

THE WOMAN'S I/EYE: 'IN-BETWEEN' STRATEGIES IN THE WORKS OF SHIRIN NESHAT AND TRINH T. MINH-HA

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Starting with Homi Bhabha's definition, my aim is to explore the 'in-betweenness' of territories through the woman's I/eye.

Can women really cross the borders, and how do they achieve it?

The artists Shirin Neshat and Trinh Minh-ha give an answer to these questions in their visual works, where women finally break the silence and become the subject, and not the mere object, of looking.

In his introduction to *Nation and Narration* Homi Bhabha writes:

The 'locality' of national culture is neither unified nor unitary in relation to itself, nor must it be seen simply as 'other' in relation to what is outside or beyond it. The boundary is Janus-faced and the problem of outside/inside must always itself be a process of hybridity, incorporating new 'people' in relation to the body politic, generating other sites of meaning and, inevitably, in the political process, producing unmanned sites of political antagonism and unpredictable forces for political representation. [1]

According to Bhabha, nations should not be considered as unitary societies but rather as "interruptive" spaces. The meaning of every nation, of every culture, lies in what the postcolonial critic calls the "in-between space," between nations, frontiers and boundaries — "an international dimension both within the margins of the nation-space and in the boundaries in-between nations and peoples." It is thus a natural derivation that "the 'other' is never outside or beyond us; it emerges forcefully, within cultural discourse, when we think we speak intimately and indigenously "between ourselves.'" [2]

Bhabha's ideas are useful to understand the actual realities of migration and exile nowadays: every movement here involves a transition, through space and time, of people migrating from one country to another, and across boundaries. It is in the 'interstices' that today people – and artists – build their own home.

Women's art is not just predicated on the migratory movement; even more, it is what 'lives on' this movement.

Many women artists have recently turned to cinema or video-art and video-installations, in order to express their experience as migrants. The countless borders to be crossed everyday – geographical frontiers, frontiers between genders, and frontiers among different media – are experienced in a singular way, by artists such as Shirin Neshat and Trinh Minh-ha: these two artists are constantly in search of the right artistic dimension where women can speak – and write – themselves, by getting possession of the Western male gaze that has ruled them, in life, in society and in art, for so long. On her part, Shirin Neshat, when interviewed, repeats that she does not belong to any place, that she is a stranger and that she cannot identify any place as 'home.' Her "in-between" position belongs only to herself; as a consequence, her art is the way through which she seeks to reconcile with her past and her culture, so as to

open up, for women, the possibility of a dialogue. The position of Trinh Minh-ha is somehow different, but she is worried by a similar preoccupation: the Vietnamese artist reflects on the equation between the English words for “I” (identity) and “eye” (the organ of sight), in order to show how human identity asserts itself primarily through the act of seeing.

My question would then be: how does the female I/eye place itself in the “in-between space,” the space between different countries, and different media?

Strategies of counter-signing

In the works of Shirin Neshat, the frontier underlines what inextricably divides men from women in the Iranian society. She started as a photographer, before moving to videos and movies which, as she insists, gave her the chance to display the constant dualisms between East and West – and between women and men – in a more powerful way. In addition, video allows the artist to give voice to what, or whom, has been voiceless, making the unmoving finally moving. Most of Neshat’s videos are shot in black and white, presenting a two-channel-technology which is functional to the content of the videos; they draw a portrait of the Islamic society, especially focusing on the spaces occupied by men and women in this society. [3] In her videos – *Soliloquy* (1999) is a remarkable example – Neshat investigates the “third space,” – an expression she shares with Homi Bhabha – the space in which distinctions between different lands and cultures do not exist any longer.

Almost every work of Neshat is conceived as a big installation to be shown in museums and galleries: often consisting of two separate screens, one in front of the other, in a dark room, upon which the videos are shown simultaneously. In this way, the viewer, standing between the screens, is part of a process that involves his/her choice of choosing to watch one video or the other. In Neshat, we experience a frontier between two genders, and also a frontier between different media: as the artist affirms, multimedia languages are powerful, because they involve people and allow the viewer to become part of the work, by merging and contaminating his/her body with the video and the computer. Her purpose is to tear off the screen, and put the viewer at the center of the installation, often projected on more than one wall. The body is central to Neshat’s work, especially because, in Islamic society, the female body is the actual field where all battles take place.

This close relationship between the viewer and the image is particularly relevant to the installation entitled *Women without Men*, which was projected in February 2011 on the statues of Sala delle Cariatidi in Milan. In this exhibition, people move among the images reflected on the statues, in a multisensorial experience, as if they were part of the stories told by the screens. The installation consists of fifteen screens made of tulle, and it tells the stories of five women in Tehran, who gradually find shelter from their difficult lives in an enchanted garden. The screens do not follow a chronological order or a linear narration, they are randomly shown one after the other; this forces the viewer to move from one video to another, becoming the editor of the images, the one who puts them together and, in a certain way, who draws out his/her own story out of the images.

