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ABANDONED TO DIFFERENCE: IDENTITY, OPPOSITION AND TRINH T. MINH-HA'S *REASSEMBLAGE*

Michael Hill

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Article abstract

This essay is about the realization of power's proximity, and about how, once taken seriously, power forces us (1) to disband the outmoded notion of representing a generalized Other, and (2) abandon the Other's co-ordinate, subjective political agency. A tentative premise describes how the proximity of power — its stickiness — forces us to seek more politically informed notions about otherness and identity than could previously be thought. Upon that basis, an argument is built on behalf of a politics that attempts to exceed subjective agency by abandoning identity to politics, rather than abandoning politics to identity. Althusser, Foucault, West, Mudimbe, and Trinh Minh-ha are brought into the discussion.

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ABANDONED TO DIFFERENCE:

IDENTITY, OPPOSITION AND TRINH T. MINH-HA'S REASSEMBLAGE

Michael Hill

ABSTRACT

This essay is about the realization of power's proximity, and about how, once taken seriously, power forces us (1) to disband the outmoded notion of representing a generalized Other, and (2) abandon the Other's co-ordinate, subjective political agency. A tentative premise describes how the proximity of power -- its stickiness -- forces us to seek more politically informed notions about otherness and identity than could previously be thought. Upon that basis, an argument is built on behalf of a politics that attempts to exceed subjective agency by abandoning identity to politics, rather than abandoning politics to identity. Althusser, Foucault, West, Mudimbe, and Trinh Minh-ha are brought into the discussion.

RÉSUMÉ

Notre texte porte sur la prise de conscience de la proximité du pouvoir, et la façon dont, une fois pris au sérieux, le pouvoir nous oblige à 1) rejeter le mode périmé de représentation de l'Autre comme une entité généralisée, et 2) abandonner son corrélat, le sujet-agent politique. Une prémisses provisoire montre comment la proximité du pouvoir - son ubiquité - - nous oblige à chercher des notions d'altérité et d'identité qui soient politiquement mieux informées que celles qui circulent actuellement. Sur cette base, nous argumentons en faveur d'une politique qui vise à dépasser la notion de sujet-agent en abandonnant l'identité à la politique, plutôt que la politique à

l'identité. Sont mis à contribution les travaux d'Althusser, Foucault, Minh-ha, Mudimbe, et West.

Within the limits of the current debate on radical critical practices, one is likely to arrive at a precarious conjuncture between postmodernism and the emancipatory impulse behind what the 'post' evidently displaces (modernism? Marxism? Feminism?). Such a moment might be called an ethical moment, possibly, an ethical crises. For at its most disruptive and most difficult, postmodern criticism goes a reflexive step further than questioning the more obviously hegemonic discourses of the culturally dominant. Postmodernism, in the political arena, is perhaps a troubling realization of power's uncanny way of seeping onto the *whole* scene of oppositional critical practices. - From such a realization, one draws the conclusion that strict adherence to any single radical program --perhaps something like a well intended Br'er Rabbit-- brings one too close to the Tar Baby of power to maintain the objective separation necessary for wielding any certainties without eventual embarrassment. Indeed, if these are the stakes, if, in other words, criticism's relationship to the margin --by any of the terms one mistakenly seeks to stabilize marginality (e. g. 'native,' 'women,' 'worker,' etc.)-- is neither as critically efficient nor as ontologically aloof from power as once assumed, then we necessarily face the arduous task of re-writing what effective political practices might be.

This essay is about the realization of power's proximity, and about how, once taken seriously, power forces us (1) to disband the outmoded notion of representing a generalized Other, and (2) abandon the Other's co-ordinate, subjective political agency. As an arguable premise, I will describe how the proximity of power -- its stickiness -- forces us to seek more politically informed notions about otherness and identity than could previously be thought. From such a premise, I will argue on behalf of a politics that attempts to exceed subjective agency by abandoning identity to politics, not -- as I shall suggest has too long been the case -- abandoning politics to identity.

In the first section of the essay, I will attempt to displace some of the larger claims of (Althusserian) Marxism with the smaller -- but arguably more efficient -- claims of (Foucauldian) discourse analysis, suggested in part by Ernesto Laclau. This will be, in effect, a critique of an already important critique of power and subjectivity (or 'scientific materialism') -- turned back on itself -- in the interest of realizing the materiality of language. In the second section of the essay, I will measure the value of the 'incorporeal materialism' that remains against the subjectivities redeployed in the 'new humanism' of Cornel West and V. Y. Mudimbe. Here, I will also outline some of the practical features of a political alternative which might be stated in

