



Listening Like a Documentary

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Trinh T. Minh-ha is an unrelenting critic of the ethical calling that has justified the documentary tradition when its formal and political footing has felt least stable: the call to *listen*. Documentary has tended to grasp the failures and promises of democracy through metaphors of sound more so than vision. Listening, we are told, is the highest ethical act. Listening brings the voiceless into the domain of audibility, where their humanity can be witnessed, recognized, admitted. When we listen, the story goes, we practice accountability for those who have suffered, who have been silenced, who have gone unheard, so that they may, however belatedly, speak up and have a voice, so that they may *count*. Listening is perhaps the only true gift—an extending of oneself without expectation of recompense. Listening justifies documentary.

I began reading Trinh as a skeptic of this story about listening, understood not only in the narrow sense but as a crucible and master trope for documentary's democratic aspirations—a “value about values,” Nick Couldry might call it—while researching a book on the documentary impulse of giving voice to the voiceless.¹ I was interested then in the role of humanitarian structures and sentiments in the late twentieth-century emergence of participatory media interventions that sought to empower disenfranchised subjects as documentary authors. Trinh had already diagnosed this symptom more than two decades prior in “Outside In Inside Out,” but it is a passage from “Mechanical Eye, Electronic Ear, and the Lure of Authenticity,” another essay anthologized in Trinh's collection *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics*, that has stayed with me. It is worth quoting at some length from Trinh's visionary analysis of the ruse of rescue that binds the seemingly benevolent gesture of surrendering the camera to an older ethnographic legacy, one in which salvation comes at the cost—to paraphrase two writers she frequently invokes, Zora Neale Hurston and Gloria Anzaldúa—of the domestication of the beneficiary's wild tongue.²

Making a film on/about the “others” consists of allowing them paternalistically “to speak for themselves” and, since this proves insufficient in most cases, of completing their speech with the insertion of a commentary that will objectively describe/interpret the images according to a scientific-humanistic rationale. Language as voice and music—grain, tone, inflections, pauses, silences, repetitions—goes underground. Instead, people from remote parts of the world are made accessible through dubbing/subtitling, transformed into English-speaking elements and brought into conformity with a definite mentality. This is astutely called “giving voice”—literally meaning that those who are/need to *be given* an opportunity to speak up never had a voice before. Without their benefactors they are bound to remain non-admitted,

non-incorporated, therefore, unheard.³

Like her contemporary Kaja Silverman, Trinh was ahead of her time in intuiting the role of cinematic conventions, specifically documentary conventions, by extending what philosopher Mladen Dolar would decades later name the Western metaphysical and linguistic imaginary of voice. In this imaginary, central also to the documentary ethos, the speaker's voice is thought to be a guarantor of self-presence, consciousness, and truth that is compromised or disrupted by its own bodily materiality.⁴ Trinh's analysis of this imaginary and its chilling audit of nonstandard oral and aural practices anticipated what is today widely referred to as the “sonic turn” in media and cultural studies—or the “auditory turn” among those scholars who, like Trinh, have turned their attention to listening as a political act that distributes attentional and material resources in ways that make some lives more or less livable than others.⁵

How, then, has the documentary audit, understood in the twinned moral-economic etymologies of the term (that is, the entrained but unconscious auditory perspective embodied by an entity or text that channels and allocates attentional resources; an internal accounting undertaken to verify the credibility of a public or private agency) shaped what counts as a voice, that ultimate value about values? This is the question I hear over and over as I reread Trinh's essays on documentary. In the quoted passage and elsewhere in the essays that constellate the “No Master Territories” section of *When the Moon Waxes Red*, Trinh proposes that documentary has given us an auditory vantage or audit from which to make sense of the cacophony of the world. The genre's formal categories (voices that speak over, voices that must be subtitled; those who interpret, those who exemplify; miked voices, unmiked noises) actually bear little correspondence to language as it is spoken, experienced, and lived. Yet they offer something more valuable: legibility. The documentary audit makes local opacities legible to outsiders, much like a land map or cadastral map. If a strategic narrowing of vision made possible the commercial, utilitarian, and bureaucratic vantage that political scientist James C. Scott calls “seeing like a state,” then Trinh offers, in her collected essays, a feminist history of the ascendance of a perceptual logic that is just as impactful and considerably more insidious: listening like a documentary.⁶ Under documentary's benevolent audit, voice as myth, fable, accent, and song is replaced by voice as a resource to be mined, managed, packaged, storified.