Jacques Derrida’s words seem to echo here:

By definition the reader does not exist. Not before the work as its straightforward “receiver.” The dream we were talking about concerns what it is in the work which produces its reader, a reader who doesn’t

yet exist, whose competence cannot be identified, a reader who would be “formed,” “trained,” instructed, constructed, even engendered, let’s say invented by the work. [...] The work then becomes an institution forming its own readers, giving them a competence which they did not possess before. [...] It teaches him or her, if s/he is willing, to countersign. [4]

The notion of “countersignature” is also fundamental in the work of Trinh Minh-ha, who in her own way explores the question whether it is possible, for women, to cross the frontier. According to Trinh, “a creative event is a journey”: the journey, with its meaning of ‘crossing,’ seems to play an important role in her career too: “West is, at the same time, inside and outside me,” she says. We all know that people who live on the border can see and understand things from different points of view; still, with Trinh, we also understand that these people can speak not only for themselves, but also ‘nearby’ the Other. The difference is crucial if we think that the artist actually began her career by shooting documentaries. In her work *Reassemblage* (1983), among the signs scrolling on the screen, we read: “I do not intend to speak about, just speak nearby.” The declaration of intents is polemical towards the way anthropologists and documentaries have always treated the subjects of their studies, that is, by taking the place that actually belongs to the subjects of their studies, and talking of them as if they themselves could not speak at all. To reverse this trend, and avoid any hegemonic position, Trinh decides to use the pronoun “I” without the capital letter. It is her way of stating that one can come close to something only in an indirect way, by letting things come over, without a pre-determined direction. This is the reason why she pays great attention to the role that speed plays in society: only by moving slowly, and by granting silence, are we able to play with the dimensions hidden in the interstices of the world.

In all fields, including language, there are multiple dimensions: one should play with all of them in order to create new meanings starting from old words and ideas. It is essential to work on silences, intervals, pauses, on the relationship between different things and different people. In this respect, Trinh Minh-ha proposes “a decentred narration made of intervals,” as Lidia Curti says. [5]

Furthemore, as Iain Chambers says:

Here on the threshold of vision that is marked by the elsewhere and its transitory exposure, the image comes undone, stutters, and for an instant is traversed by an oblique glance able to catch something in its unfolding. There exists the possibility to multiply on the image a multitude of senses, of directions, to rob it of unilateral intent in order to free it for a further movement. Here emerges a cinema of the ‘gap,’ of the ‘interval.’ [6]

Trinh locates her aesthetic vision inside the passage, the border crossing, the movement across space and time, the interval between life and death – in *Night Passage* all the subjects and the bodies are displaced, de-centered, un-done by the movement both of the camera and of the train.

Cinema — especially digital cinema — is a specific choice: because of its intrinsic mobility, it is considered as the most migratory art, and stands out as a transcultural phenomenon: movies can in fact be shown in different places and at different times. New media do not just help us collecting memories, by functioning as archives of what happens around and inside us; they mainly allow us to intervene: as a consequence, digital media are the most suitable to bear evidence of migration.

As in Neshat's works, in Trinh's movies, the frontier is there, even though sometimes only imagined: in Trinh's art, however, it seems more fluid, as if one might creep into it. This is remarkable in *Night Passage*, whose story is based on the novel *Milky Way Railroad* by the Japanese Kenji Miyazawa. [7] The film tells the story of a trespass, a crossing of the spatial-temporal dimension observed through a train window, and, more originally, through the I/eyes of women. When transported onto the screen, the male characters of the novel become female: under the eyes of the women, the 'gender frontier' crumbles away. According to the director, a change takes place when one repeats something by adding something new: thus, Trinh's work can be read, by quoting Derrida again, as her "countersignature" to the work of Miyazawa:

My law, the one to which I try to devote myself or to respond, is the text of the other, its very singularity, its idiom, its appeal which precedes me. But I can only respond to it in a responsible way [...] if I put in play, and in guarantee [...], my singularity, by signing, with another signature; for the countersignature signs by confirming the signature of the other, but also by signing in an absolutely new and inaugural way, both at once. [8]

Trinh seems to tell us that what is important for women nowadays is their ability of placing themselves across cultures, traveling and slipping across boundaries: exiling themselves, in the sense of soaking into new worlds, new experiences, new meanings. Still, *Night Passage* is not only Trinh's personal, totally female, countersignature of Miyazawa's book; it is "a spiritual journey of a young woman with her best friend and a little boy, into a world of rich in-between realities." [9] These realities are shown by means of a fragmented and deconstructive strategy: single episodes, single images framed as sequences, seen through a train window. As in her *The Fourth Dimension* (2001), the train serves as a moving and, at the same time, motionless frame, through which the human eye/I makes a sense of the reality. In this way, according to Trinh, "the gap between photography and cinema tends to become the bridge": the bridge that, once again, accounts for the importance of the infra-ordinary.