any number of ways, such as 'the practice of difference,' *askesis*,^[1] or in a more dramatic fashion after Blanchot, 'responsibility without consciousness.' In the third section of my essay, I will discuss Trinh T. Minh-ha's film *Reassemblage*. This section of the essay does not function -- and this is exceedingly important to realizing at least one effect of a subjectless discourse in the postmodern sense -- to set up an object into which I seek to place the key of a new critical method.^[2] Indeed, it would be foolish to think that postmodern work ever functions hermeneutically; and neither will this essay. Rather than staying within the bounds of linearity that dictate the illusion of commentary and maintain the fictional division between theory and practice (i. e. the division between criticism and its object), in section three of this essay I want to locate an example of the alternative politics I describe in section one. I see Trinh's work as an example of theory's latest effect upon the limits of subjectivity, in this case, as it pertains to the specific technical features of film, as perhaps, film theorized.^[3] Hence, in this final section of the paper, I will detail how Trinh's *Reassemblage* radicalizes the political objectives offered within the questionable boundaries of 'third cinema.'^[4] I will argue that the film is a highly localized example of political intervention without identity, or more precisely, of identity surrendered to politics.

'Being' or 'Becoming' Political?: The Two 'Materialisms' and their Challenges to Agency

It is still necessary to begin a critique of subjectivity by evoking a name which -- at least I would argue -- is overlooked in the more fashionable quarters of contemporary critical theory or out of hastiness. Althusser's contribution towards opening the fist of subjectivist discourse, if certainly not the final word on radical critical practices, is still a worthy point of departure. In "Marx's Relation to Hegel," Althusser offers the following 'adequation': (Origin = [(Subject = Object) = Truth] = End = Foundation), (173). This is the circular system of 'classical' (Western) philosophical categories, circular because the "foundation is the fact that the adequation of Subject and Object is the teleological Origin of all Truth" (173). It is, to unpack this statement a little, the 'Subject = Object' component of the 'adequation' in particular that seals off the possibility of producing knowledge from the "scientific continent" which Althusser credits to Marx. Taken at face value, 'Subject = Object' is a license for the production of humanist knowledge which is solidified into a misleading transparency by using 'Truth' not only to limit, but to completely prohibit inquiry into a political basis for 'Subject/ Object' alignment itself.^[5] To put it another way, in Western philosophical discourse prior to Marx, the price for knowing 'truth' was to withhold the network of relations (for Althusser 'material relations of production') which legitimize a truth-effect, from philosophical intervention.^[6] Thus, the transformation from Hegelian idealism into 'scientific materialism' occurs by offering a materialist-relational approach

to the production of knowledge in the place of a subjective-teleological one.
[\[7\]](#)

Althusser's subjectless model of 'knowledge as process' has enough in common with the brand of discourse analysis used in postmodern critical practices to consider them as, in many ways, allies. Yet, from the latter perspective, it is fair to say that 'scientific materialism' eventually lapses back into the some of the typically humanist problems it attempts to politicize by positing the 'fact' that the 'material relations' against which it measures its successes are not mediated within a cultural-political and always partially obscured space. In other words, 'science' is limited by the fact that 'ideology' becomes its transcendent object in the formal sense of the term: 'science' seeks to master 'ideology' as a text. In addition, by maintaining a rigid faith in subjectivity as the object of power -- instead of regarding the subject as one of power's effects -- 'science' re-introduces subjectivity through the back door as higher consciousness, a new brand of an old product. For the sake of clarity, let me detail these claims by referring to a few passages where Althusser directly discusses power and agency directly.

According to Althusser, power operates in the negative capacity of an ideological distortion of reality, or put more succinctly: "(ideology = illusion/allusion)" ("Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" 163). Ideology is 'illusion,' because it "represents in its necessarily imaginary distortion, not the existing [material] relations of production, but above all the (imaginary) relationship of individuals to the relations of production and the relations that derive from them" (164). In other words, ideology represses our ability to see beyond the mere concept of things to the reality of things themselves, or more precisely, to a material objective existence in which the knowing subject plays a secondary role. More important for the scientist, ideology = allusion. This is so because while it does not correspond to reality, ideology "only need be '*interpreted*' [by the scientist] to discover the reality of the world behind its imaginary representation of that world" (emphasis added) (164). Hence, the exact importance of relativity to the 'scientific' approach to social knowledge is understood in the too rigidly hierarchical manner of *real* (read 'material') relations of production -- which function in the order of fixed (albeit, historically fixed) referents -- over *imaginary* (read ideological) relations. Put another way, ideology is the dirty sheet of false signification against which the 'scientist' measures historical (and, incidentally, literary) truth.

That the scientist remains the undisputed master agent on behalf of he/r subordinate masses, who, as so many interpellated subjects, are only as real as the scientist's ability to hold them in h/er purer consciousness, remains highly problematic. It is especially problematic given what 'science' has supposedly already done to disrupt our faith in subjectivity.

