty. We first judge an artwork based on intuitive feeling rather than rational (moral) thought. This disinterested moment is in contrast to an interested aesthetic judgement, which is tied to ethical, social, and political motivations. Thus, to be disinterested is to concern oneself only with the form (shape) of an object and not its sensible content (colour). The latter, according to Kant, is connected to collective interests. He states that if we concern ourselves with 'agreeables' such as colour, we cannot make a judgement of beauty because these aspects are merely sensuous personal preferences that, therefore, cannot be universalized. Thus, in an

aesthetic judgement of beauty, one's experience or taste must be traceable to non-sensory aspects (Daniels 201). Therefore, to be disinterested is to be without interest in the objects existence; or in another way, a disinterested approach to art is to take pleasure in an artwork because we judge it beautiful, rather than judging it beautiful *because* we find it pleasurable (Brand 5, Burnham 2005). Importantly then, a disinterested attitude does not exclude pleasure but rather the desire to possess an object through conceptualization.

Feminist art philosophy is particularly critical of the Kantian notion of disinterestedness. At first glance, a disinterested approach appears to suggest that in order to make a universal claim of beauty, a universal *subject* is necessary. From this perspective, Katy Deepwell argues that disinterestedness, therefore, ignores a subject's positionality and how one's social-location (based on gender, race, class, ability, sexuality) affect an aesthetic judgement (8). In her words, "Feminism's critique of the disinterested observer exposed the partisan nature of all readings (when that 'neutral' figure was identified as white, male and middle-class), and began to explore how reading [art] is inevitably informed by political positions" (8). Thus, for Deepwell, a disinterested attitude can only be held through a position of privilege that reinforces gender oppression. In support, bell hooks contends that any claim to a neutral, distanced, disinterested mode of perception glosses over the deeply invested interests and influences of one's experience of gender, race, class, sexuality and ability (116-118).

Estella Lauter further claims that disinterestedness, like formalism (the practice of judging artwork based purely on form rather than context or content), is partial to the male experience. According to Lauter, formalist aesthetics are in direct opposition to feminist art theory (103). In comparing formalism to feminist reception theory³, Lauter genders the former as male and the latter as female. She claims that a formalist approach is dependant upon formal education and artistic training—a criteria that assumes one has access to these privileges and the ability to "set time aside from daily life to perceive art and to cultivate a separate mode of response (called psychical distance

³ Feminist reception theory, sometimes referred to as just reception theory and also known as the reader-response approach, gives an essential role to the viewer (or 'reader'). This approach considers meaning as something produced, negotiated, or fabricated by an interaction of between the film and its viewer. In other words, reception theory analyzes the reading of a text as a communicative process.

or disinterestedness) that will allow a momentary release from life's pressures" (104). In contrast, feminist responses to art, writes Lauter, involve "political, social, religious, economic *and* aesthetic sensitivity..." (104, emphasis in original). Moreover, she declares that, unlike the aesthetic attitude of disinterestedness, feminist art theory concerns itself with an artwork's potential to empower a particular group of people. To do so, the interests of both the artist and art critic are considered in the process of assessing the work's artistic value (104).

Alongside Lauter, Marcia Eaton challenges Kant's assertion that judgements of beauty are void of interest. Eaton argues that judgements of beauty are contextually linked to collective attitudes and one's ethical imperative. To illustrate this point, she refers to Kant's characterization of female beauty, which he describes as a woman with blonde hair and blue eyes (Eaton 356). Such, attributes, Eaton affirms, are deeply invested in interested notions of gender and race. Ultimately, as Peggy Brand writes, "The general consensus [amongst feminists] is that there is no disinterested gazer of visual images, only one whose gaze is saturated with interest" (8). A feminist philosophy on aesthetics, therefore, promotes and encourages an interested approach to art and takes one's positionality and situatedness into account. In this regard, the content and context of an artwork is just as important as its form, if not more so.

In a surprising move, Brand goes against feminist these critiques of Kantian aesthetics. She claims that a disinterested approach to art is not only possible but that it is useful for feminist theory. Although she acknowledges the validity of an interested approach to art, she proposes that a conscious switching between interest and disinterest is the "fullest and fairest experience of a work of art" (4). Brand states, "what I suggest here is a bit of 'gender treason'—the simultaneous endorsement of both authority and freedom, order and flexibility, objectivity and subjectivity, and reason and feeling" (10). Drawing a distinction between a disinterested *attitude* and a disinterested *attention*, she defines the latter as not a pure disinterested stance, void of subjective interests, but "only something approximating it" (13). This stance, Brand assures, strips away various subjective 'lenses' such as race, class, gender and so on (13). She continues that a disinterested attention allows one to 'disengage' with their emotional response and free themselves to the intellectual impressions a work has to offer. Nonetheless, Brand admits that one cannot fully

experience a work of art with disinterest alone. Instead, she contends, one must 'retrieve' imaginative interpretations gained from an interested position in order to add contextual meaning to a disinterested one. This, she asserts, provides a richer experience of the artwork (13–14). Brand maintains that 'toggling' between an interested attention (which she claims is the initial reaction) and a disinterested attention (the secondary reaction), is analogous to viewing an optical illusion—only one type of attention can be occupied at a time; it is an either/or situation (10). In a contradictory statement, however, she claims that an interested attention "may be *interspersed* with brief moments or long intervals of... disinterested attention" (10, emphasis added). Despite her earlier description of interest and disinterest as being separate and consecutive moments, here, she suggests they occur simultaneously: disinterestedness exists *within* interest.