Starting from Miyazawa's story, Trinh leaves just the frame unchanged. Characters, who were formerly male, become female. On the night train, the young Kyra meets her best friend Nabi and Shin, Nabi's son – later we will find out that Nabi drowned trying to save Shin's life. During the night journey, Kyra discovers the "power of communication" and the bondage with Nabi, who supports her throughout the passage. Together, they run across the Fourth Dimension Railroad, a place of transit and movement where Kyra finds herself at the end: thanks to the journey, she becomes a woman able to leave her past behind her, and to move on; she learns the importance of going on, which is the rule of the *Night Passage*: "don't stop in the dark or you'll be lost; move to the rhythm of your senses, go where the road is alive." [10]

With her personal countersignature of Miyazawa's novel, Trinh seems to succeed in finding a common path where men and women can live, at least figuratively, one next to the other: she only needed to change the story by declining it to the feminine, so as to prove herself able to cross the frontier between genders.

On the contrary, for Neshat, it seems that there is no possibility of crossing the frontier, neither for men or women. What happens when such a division leads people – women – to choose, even unconsciously, exile in an enchanted place, a fabulous and magic place, where the real and the surreal merge? Neshat's movie *Women without Men* tells a fairy tale, based on the homonymous novel by Shahrnush Parsipur, a story about the impossibility of a dialog.

Parsipur, like Neshat, comes from Iran but, unlike her, she cannot come back to her country where, because of her work — dealing with many taboo subjects in Iran, as prostitution, rape, virginity and reaction to male domination — she has been imprisoned and tortured several times. [11] In Parsipur's most famous novel *Women without Men*, the characters are strong women, who, at a certain point, take important decisions that lead them to run away from home — the place of their confinement — in order to take shelter in a garden outside Tehran. They arrive to the garden as in a trance state, walking as in a dream across silent and dusty roads. All of them will fulfill their destinies in different ways: some of them die and return to life, some disappear or transform into other essences, such as trees, wind or light.

In the garden of *Women without Men*, narration turns magic, the magic of a “non-place,” to use the French anthropologist Marc Augè's expression, which Derrida might call “a place to come.” For each of the five women, the garden becomes the symbol of their freedom from male control, the place where they are capable of reinventing themselves outside the boundaries of male society. In the garden, they are both at home, in a safe and domestic space, and free to live as they like. Still, none of them seems satisfied with living so strictly separated from the outside world, so neatly separated from men. Apparently what Parsipur is telling us is that living completely isolated, without men, is not the right answer: in order to be human, women must not try to exile themselves from the outside world, by taking a position of separation from it, but, on the contrary, they should find their personal answers, their own ways of living inside society rather than against it.

Nevertheless, the garden of *Women without Men* recalls me the words of Julia Kristeva in her *Strangers to Ourselves*, [12] where she seems to suggest that the feeling of being a stranger can only be abolished in a different dimension, an imagined and fantastic universe totally separated from the real one ... is that really so?

References and Notes:

1. Homi Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), 4.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Among Neshat's works, see especially the trilogy *Turbulent* (1998), *Rapture* (1999) and *Fervor* (2000).
4. Jacques Derrida, Derek Attridge, "This Strange Institution Called Literature: an Interview with Jacques Derrida," in *Acts of Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 74-75.
5. Lidia Curti, "Speaking of Cinema, Speaking with Cinema," in *The Other Cinema, the Cinema of the Other*, ed. by L. Curti with Marta Cariello and Serena Guarracino, *Anglistica* 11, 1-2 (2007): 1.
6. Iain Chambers, "Scratching the Lens: Media, Memory and Mimesis," in *Anglistica* 11, 1-2 (2007): 10.
7. *Milky Way Railroad* by Kenji Miyazawa was written in 1927; for further information, cfr. the edition by Stone Bridge Fiction, Berkeley CA, 2009.
8. Jaques Derrida, Derek Attridge, "This Strange Institution Called Literature: an Interview with Jacques Derrida," 66-67.
9. Trinh Minh-ha, "Lotus Eye. Reading Miyazawa Kenji and Making Night Passage," in *Anglistica*, 11, 1-2 (2007): 83.
10. See *Night Passage* (2004) by Trinh Minh-ha (all quotations are from the film).
11. See the afterword by Persis M. Karim, in *Shahrnush Parsipur, Women without Men* (New York: The Feminist Press, 2009).
12. Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