Part of the move that enables the 'scientific' privilege of escaping its own materialist critique involves a subtle regression back into a new version of the old Hegelian Subject = Object "adequation," this time in the form of a repressive hypothesis of power. For Althusser, power can be more or less univocally located and objectively transferred (140). This transference typically takes place in the strict sense of the State moving down upon its subjects (141). While the subject is locally specific, it is -- categorically speaking -- a closed and "eternal" space. In the end "the subject has no history" (170). The ultimately condemning charge is that 'science' finally depends upon a reconstitution of the subject as a formally distinct and eternal region, a fixed and referential category which is ideologically repressed throughout time (history) and space (culture).[\[8\]](#) As political agents, our faith in the possibility of, and desire for opposing power, is supposed to be informed by something other than power itself, something which -- pursued by the threat of its own deconstruction -- ends up having to be historically and culturally transcendent.[\[9\]](#)

The unwillingness of 'science' to acknowledge the political character of socially objective knowledge as an integral thread in a complicated network of power/knowledge, reveals its dependency upon a morally and ideologically transcendent master consciousness/conscience. In spite of itself, 'science' halts politics by positing the static space of 'real' (i.e. extra-relational) knowledge.

Ernesto Laclau suggests that the unacknowledged exclusivity of all positive (i. e. 'scientific') knowledge is inherent in the 'scientific' denial of the complete discursive character of objectivity ("Building a New Left" 185). Drawing from Foucault, 'scientific' materialism is modified into an "incorporeal materialism" of the sign ("Discourse on Language" 231), where in a sense, all utterance -- especially explicit political utterance -- is a site of production which is subject to the same conditions and influences of power as all other (e. g. economic 'material') sites of production.[\[10\]](#) Accordingly, positive political utterance depends on an unacknowledged 'outside,' "an ungraspable margin that limits and distorts the 'objective,' which is precisely the real" (185). It is this 'outside,' then, which 'science' both fixes and excludes in order to maintain the illusion of its universal application. The limit of such a margin, Laclau calls the "objective differential." It is important to note that, in extending 'materiality' to the sign in the interest of the differential, Laclau is not appealing to speak the truth of the margin. The margin is, after all, ungraspable. To speak of it truthfully would be to repeat the mistake of 'science' and of many other universalist -- or, what Spivak calls, "identitarian"[\[11\]](#) - -- narratives. Rather, by acknowledging the differential, one submits political practice itself to specific kinds of relational effects, the first of which is to disintegrate the notion of an objective social into local and specific systems of socio-linguistic differences.

It is in the spaces of language where political action can proliferate, become specified, and be constantly renewed, because in politicized discourse, signification is reversed. One speaks not from oneself for others, not for things, but speaks as an effect and measurement of the limits of acknowledging what as yet cannot be said. Transformative political practices within the materiality of discourse would explicitly avoid being reduced to speaking as the voice of a generalized other, that is, as an other against and above which identity and representation can falsely assume their stable place. Ideally, a postmodern cultural politics emphasizes a perpetual state of becoming, "a cultural and historical opportunity for the subject [that discourse] constitutes to invent not-yet-imagined manners of being" (Foucault, "Friendship as a Way of Life" 206), and it does so precisely by making the limits of discourse available to difference.

In the interest of clarifying the notion of politics based in the materiality of discourse, we might introduce Foucault's term *askesis*. The way in which *askesis* delivers the political goods -- not in spite of deconstructed subjectivity, but as a manifestation of it -- is that *askesis* sees the realization of new relational rights with an explicit disregard for the limitations of a generalized identity. This notion of agency (or agencies) in flux, which refuses to snuff out the multiplicity of subject positions that occur at a given moment by evoking the dream of 'Being,' is the practical extension of relativizing the social. By vanishing the notion of objective political knowledge into a changing system of linguistic differences -- a move which highlights both the temporal and spatial limits of political initiative -- the consciousness of the intellectual worker must undergo a severe conceptual overhaul: 'higher' political consciousness becomes, at least, less than half the story. For subscribing to the illusion that one knows the effect of an utterance before one offers it depends upon ignoring the ongoing action of changing relations within which one is caught, and over which even the best intellectual activists have exceedingly less than complete control. So even though we intellectuals think that we're doing the big politics at school, we're almost certainly forgetting about all the little ones (geographical, institutional, departmental, etc.) that are the condition for the big politics to be possible or not in the first place.

Politics -- the way I have described them here -- are the invitation to acknowledge that no point of origin ever exists which enables pure and long-standing opposition. The identity that wants to lay hold of a particular political program floats, and becomes self-effacing according to an ongoing shift in relations which precede and act upon that identity. This moment is not a hindrance to political practice, but a moment where politics might proliferate, and at long last abandon the illusion of a thetic relationship to representation. - From here it might be possible to put to use what is probably the case anyway: that the kind of politics we practice in the classroom, at conferences, in articles, and on the picket lines, etc. are all different, and even have contradictory strategies, even though if done

carefully and independently they all might eventually enable the possibility of a bigger politics.