Despite this revelation, Brand strangely continues to impose a dichotomy between interest and disinterest. What is more, she genders this dichotomy as female and male respectively. Brand states:

The feminist viewer whose tendency is to adopt a more physically and bodily based interested stance... may also benefit from the lesson of undergoing an intellectualizing and abstracting process. Like the viewer with a male gaze, who undergoes a radical shift by learning to view with a feminist lens, the feminist who looks upon [art] formalistically is self-consciously and deliberately shedding her feminist lens to view the work as disinterestedly as possible (15).

Consequently, Brand implies that a feminist should not only disassociate intellect from emotion (if that is at all possible) but that she would actually benefit from 'shedding' her feminist perspective to adopt a male gaze. This line of thinking systematically recreates binary modes of thought where objective/subjective translates to intellectual/emotional and is associated with the hierarchal division between male/female. Rather than following a dichotomous logic, as Brand does, I argue that the boundaries around an interested and disinterested approach are porous in such a way that one approach cannot help but leak into the other. Disinterest and interest, then, are not oppositional; they cannot be separated; they exist in interaction, relationality, and oscillation. Thus, Brand's notion of

'toggling' between objective and subjective, intellectual and emotional, and disinterest and interest during an aesthetic judgement relies on the notion of stable categories and is, therefore, amiss. Brand's insistence that interest and disinterest occur in discrete moments is informed by her (mis)reading of Kant's description of universality. Unwittingly, she collapses universality into objectivity writing, "We can attempt to be neutral and objective, in the spirit of the traditional notion of disinterestedness...". However, Kant's understanding of universality is more complex. He does not claim that a viewer is neutral and objective but that a judgement of beauty is based on 'subjective universals'.

Taking a closer look at Kant's concept of 'subjective universal judgements', Paul Daniels argues that, despite also being subjective, aesthetic judgements of beauty are universal not in content but form. More specifically, Daniels claims that for Kant universality refers not to any social attitude or location, but to the universal process of cognition, which then forms subjective opinion. Daniels writes, "While the content of subjects may differ, the form of a judgement is common... It is the validity of this commonality which Kant supposes justifies our aesthetic judgements" (207). Put differently, it is the neurological processes and *the force* of perceiving beauty that defines the universal experience in an aesthetic judgement. With this in mind, disinterestedness as a universal judgement is not claiming to be objective, it simply is. Cerebral processes, the firing of neurons for example, exit outside of subjective awareness. Thus, like the relationship between affect and emotion, as soon as the physiological pleasure of perceiving is brought into thought it becomes subjective with a person's "covert incentives" (Daniels 202). Although Daniels interpretation of 'subjective universal judgments' is not without problems (such as the assumption that all subjects share identical neurological and cognitive faculties) his reading of 'subjective universals' is an interesting intervention to Brand's conflation of universality and objectivity.

4. The Affective Dimensions of Disinterestedness

In her short but thoughtful chapter, "Beauty: Machinic Repetition in the Age of Art", Melissa McMahon attends to the affective dimensions of disinterestedness. She explains that disinterest is commonly misunderstood as an attitude of disaffection. This, she says, implies a distance between the viewer and art object. McMahon

clarifies that it is actually an interested attitude that seeks to put subject and art objects at a distance. With its moral and theoretical investments, an interested approach asks what the art object is, or what it is good for as a way to assess the appropriate proximity to the object (6). A disinterested approach, on the other hand, is unconcerned with such questions, and, therefore, does not create distance between the viewer and artwork, but actually marks its loss (6). Because disinterest is detached from political investments, the aesthetic experience is no longer about a relationship to the object itself; rather, an aesthetic encounter becomes one of sensation and affect operating outside cognition. Fittingly, McMahon writes, "[disinterest is] an encounter which precisely strips the subject of its habits of thought" (6). In a disinterested moment, affect is not attached to the object as a whole but to the eventfulness of its fragmented attributes (6).

