

Yet films that resist serving up a story or a message without merely falling into the trap of serving Art, often leave the spectator at a loss. For me, since brain and body are not separable—despite the fact that society, as suggested in *A Tale*, still largely prefers women’s bodies without their heads—the nonverbal events in the film and what is not sayable in the actors’ dialogues are just as important, if not more, than what is actually said. Often, people who have problems with the content or the performance of *A Tale* and whose rejections can sometimes be fiercely anti-intellectual (not to mention sexist), are precisely those whose viewing of the film remains primarily intellectual. Such a viewing never accounts for the impact of a film on the spectator’s body. It reduces everything to the order of meaning and remains oblivious to the way the nonverbal, plastic, musical, sculptural, or architectonic workings of a film interact with its content and verbal performance. For me, a sensual experience is clear and luminous, but not immediately tangible; you don’t know where you are exactly, so you take a risk when you try to verbalize it.

I’ve made a detour to come back here to precisely what the film focuses on: an altered state of the mind and body, the state of being in love, in which our senses are strangely aroused and sillily obscured—hypersensitive; so lucid and so blind at the same time.

V: *At the end of A Tale of Love Kieu comes to a realization that her own narrative comprises a series of layers without the “climax” or unifying flourish that ordinarily conclude the conventional “love story.” The point is that she “recognize” her own situation, gaze upon it and so “be in love with love—not with a Prince Charming.” Then there can truly be a happy ending. How might this observation be applied to the cultural rendering of Kieu—as a metaphor for Vietnam?*

T: There’s no truly happy ending; I didn’t intend to imply this. But your question is a real challenge, because if Kieu as a literary and mythical figure has been the site of continuous moral and political appropriation in Vietnamese culture, it was more in relation to foreign domination in Vietnam’s history and to the Confucian norms that regulate women’s “proper” behavior. The conclusion of being in love with Love is one that I introduce in my own tale, one that is informed by the feminist struggle and its questioning of power relationships exerted in the name of love. Kieu’s tumultuous and wretched love life, her being forced into prostitution, her passion and sacrifice have all been extensively written about and used as an allegory for Vietnam’s destiny. But no one has really linked Kieu’s denouement to Vietnam’s geopolitical, socioeconomic, or artistic and ethical situation today. Perhaps I can venture into saying that independence entails complex forms of re-alignment, and that Vietnam’s opening up, which for many means assimilation of the free West, can be, despite all the mistakes and drawbacks, a way of keeping Her distance from all three power nations: China, Russia, and the U.S. Infidelity to others and to one’s own ideals, even when dictated by circumstance, can only lead to difficult places, and hence, there’s definitely no simple happy ending here.

V: *A Tale of Love explores the premise that a character/person can have many stories and many selves. Do you consider that you have many selves? What are they? **There is a moment in the film where the characters discuss the idea that women in particular are punished for having many talents—is this true of your own experiences?***



TL



T: It's by working with multiplicity that the notion of "character" can be undone. Since the narrative was not conceived as a game of psychological construction, it was important that everyday individualized passions should not be the mainspring of the film, and that each of the protagonists (Kieu, Juliet, Alikan, the Aunt, Minh) should be a multiplicity. They are what one can call disinherited characters, and the actors cannot simply "act themselves." For me my many selves are as real as the fingers of my hand, although the process of naming them can be infinite, if I were to avoid types, roles, and fixed categories. **Kieu's miseries have been legendarily attributed to her beauty and her many talents. Although I don't necessarily identify with her, Kieu's life does speak to the lives of innumerable women.**

In my case, it has always been extremely difficult. We live in a very compartmentalized world, and people certainly do not forgive you for being more than one thing at a time. Aside from the fact that as a woman, you always have to be twice as excellent for them to accept you simply as "proficient," they also cannot praise you, for example, as an artist without demeaning you as a theorist or a scholar, and vice versa, depending on where the stakes are for each of them. The more accessible I look, the more competitive they tend to be. Age, gender, ethnicity, and appearance have a lot to do in these kind of situations. This holds true even for my closest friends, some of whom simply can't accept my being, independently, every bit as much a writer as a filmmaker, and vice versa, for example. They prefer to give you credit for the area that is clearly not theirs or where they can't claim mastery. Or they judge your work in the light of your other activity, not in its own light. Everything is seen in terms of complementarity—one activity *servng* the other—rather than in terms of radical multiplicity. It's distressing that such an attitude thrives even in highly progressive and informed milieus.

V: *In the past you have commented that, "Light, setting, camera movement, sound, and text all have a presence, a logic, and a language of their own. Although they reflect upon one another, they are not intended to just illustrate the meanings of the narrative." To what extent does a process of cine-symbiosis rather than reflection also have a "formal" role in the cinema?*

T: Symbiosis . . . very appropriate word in love context. I prefer it to the overused term "syncretism," because it implies both intimacy and dissimilarity in living together. I also like the way you evoke it as against reflection. Myself, I have developed a closer relationship with the concept of multiplicity, which is a way of working radically with differences. When I say, for example, each character or each film element has its own story spaces, I mean it literally, not metaphorically. In my films, the relationship between things or events themselves is just as important as the relationship between people, or between people and things. Similarly, the relation between the verbal and the nonverbal, between what is said or read and what is seen, heard, and felt is never homogenized. The center of gravity and the moving force change place with each shot, both within the image and between images. These have their own rules and dynamics, independent of you and me, or of the viewer, the maker, and the actors. It's like coming up with a finite assemblage in which everything holds tightly together, every cut, every segment, every scene is carefully thought out, but nothing works in unison. Not only is the center never the same, but also, as each segment is itself a multiplicity, depending on which seg-