Along these lines I would suggest that there is an important distinction to be made between the interest in '*being* political,' and, for the moment anyway, the more radical interest in '*being* as political.' Perhaps 'being political' is finally an interest vested in a sense of identity that is coherent from one site of struggle to the next. If so, then 'being political' is, at least in this small sense, a classical disciplinary moment, not a radical one. It would be disciplinary because it seeks the establishment of desire over politics, at the cost of politics, that is, at the cost of dealing with oneself as an effect of situations that can't be stabilized simply by saying "I protest." Perhaps on the other hand, in the interest of being as itself political, one can see how the positions from which one lays claim to 'protest' quite literally become an effect of politics -- and not politics the effect of what one supposes one is. To be sure, the truth of consciousness has managed to escape the far too limited field of practices we 'radical' intellectuals associate with power. But by avoiding the reduction of critique to the *telos* of individual achievement and representative knowledge, more challenging, if less comfortable, possibilities at least begin to become comprehensible. New relational freedoms depend, I suggest, more on making good out of the unstable versions of agency that are left out of politics, than on the false sense of security in ontological commitment that currently limits them.

'Abandoned to Difference': Some Practical Features of Agency Without Being

In the preceding section of this essay I discussed how 'scientific materialism' inadequately addresses the subjectivity problem, first, by failing to extend the materialist or relational approach to the question of power; and second, by failing to realize that politics cannot be reduced to the representation of a general margin subsumed in identity. I have also begun to describe the rather more experimental practices of an 'incorporeal' materialism of discourse. I have noted how such a materialism brings a politics to agency which -- in the place of the repressive hypothesis of power, and the separatist notions of identity formation that accompany such a hypothesis -- invite us to consider a new kind of agency. This kind of agency -- based on a '*politics of being*' (or *askesis*) -- never assumes to operate from a space which closes out what is falsely supposed to remain on the outside of identity as its passive referential (i. e. identity's 'other').

In this section of the essay, I will try to concretize some of the practical features and political logic of such a notion of combined agency by offering some examples. Specifically, I want to compare the respective 'new

humanisms' of Cornel West and V. Y. Mudimbe, and to perhaps offer a way of representing them that takes combined agency into some useful account. I think the essays by West and Mudimbe are particularly good ones because, to my mind, they represent the precarious conjuncture I identified in my introduction as a postmodern ethical crisis. The two essays show many different concerns. But the concerns I want to tease out, perhaps because they are the most different, are, first, that of deconstruction; and, second, that of developing a subjectivity homogeneous enough to rally behind for a positive political commitment.

West's argument begins, as I have, by explicitly calling into question the uncontested consensus regarding the representability of the subject, in his case, the Black subject. Following Stuart Hall's well-known call for a 'politics of representation,'^[12] the essay shows, at first, a rather enthusiastic willingness to recognize that "Black" is "essentially a politically and culturally constructed category" (104), a category which sustains itself according to the oppositional logic of the dominant regime. And after the deconstruction of the binaries (Black/White, in this case) that formerly gave political concepts their uncontested referents, "a profoundly hybrid character of what we mean by 'race,' 'ethnicity,' and 'nationality' could emerge" (105). Depending upon the direction in which one reads the term "hybrid," and depending upon how insistent one is in avoiding the connotations of a permanent hierarchy that might lurk somewhere in the term, then arguably, one is headed in the direction of a more complex, if vague understanding of a new version of identity. Based upon an explicit sympathy for a deconstructive disruption in the binaries that keep subjectivities closed (i. e. less 'hybrid' or less 'combined'), one could read here the beginnings of a notion of agency surrendered to difference, that is, a notion of agency which -- as I have suggested *vis à vis* Foucault -- seeks to create uninvited relational freedoms by managing oneself as a fluid political effect.

However, within the space of a paragraph, there is an important move that appears to block such a reading. It begins with the idea of a "prophetic criticism," which

begins with *social structural analysis* [and] also makes explicit its moral and political aims. . . . In addition to social analysis, moral and political judgments, and *sheer critical consciousness*, there is indeed evaluation . . . , [which enables one] not to undergird bureaucratic assents or enliven cocktail party conversations, but rather to be summoned by the styles they [art-objects] deploy for their *profound insights, pleasures, and challenges* (emphasis mine) (105-06).

It takes work to avoid reading the terms evoked here as a summon to precisely the kind of humanism that an insistence upon difference would

attach to politics. The notion of a "sheer [objective?] critical consciousness" connected to insightful pleasures -- which somehow manage to remain aloof from while mastering the politics of an artistic sphere -- seems especially hard to connect to hybridity. It is, in fact, difficult to disassociate this language from the intolerance to difference that is implicit in the normative gaze that founded the European enlightenment. There are, of course, waiting in the wings Hegel's infamous remarks regarding the "unknowable African character . . . who had not yet attained the realization of any substantial objective existence in which he realizes his own being" (Gates 20). The fetish of the unknown and the language consciousness" forge an odd connection between two of "critical oddly similar accounts of the social. Both can easily be placed within too short a distance from the very disciplinary culture[13] of taste, appreciation, and criticism that put literary studies into sheltering arms of humanistic pleasure in the first place, [14] and that hybridity would ideally escape.