Likewise, I contend that *Reassemblage* is affective not as a whole, but through its fragmentation. Indeed, spaces and people in *Reassemblage* are never wholly represented; just as they come together they move apart. Through jump cuts that seem to separate one image from the next, the audience is denied a linear progression of time and thought, thus revealing the impossibility of ever capturing the 'whole' (Odin 600). For Trinh these fragmented images or scenes are not in opposition to a whole but rather they are "a way of living with difference" (*Framer Framed* 156). The fragments exist on their own as pieces of difference. For instance, the film's fragmented non-diegetic sound interrupts passive, yet interested, spectatorship by unsaying and momentarily freeing images from their meaning. Impinging on the senses and catching the viewer unawares, sound and silence affect the viewer by their sudden and unexpected eventfulness. Caught by the film's intervals, the viewer is obliged to sense the form of the film while also attending to content. Writing on the importance of black screens in *Reassemblage*, Jaishree Odin claims, "the [viewers] need to have momentary blindness or emptiness in order to enter the reality of the other" (614). The black screen, or 'negative space', as Trinh calls it, is not absent of meaning but marked with presence. Accordingly, this presence or 'momentary blindness' is one of disinterest and interest, where form is called to the forefront through fragmentation. *Reassemblage's* affective capacity, therefore, is not generated through an interested attention to the sequence of images or through a disinterested attitude toward the intervals of black screens, but

from the space that exists between aesthetic judgements.

Deleuze's concept of 'any-moments-whatever' provides a useful tool to unfold the potential of this in-between space. He describes 'any-moments-whatever' as a flattening out of time absent of a linear succession of moments that move from one privileged point to another. Instead, any moment is just as any other, mapped out without attributing specific value to one instance over another: "when 'any-moments-whatever' collide the course of things follows" (McMahon 3). That is to say, what potentially follows out of a meeting of moments cannot be predetermined; it emerges at the possible site of connection: "[Movement] can be intercepted at 'any-moment-whatever' in order to yield information" (3). Correspondingly, the fragmented arrangement of images and sounds in *Reassemblage* creates 'any-moments-whatever'. This, I claim, is the affective in-between space that allows for new meaning to take place. Just as judgements of the beautiful cannot be mapped as privileged points (such as starting with interest and moving to disinterest and back again), no one image or sound in *Reassemblage* is more important than the other. Trinh brings together 'any-moments-whatever'—an image of burning house, followed by an image of a woman cutting wood, interspersed with music then silence then narration—without prescribing meaning or more value to one image over another. Because scenes have no beginning, climax or end, our attention turns to the space in-between image and sound. This space, however, is not empty; it fills up with unpredictable 'any-moments-whatever' with every jump cut.

The gathering of 'any-moments-whatever' into a single context is, what Deleuze and Felix Guattari call, an assemblage. This meeting of things (images, sounds, thoughts, forces), according to Deleuze and Guattari, is a relation that produces a number of effects (3–4). Unlike a unified whole with a single and dominant reading, assemblages are a mixing of exchangeable fluid pieces that have multiple functions. Drawing on the example of a book, Deleuze and Guattari explain that the various components of a book including text, thought, and its material properties are all fragments that operate outside of the assemblage of a book in other contexts or assemblages (3–4). Further, assemblages exist in a web of interactions with entities to continuously re-create new formations. For

instance, the book interacts with any number of assemblages including readers, libraries, or even as kindle for fire. Thus, assemblages contain other assemblages within themselves and enter into new assemblages through various interactions (Wise 79). Assemblages, then, are open-ended processes always coming together while simultaneously moving apart. As such, they may or may not form emergent thought

The first assemblage in *Reassemblage* occurs in the titling of the film. Using the prefix 're' before 'assemblage', Trinh points to the repetitious nature of constructing otherness in ethnographic film. The 're' signifies the re-creation and re-presentation of otherness, but also illustrates how the boundaries around these meaning-making-assemblages are continually influx. Although conventional ethnographic film attempts to assemble and re-assembles image and sound in certain ways in order to provide particular meaning to the film, there is no guarantee what the spectators' perception will be. This is because, as Deleuze and Guattari describe, assemblages are volatile fleeting forces with unstable borders. *Reassemblage* plays at/with the borders of ethnographic film testing its limits and exposing the instability of documentary practices.

This paper argues that there is an affective dimension in disinterested approaches to art. Furthermore, this dimension is felt in the oscillation of 'any-moments-whatever' between insider/outside, self/other, and interest/disinterest. By turning to the affective capacities of *Reassemblage*, we can explore how Trinh's filmic techniques push out comfortable, categorical ways of knowing in order to make room for new ways of thinking and feeling. Instead of taking an interested approach to filmmaking, in which scenes are scripted, Trinh edits together an assemblage of 'any-moments-whatever' with a disinterested attitude focusing not only on content but form. Trinh's disinterested and, at the same time, interested approach to representing difference as an unstable re-assemblage underscores the inability to know difference. That is, difference is always in a process reconstitution and re-assemblage. What I argue is that a disinterested approach to art is an affective one. In our fluctuations between interest and disinterest we find ourselves in a space between that is full of potential. It is here, in this space that we can begin to think, feel, and sense otherness anew.

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