

Paper Proposal: The (Un)Teachable Film Praxis of Trinh T. Minh-ha

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Trinh T. Minh-ha is a renowned Vietnamese-American filmmaker, teacher and cultural theorist, whose films have challenged conventions of ethnographic and documentary filmmaking, and who has made important contributions to the fields of postcolonial and feminist theory. Her theory of 'speaking nearby (Trinh 1992)' is particularly well-known for its implication for ethical filmmaking. It is marked by the refusal to make assertions about subjects of alterity. I argue that 'speaking nearby' is fundamentally informed by what I define as 'recessive resistance', which seeks to challenge the commodification of women's identities. This form of resistance is marked by an attitude of receptivity and not-knowing, of 'letting the world come to you with every step (Trinh 2013)' rather than going towards it with preconceived knowledge. Furthermore, it can be characterised by a refusal to adhere to insider-outsider divisions – Trinh was heavily criticised for making films on West Africa as a Vietnamese woman – as well as an opaque film aesthetic (using darkness and silences) that challenges visibility and its association with power in ethnographic and documentary films. I argue that all these aspects, and thus recessive resistance more broadly, fundamentally inform her practice of 'speaking nearby'.

This paper asks whether it is possible to teach 'speaking nearby' and recessive resistance, particularly in making films about cultural practices different to one's own. Assuming the position of the student of Trinh's praxis – both her theory and practice – as well as the scholar analysing her work, I reflect on the process of adopting Trinh's stance of receptivity and her opaque film aesthetic in the making of my own film *Anukampa Bhikkhunis*. The project is a work-in-progress, focusing on a community of Buddhist nuns who aim to establish the first monastery for women in England. Trinh herself has pointed out that students often struggle to adopt a position of receptivity, which I have defined as an aspect of 'recessive resistance,' when approaching a subject of filmmaking. Rather than starting with a script, an outline or treatment and focusing on developing a 'message', she suggests exploring one's own relationship to the subjects and culture of interest first and 'jumping into the void (Trinh 1999)' of alterity, but also explore new aspects of self-hood. I reflect on the ways in which I translate these suggestions into practice in making *Anukampa Bhikkhunis*, attempting to remain in between the positions of insider – as a meditation practitioner and white woman interested in Buddhism, like many of the nuns involved in the project – and outsider – a layperson, outside of the patriarchal system of Theravada Buddhism. I reflect on my difficulties with adopting this refusal to align oneself entirely with either position, as well as on the exploration of an opaque aesthetic, and the effects of doing so in the representation of predominantly white English women.

Bibliography

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Author Bio

I am a 2nd-year-PhD student in the Film and French departments at the University of Bristol. My doctoral research focuses on the films of Trinh T. Minh-ha. With the help of Buddhist philosophy, French theory and practice-as-research, I define a particular form of resistance in her work. I label this form of resistance as 'recessive,' as it runs counter to assertive, progress-oriented forms of resistance. It is characterised by certain practices of refusal and an aesthetic of opacity. I explore this form of resistance in the context of ethnographic and feminist documentary film.

I have completed two taught postgraduate degrees at the University of Bristol in Comparative Literatures and Cultures (2017-2018) and Film and Television (2018-2019) and I am now receiving a full University of Bristol Faculty of Arts Scholarship for the duration of my PhD.