V. Y. Mudimbe's argument also begins by calling for a politically subordinate and highly relativized notion of subjectivity over which the Western *ratio* no longer has control. His essay is similarly concerned with a discursive relativizing of the truth-as-object model underlying the culturally suspect unities of africanism and old-style (Herskovits') cultural anthropology (98). In this essay the ontological positivism which permits the Hegelian proposition of both an 'adequation' between subject and object, and the extended proposition of assuming a transparent coordination between nationalities (99), function as limits which a relativized subjectivity would move beyond.

Yet what distinguishes this second, similarly concerned essay from the former (and from most other arguments that aim to rewrite agency), is the completeness of its challenge to subjectivity. Here discourse analysis is turned upon itself so that it remains -- opportunely -- unoriginal. "Michel Foucault," Mudimbe writes, "because of the significance of his work . . . may be considered a noteworthy symbol of the sovereignty of the very European thought from which we wish to disentangle ourselves" (39). The charge is significant. Discourse analysis paradoxically undermines the conditions of possibility for the Western *ratio* while cunningly redeploing that *ratio* by attaching the exaggerated significance of its displacement to the author/identity called 'Foucault.' [15] The charge is nothing, if not a ruthlessly discursive move. Its multi-leveled irony reaches full political value if we note, first, that discourse analysis is explicitly designed as counter-subjective; and, second, that it is precisely this feature that enables Mudimbe's provocative warning: radical critical practices are entirely relative. One could not say both that 'Foucault' discovered or invented an interpretive method -- could not locate the origins of a critical school in its founder -- *and* have abandoned one's critical practice to the highly relational quality of difference, simultaneously. When we see that discourse analysis is less a 'system,' less a 'mode of interpretation' -- less formally 'Foucauldian' -- and more a series of highly specialized counter-practices designed to put a political price on the limits of legitimacy, certain intellectuals must realize

the force of Mudimbe's charge, or more accurately, must be realized by its force. Mudimbe's productive ambivalence towards subjective agency -- written here in terms of authorship -- might best be described as a kind of Foucauldian-anti-Foucauldianism, undoubtedly the best kind.[\[16\]](#)

West, Mudimbe -- indeed, all of the theorists I have selected -- agree at some level that subjectivity maintains the order of knowledge in the West. However, Mudimbe reveals something about how power, culture and consciousness function that contains what is perhaps a new challenge. In specific terms, he reveals that to categorically denounce the West means that the importance of the West and the myth of its continuity are already firmly enough established in the myth of opposition to determine the likely outcome of the game. In more general terms, Mudimbe reveals that we have a new possibility in the arsenal of political critique, the possibility that, somewhere outside the enclosure of identity, we can mark and strain the presuppositions that make the game possible and the results of the game desirable in the first place.

Perhaps what keeps the discursive effacement of identity from taking on greater political significance for politically minded cultural practitioners is finally, as Mantha Diawara states it, "the fear of the unknown" (87). That fear has not, I think, been more accurately described, nor the effects of confronting it more aptly put than in the following passage from Blanchot. "When the other is no longer remote," he writes,

but the neighbor whose proximity weighs upon me to the point of opening me to the radical passivity of the self, then subjectivity -- subjectivity as wounded, blamed, and persecuted exposure, as vulnerability abandoned to difference -- falls in its turn outside of being (29).

The word ambiguous word 'passivity' is, no doubt, an especially fearful one for politics. In the context of the agency question it is also the most productive. For the subject is passive, indeed violated to the point of passivity -- but its violation is explicitly *not* without political effects. The subject's 'passivity' is rendered -- its 'being' annihilated -- by the inability to negotiate a separation from the other whom identity must control in discourse for the sake of prolonging itself. (This, I take, as the cunning irony of Mudimbe.) However, the moment otherness moves beyond the limited relational right assigned to it by identity -- the moment otherness slips at once away and into identity as identity disintegrates into the material of discourse -- is the moment politics returns to, and re-invigorates, the question of agency. Identity's 'passivity' becomes a point of departure for ethical creation whereby new and inconceivable associations, new combinations with which to replace the outmoded belief in ourselves as political and cultural representatives, might finally be thought. /pp. 18-19/

Trinh T. Minh-ha and Combined Agency: The Case of *Reassemblage* and the Possibility of a 'Third cinema'

In the first section of this essay, I sought to produce a critique of representation and agency -- in more or less general terms -- by moving the fundamental tenets of Althusserian Marxism into what I tried to show is the more politically charged terrain of discourse. In the second section, and in much more specific terms, I tried to locate some of the demands that an insistence upon difference makes upon our notions of effective critical practices. In what follows, I would like to further narrow the focus in order to identify one very particular example -- among what must be many more -- of a productive response to the demands of difference upon the notions of otherness and agency within the genre of film. This is explicitly not, as I mentioned in the introduction, a hermeneutic task. In my discussion of Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Reassemblage*, I am seeking a specific example of how agency abandoned to difference can function politically across certain generic features of 'Third cinema' -- features many have come to see as requirements -- once those features are adequately theorized.