From a local perspective, the documentary audit is experienced as debt, not gift: it takes more than it gives. But Trinh's reluctance to indemnify the local and its feminized-colonized cognates (the body, feelings, identity, interiority) as a stable vantage of resistance may be her greatest gift and



greatest challenge to feminist inquiry. The feminisms of the last three decades have overwhelmingly rejected critique in favor of repair, seeking relief from oppressive systems in the coping strategies of those who are most oppressed by them.⁷ But the false absolution of repair is never more dangerous, Trinh reminds, than when it is experienced by those who purport to listen from an outsider or activist position, finding in the relief and release of their good intentions a transcendental refuge from history and power. When reading Trinh, I often find myself thinking of how the prison abolitionist Mariame Kaba describes the “cops in our heads and hearts,” because Trinh shares Kaba’s sense that the very systems that we are working to dismantle live inside us.⁸ The documentary audit also lives inside us. Listener and speaker are, in Trinh’s words, “like the two sides of a coin, the same impure, both-in-one insider/outsider.”⁹ For those who confront this audit as a condition of speaking out (what Trinh calls “Inappropriate Other/Same”), there is no return or escape, only a perpetual sense of not fitting.

What options exist, then, for the Inappropriate Other who seeks not to endure or salvage this world but to imagine another one? The resources to which Trinh turns for aesthetic and political instruction are both cipher and key. In her essays and in her films, Trinh ventriloquizes but never explicates expertise that is vernacular, local, customary, practical, and opportune. Zen tenets and old Cathay witticisms share space with Maxine Hong Kingston and Haunani Kay Trask. At times, they steal space from Maurice Blanchot, Dziga Vertov, Jean Rouch. The effect is chaotic, unruly, often illegible, and also calculated. It models an approach to knowing and making that appreciates warring differences, but refuses synopsis, certainty, essence, and codification. Just as she doesn’t speak *about*, Trinh never listens *for*, only *with*, *like*, and *in*. Perhaps this listening offers a vantage for a feminist documentary practice that does not look for the easy fix, that stays with the trouble, that does not take flight from critique, that dwells in the thicket, that clears space for what does not tidily fit.

1 Nick Couldry, *Why Voice Matters: Culture and Politics after Neoliberalism*. London: Sage, 2010, p. 2; see Pooja Rangan, *Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017.

2 Trinh T. Minh-ha invokes Zora Neale Hurston’s writing on the domestication of Black people as “pet Negroes” and Gloria Anzaldúa’s account of the border-patrolling tendencies of monolingualism against verbal, visual, and musical insurrections when describing the repressive structures of documentary listening. See Trinh T. Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics*. New York: Routledge, 1991, pp. 14; 68.

3 Trinh, *When the Moon Waxes Red*, p. 60.

4 Mladen Dolar writes that voice, in the Western metaphysical tradition, is often regarded as “the material support of bringing about meaning, yet it does not contribute to it itself It [this material support] makes the utterance possible, but it disappears in it, it goes up in smoke in the meaning being produced.” Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006, p. 15. In her 1988 feminist study of classical narrative cinema’s sonic structures, Kaja Silverman argues that the masterful interiority associated with the disembodied, acousmatic voice-over is usually reserved for the male voice, while the female voice is embodied, synchronized, and “pinned to” the female body, which is relegated to the role of spectacle. See Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988, pp. 42–71.

5 See, for instance, Naomi Waltham-Smith, *Shattering Biopolitics: Militant Listening and the Sound of Life*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2021; Brandon LaBelle, *Acoustic Justice: Listening, Performativity, and the Work of Reorientation*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021; Dylan Robinson, *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020; Jennifer Lynn Stoecker, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*. New York: New York University Press, 2016; Roshanak Kheshti, *Modernity’s Ear: Listening to Race and Gender in World Music*. New York: New York University Press, 2015; Lisbeth Lipari, *Listening, Thinking, Being: Toward an Ethics of Attunement*. University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2014.

6 James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999, p. 45.

7 See Patricia Stuelke, *The Ruse of Repair: US Neoliberal Empire and the Turn from Critique*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021.

8 Mariame Kaba, *We Do This ‘Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021, p. 140.

9 Trinh, *When the Moon Waxes Red*, p. 75.

