

shot, waking up (in Juliet's court) and uttering his name with surprise. The same day shot with Kieu drowning off (in Juliet's court) is seen somewhere toward the beginning of the film. So many things have happened in the film during this lapse of time that a multitude of questions may be raised as to both the nature of that night scene (is it a nightmare? a fantasy? a memory?) and the nature of the events that came before it (Was she telling herself stories all this time? Or was the daydream dreaming her?). No single linear explanation can account for these narrative interfaces in which performer and performance, dreamer and dream are constituted like the two sides of a coin. One cannot say that she's simply moving in and out of fantasy and reality, but rather, that it's a different zone we are experiencing.

GF: I really like that sense, as a viewer, of falling into that zone because it's undescrivable, and it makes you want to see the film again and re-experience the cracks and fissures in narrative and character. I was really interested in the parallels you imply between writing and loving and the connection to the rhetoric around women as writers. In particular, I was thinking of some the writing that's been done on women writing such as Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa." But it also made me rethink Plato's *Phaedrus*. Both speak specifically about writing, creativity, and romantic love and how they're very much tied to the body. I was struck by the ways in which you embodied and enacted these ideas in the film.

TMH: Well, I'm certainly glad to hear that because although I do not expect viewers to be receptive to all the layers involved (I myself am still learning to articulate them), the fact that some viewers, yourself included, may be familiar with feminist writing would make all the difference. If we don't center our attention on this so-called conflict in the film, then there's a whole other narrative layer that may come to the front. This is the realm in which Kieu as a character shuttles between more than one identity and contributes to the afterlives of *The Tale*. No matter how non-illustrative the relation is, the film's present-day Kieu who lives as an immigrant in the States and does research on the "Tale of Kieu" is also embodying the poem's 19th-century Kieu who sacrifices herself for love; and in that sense, she partakes in the life experiences of

the thousands of all-time Kieus whom her Aunt mentioned in the film. As with my other films, there are many forms of reflexivity in *A Tale of Love*. And working with them means opening up to the possibility of engaging with infinity within the very finiteness of a constructed film space. Kieu's self-reflectivity and reflexivity constantly shift; the question is not simply that of doubling—one looks into the mirror and sees a reflection or a double of oneself—but that of one reflection reflecting another reflection to infinity. Kieu's reality here is in tune both with the boundless (or bounding) reality of love, and with the radically reflexive nature of cinema and writing. It is this notion of shifting interface and reflection, with no side passing for the original, that really interests me, especially in working with voyeurism in this film.



GF: Another aspect that I really liked about the film is that it obviously is a meditation on the discourse around the politics of women and objectification and voyeurism. I felt engaged in a performance that was voyeuristic and at the same time made me critique that place of voyeurism.

TMH: Yes, I think the film can offer the viewer a unique entryway when it is placed in the context of feminism; but if you miss that entryway, there are other possible ways to enter *A Tale of Love*, because the voyeur has appeared quite prominently in a number of writers', filmmakers' and artists' works. One can look at the entire history of narrative in terms of voyeurism--how different forms of voyeurism are deployed in order to sustain narrative power, and how they are made to go unnoticed, especially among spectators who, unaware of their complicity as screen voyeurs, want to be "convinced" of what they see. In other words, the production of (unacknowledged) voyeurism and the consumption of realist narrative continue to feed on each other. It's difficult for me to tell right now how audiences are viewing the film because it has just been released. From the screenings I attended, its reception already oscillates between a very high discomfort and a very intense, enthusiastic response.

GF: Maybe even a bit of both. I do remember being a bit shocked that you were taking on what can be shown and what cannot be shown. I mean, we're looking at women being looked at and with all the discourse around women being reduced to their object status of to-be-looked-at-ness. It made me constantly ask myself questions such as, how is Trinh, as a woman filmmaker, different in her representation of voyeurism? How can I negotiate the many different narrative strands of the film with relation to the questions of voyeurism and spectatorship? How is this moving the discourse of pornography further beyond rigid moralistically defined ideals?

TMH: Right. Actually the film does not really show nudity in a pornographic way and it doesn't have any lovemaking scenes, for example. As a filmmaker has said it before, when it comes to lovemaking, all actors just start looking like all other actors. The way lovemaking scenes are realized on film remains quite homogenous throughout the history of commercial narrative. Knowing my background, it was perhaps unavoidable that you would ask how a feminist treatment of voyeurism could be different, but this is one way of approaching *A Tale of Love*. I would say that the viewers' discomfort with it so far seem to be less easily locatable,

perhaps because it takes time to articulate this discomfort, and there is no consensus among them as to where or what disturbs them. Some think it's the script; some, the lack of plot and unified storyline; others, the acting and the actors; and others yet, the explicit recognition of themselves being voyeurs.

A number of comments did focus on the acting, which some spectators find "hard to look at," "self-conscious," "distant," "odd," or they simply "didn't like the style." Informed viewers have invoked similarities with the films of Straub and Huillet or of Duras. What seems striking in the more negative comments is the fact that viewers differ markedly in their opinions about the specific actors: the one they really have problem with is definitely not always the same (and this applies "democratically" to all five main actors of the film), and yet each sees in *one* and only one particular actor the unequivocal source of their discomfort. Several viewers have also divided the acting, in accordance with the setting and the characters, into three levels: more natural, more stylized, and in between the two, mid-stylized. By these comments, it seems likely to me that the viewer is uncomfortable, because she or he feels some of the acute moments when the actors themselves are self-conscious. This is exactly what I was aiming for, although I was not sure what the exact outcome would be. *A Tale of Love* does not fall squarely into the kind of film whose actors' deliveries sound deliberately *read* or monotonously flat because the artifice is clearly exposed as such. There are a number of films that work in that direction; Yvonne Rainer's films, for example. In my case, I was experimenting with different effects in a slightly different space, and I didn't want the scripted lines to sound distinctly "read." I would let the actors try to make their deliveries as naturalistic as possible because I knew that the "dialogues" I wrote could not be entirely naturalized, although what ultimately resists being naturalized remains undefined, and hence fascinating to me.

GF: So, in a sense, you're acting as an ethnographer of performance itself. You are problematizing acting styles in ways that question naturalistic expression. I'm thinking particularly of moments such as when Kieu tells the photographer, Alikan, that what he really wants is a headless body. There's a sense, as a viewer, that she may