Teshome Gabriel states that the overall effect of 'Third cinema' is "the critique of Western dichotomies," specifically, as they are manifest in the enlightenment "concept of the transcendental individual" ("TCG" 59). He then seeks to erect what appear to be the formal aesthetic standards by offering a lengthy list of diametrically opposed techniques regarding lighting, camera angle, camera movement, length of shot, etc., that would separate Western and non-Western approaches to film making ("Towards a Critical Theory" 46-47). The generic features of a 'Third cinema' are, he suggests, based upon "fundamental differences between Western and Third World discourses" ("Third Cinema as Guardian" 60). The familiar pattern of critical work that -- because it is not sufficiently informed by discourse analysis -- falls short of its radical potential emerges here, I hope, somewhat obviously. Indeed, the reproduction of the dichotomies by which the West has ruled are most notably featured by Gabriel's insistence upon the strict West versus non-West distinction that becomes the founding principle for 'Third cinema.' The critique of binaries is made by drawing new ones, which end up placing the project back into the realm of aesthetic formalism. Whether aesthetics as a political practice begins in some or other form of deep thought or enlightened genius is not clear. Clearer is that 'Third world' equals good, 'first world' equals bad. Normativity as a system of value remains unchallenged. To that degree, 'Third cinema' never breaks from the tradition against which a radical cultural politics might more effectively negotiate its practices.

By contrast, Trinh has shown an explicit political interest in the two connected concerns that have run the course of my essay, concerns that would necessarily block the moves featured in Gabriel's problematic standardization of 'Third cinema.' She casts the general theoretical terrain of identity and power in much the same manner as I have in the preceding sections of this essay. Trinh is gravely suspicious towards the vast arsenal of big binarisms (Self/Other, Insider/Outsider, Subject/Object, etc.) that permit cultural disciplinarians the authority to have "knowledge about" ("Outside In/Inside Out" 133). For Trinh, the "*knowledge about*" model presumes the falsely innocent distinction between perceiver and perceived, cultural insider and cultural outsider, readerly examiner and textualized other. This separatist relationship of essential difference is both the cause and the effect of the Western *ratio*, or what Trinh calls "civilized man" (117). Conscious cultural identity of either the First or Third variety, is negotiated, stabilized, and -- despite the best intentions -- hierarchized, by an exclusive trust in the referential use of language and at the expense of the archaic differential.^[17] It is thus that Trinh can make the claim that "representation is ideology" ("Documentary Is/Not a Name" 85).

"Meaning can be political," she writes, "only when it does not let itself be stabilized, and when it does not rely on a single source of authority, but rather empties or decentralizes it" ("OIIO" 89). The production of a political effect upon meaning, in other words, is inimical to the identification of its source or the fixity of its formal features. Refusing to identify political consciousness as such necessarily presupposes a rupture in the economy of binaries, allowing a re-contextualized notion of agency to emerge. "When the magic of essences ceases to impress and intimidate," Trinh continues, "there no longer is a position of authority from which one can judge the verisimilitude of representation ... [and] the subjectivity at work ... can hardly be submitted to the old subjectivity/objectivity paradigm" ("DINN" 144). The 'subjectivity at work here' is a subjectivity which politicizes the limits of representation, in the order of Blanchot, a subjectivity without being. Trinh evokes a moment where the other is no longer identified by subjectivity in a falsely transparent sense. She evokes a moment of combined agency, where identity and other mingle in the interest of finding possibilities that neither could know. Identity and other converge with particularly political effects upon knowledge.

Trinh's aversion to the "knowledge about" model, for example, makes the distinction between speaking theoretically and speaking practically an implicitly false one, since such a move presupposes the old separation between tool and object, (in this case, interpretive method and text), which is what she is attempting to displace. She is clearly trying to create a moment in which modeling itself, like being, can be seen as a political caper. Trinh wants to resist "speaking about" cinema, resist making interpretations of her films, or putting them into a critical market motivated by the habits of reference, intention, and appreciation. "There is no such thing," she remarks, "as documentary" (78); and to speak about documentary, formally,

critically, is to slip back "into the net of positivist thinking whose impetus is to supply all of the answers at all costs, thereby limiting theory and practice /pp. 21-22/ to a process of totalization" (78). It is at once frustrating and liberating that one cannot read (or view) Trinh in order to produce another law of aesthetic sensibility, or in order to set about a program for what-we-should-all-do in cinema. The idea of 'we,' of a Trinh, and of the discipline of 'doing' are precisely the terms that ought to be loaded with political significance -- not as fixed political identities and universal practices -- but as specific effects of power. Thus, when speaking with regards to 'Third cinema' -- or any cinema -- Trinh speaks in an antagonistic matter towards prescribing a normative aesthetic. She speaks/shoots/writes theoretically, as an effect of speaking/shooting/writing, which is to say, she does so practically.

Technically speaking, Trinh subverts 'aesthetic' modeling by, (among other techniques) surrendering the (camera) I/eye to difference in order to suspend, and attack, the cultural logic of reference itself. As a consequence, spectatorship and directorship are invaded to the extent that they come apart at their limits. Indeed, otherness is forced through and disintegrates identity on every front, all in the process of interrogating, from an indeterminate position, a documentary's "demand to mean" ("DIIN" 89). Film making is "the very place where the referential function of film image/sound is not simply negated ... , but questioned in its own operative principles and questioned in its authoritative identification with the phenomenal world" (90). The cleavage between subject and object, self and other, spectator and film, is deepened to the extent that the spaces between them open onto and displace their identities in an open-ended exchange over which both surrender complete control.

As the title suggests, *Reassemblage* has neither a beginning (single source), nor an end. A 'reassemblage' is neither a noun nor a verb, but both. It is neither fixed, nor a process. It is perhaps a 'fixed process,' in that, its significance is unauthentic, has no pure location, but is always on the move. It is impossible then, to talk about what the film *means*, or to 'speak about' the film, since the film explicitly challenges both 'the habit of imposing meaning to every single sign,' and the 'flat anthropological fact' of knowing an 'underdeveloped people.' In encountering *Reassemblage* /pp. 22-23/ -- which is to say, being a part of its encounter -- one feels these as these difficulties as being abandoned to difference.

Each of the four sections of the film begins with the disruption of the sound = image equation. There is sound but no picture to which the sound refers, no picture that represents the sound. Before any image hits the screen we are faced with a question: where does this sound belong? How can we order it? Then the sound stops, thwarting our desire make it a meaningful occurrence. And as we hear a (Trinh's?) voice-over at the opening of each section -- a comment or the fragment of a story - -- the sound begins again,

this time weaving in and out of the synchrony with dancing, with drums, with the beating of pestle against mortars mixed with laughter. These are sounds which cannot be made individually. In this mingling between the synchronous and non-synchronous, knowing whether the dancers, drummers or pounders are all working according to one rhythm, or are an effect of the rhythm which we try, however unsuccessfully, to recollect, is impossible. The wavering in continuity between sound and image suspends and highlights the urgency of maintaining a storyline at the most fundamental level. It frustrates a sense of progression, and obscures an ability to locate the signposts which enable narrative objectivity -- or "speaking about" -- to emerge. The habit of taking speech too far from its own materiality, the moment we assume that language is transparent, is confounded by the Sereer language which defamiliarizes sound again. Moreover, the scenes accompanying these sounds are shot arbitrarily in and out of focus. Thus, the spectator loses the privilege of distinguishing where s/he and other begin and end, since neither provide the origin of the film's effect.

Similarly, the film prohibits the urge to create and connect whole pictures by presenting a continual array of extreme close-ups and partially disclosed identities. These shots lack respect for conventional border-spaces, both in terms of the length of the shot, and the positioning of what is being shot. That is, the framing and timing of the shots seem to slice through the continuities and movements of bodies: seven or eight second shots, cutting to a leg, a foot, a toe, an animal's hind, an ear, a breast. These shots bring a materiality to the image, giving them an indefinite wholeness independent from the signifying structure of their bodies. A toe is shown again, this time wrapped in twine which trails off the screen. But by the time the film discloses that the twine around the toe leads to an old man weaving (where the music and voice-overs stop), the urge to extend the weaving metaphor as a guiding model for the film, is swept away by a ceaseless flickering of shots that include two remarkable images.

One image is of an albino child sleeping on his mother's back, as she pounds her pestle in and out of synchrony with the fragments of drums beating again. The other is of a child holding an armless, legless white doll clumsily by the leg (its only appendage), as other children mingle in and out of shot without paying him much attention. These images are remarkable precisely because, in the complex logic of the film, there is no evidence that they *should* for any length of time be singularly more relevant than any other shot. There is no logic of separation, no hierarchy here. In both shots, it is the apparent distinction between white and black (or, in other shots for that matter, nakedness and clothed, hidden and revealed, etc.) according to which we may feel ourselves embarrassingly groping for anthropological commentary, significance and identity -- or as Trinh's voice-over puts it -- "time, knowledge, security." Meanwhile, the film works to politicize this urgency and challenge such enclosures by prohibiting (indeed, refusing to acknowledge) a clear relationship between One and (an)Other.

This kind of vulnerability is established at the 'narrative' level of the film as well, that is, at the level of attempting to engage the film developmentally. "In numerous tales," Trinh's voice-over intervenes, "woman is depicted as the one who possessed the fire. Only she knew how to make fire. She kept it in diverse places." Children run in one direction, the camera swings in another and cuts to another shot at an arbitrary point in its 180 degree sweep across the Bassari village. Trinh taunts us with the word "tales." We want to attach the words, "fire," "woman" to scenes of burning trees beyond the village. We want to create a framework of danger, intrigue and suspense, within which to create the familiar narratives of victory, or perhaps of rebirth. But again, we do not have control of this film and as it (re)produces its viewer old desires are leveled. The move towards narrative is blocked the moment the fire scenes are produced, for they are interspersed with scenes of cutting and clearing a field with hatchets, and rolling meal for food. Each image could have any number of effects on the other, and although we may want a decision made, it is clearly not the spectator's role to make an independent choice. Similarly, we may want to make a causal connection between the sand-storm and the dead animals that are presented as fallen heads, hinds, hooves. But to do so would require a linearity in the order of their presentation, and although the images are presented near enough to each other to arouse suspicion, the two cannot be unquestionably linked as cause and effect. Again, the viewer cannot make a secure interpretive decision. This is another example of how the film massively complicates the agency of seeing and significance.

Reassemblage demands passivity and action in proportions and at levels that make cultural representation a necessarily political affair. The film demands the passivity and action of identity surrendered to difference, that is, the awkward activation of 'complex agency,' wavering indeterminately between One and (an)Other. It is the vulnerability of this condition that *Reassemblage* designates, and as such, the film seeks unimagined alternatives to the current cultural order.

The Ethical Moment

If recognizing what I referred to in my introduction as the 'stickiness' of power reveals the inadequacy of limiting politics to the separation of identity and otherness, then the ethical question ought to be recast less in terms of how to act on the other's behalf, and more in terms of acting upon oneself, that is, of recognizing a kind of cultural arrogance built into the notion of coherent identity formation. I have tried to stake out a position for de-naturalizing identity, so as to produce an open-ended and politically relevant agency.

Recognizing the proximity of otherness throws out a more effective -- if riskier -- invitation to cultural politics than pursuing a timeless or global project of individual rights. I have tried to describe an alternative practice within the discourse of postmodernism: a practice which might "be used to intensify [rather than be limited by] thought," and might be used, more importantly, "to multiply the forms of, and domains for, the intervention of political action" (Foucault, *pref.* xiv).

Michael Hill

The Humanities Institute at Stony Brook

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[1]The term *askesis* is introduced by Foucault (*Foucault Live* 207.)

[2]Hence, this essay is in no way to be confused with making a manifesto, and cannot be formulated, *per se*, as common knowledge under some fraternal umbrella of universal correctness ('the critic,' 'the people,' 'the party,' etc.).

[3]Two essays have enabled me to think about the mixing of genres in this way. They are, first, Derrida's "The Law of Genre" (51-77); and Ralph Cohen's "History and Genre" (204-32).

[4]The term 'third cinema' is from Teshome Gabriel's *Third Cinema in the Third World* (2).

[5]The Subject -- 'man' -- stands in as a primordial factotum for establishing notions of progress, determining history teleologically, etc. (Marx 67-69).

[6]Reading Derrida, one sees the apparent impossibility of producing philosophy without truth, since a transcendental norm (a 'metaphysics of presence') is itself constitutive of Western philosophical knowledge ("Structure, Sign, and Play" 292).

[7]For a developed account of Althusser's "material thesis," see Althusser and Etienne Balibar *Reading Capital*.

[8]For a more developed critique of Althusserian functionalism, see Callincos; and Bennet.

[9]It is interesting to note as Foucault does that, to the extent that the objective of class struggle is a straightforward takeover of the supposed 'pastoral' seat of power (which, indeed, insofar as power is univocally repressive it must be) class struggle turns out to be a struggle over which side of the "adequation" the subjects and objects of power will be seated ("Politics and Reason" 70).

[10]See also Foucault, "Questions of Method" (73 ff.).

[11]The term 'identitarian' is Spivak's. It suggests her own reluctance to produce narratives of continuity, repression, development, which function according to the misguided principle of "identification through separation" ("Poststructuralism, Marginality, Postcoloniality" 28).

[12]In a speech delivered at Hampshire college, Hall showed concern for the disruption of identity by difference. While he could have been more specific, he noted the importance of rethinking notions of identity in what I take to be similar to the ways I am presenting here ("Ethnicity: Identity and Difference" 9 ff.).

[13]I am, of course, thinking of Bentham's panopticon. See Foucault *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (96 ff.).

[14]See Siskin (37 ff.).

[15]I do not think that Mudimbe is harkening back to a nostalgic moment of cultural purity here as an alternative to the 'Foucauldianism' he is trying to escape. His critique of Herskovits forbids that kind of naivete.

[16]Foucault is, in fact, well known for calling for his own disappearance ("Nietzsche" 162; "Discourse" 215).

[17]Thus, Trinh would be speaking at odds with any number of the 'textual,' or what Jeffrey C. Alexander calls the "dramaturgic cultural criticism"-- e.g. Clifford Geertz -- who offer overly structuralist readings of cultures in order to (re)produce their hidden values, identities, and the secret of their differences.