RESOLUTIONS 3
Global Networks of Video

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The Voice of Blindness
ON THE SOUND TACTICS OF TRAN T. KIM-TRANG’S
THE BLINDNESS SERIES

Ming-Yuen S. Ma

Using the Negative to Bring out the Positive

I approach Vietnamese American video artist Tran T. Kim-Trang’s The Blindness Series (1992–2006), a collection of eight experimental single-channel videotapes, in a manner that is markedly different from traditional media scholarship. In this study I do not assume the position of the detached and supposedly objective scholar who has a critical distance from her or his subject. The position I assume in this study is that of the engaged observer. I have known Tran as a longtime friend, colleague, and sometimes collaborator for almost eighteen years. I have participated in the different aspects of The Blindness Series and am familiar with the processes through which Tran realized each of the videos. Furthermore, like Tran, I am an artist working in media, familiar with the process of video production, and one who shares some of her concerns and interests. I believe this sustained interaction with and intimate knowledge of the conception, production, distribution, and reception of the videos in The Blindness Series provides me with a perspective that is not available to a more traditional media scholar.

In this essay I focus on the audio elements in the eight videotapes. I begin with a general analysis of how sound is used in the series and deduce some overall strategies and tactics that Tran deploys in her use of these audio elements. Although the sound tracks for the videos differ greatly, ranging from polyphonic to minimalist in their makeup, the voice-over narration emerges as one of The Blindness Series’ central audio devices. I then examine Tran’s use of voice through two theoretical frameworks: one, voice as a metaphor for subjectivity and, two, voice in its materiality. I focus my discussion of these frameworks on two of the videos in the series. In the first, I draw from the French feminist vision of a polyvocal and corporeal feminine discourse to discuss the many voices within Khe (1994). In the second I use the cinematic sound theories of French writer and composer Michel Chion, primarily drawn from his books Audio-Vision: Sound on

My focus on sound in a video series very much concerned with vision may seem off target to some. I argue, however, that Tran herself adopts a similar strategy in her videos. Her use of blindness—commonly understood as the lack of vision—as both metaphor and phenomena in the series is a strategy of using the negative to accentuate the positive. In her exploration of topics ranging from hysterical blindness to video surveillance to cosmetic eyelid surgery, Tran consistently shows that the lack of vision speaks volume about visuality itself and that those without the ability to see are sometimes able to elucidate and comment on visual culture in ways that the sighted cannot. In my exploration of the sound tactics in the series, I adopt a strategy parallel to Tran’s. In the introduction to his book on the history of sound reproduction, The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction, Jonathan Sterne points out that although much attention has been paid to the theorization of visual culture within the humanities in disciplines such as art, art history, and film and media studies, as well as cultural studies, comparatively scarce efforts have been made to theorize a sound culture. He refers to it as “visual hegemony.” Within the field of film and media studies, a particular manifestation of this hegemony can be seen in a lack of studies focused on sound in or as media, in comparison with the plethora of visually centered studies, debates, and schools of thought. In most cases audio components in a film or video are overlooked in favor of visually centered analyses and only addressed as an afterthought, if at all. Michel Chion went as far as declaring that “there is no soundtrack,” arguing that “the sounds of a film, taken separately from the image, do not form an internally coherent entity on equal footing with the image track.” Chion also points out that in the vast majority of sync-sound films, “each audio element enters into simultaneous vertical relationship with narrative elements contained in the image (characters, actions) and visual elements of texture and setting.” That is to say, the meaning of an audio element in these films has more to do with the visual image it interacts with than with the other sounds around it.

It is significant to point out that most media scholars of sound have focused their studies on feature-length narrative films. Chion bases his observations primarily on Hollywood cinema and European and Japanese art films. Silverman, like Chion, also bases her discussion primarily on narrative films. Although she cites examples of feminist avant-garde films in her discussion, they are ones that are concerned with expanding upon dominant cinema’s feature narrative form. As I hope to demonstrate, Tran’s experimental videos, though they share some of the concerns of narrative films, utilize tactics and strategies that are radically
different. More important, in her use of sound, the instances in which the audio becomes the primary conveyor of meaning far exceed those I have found in narrative feature films. Of course, Tran’s oeuvre represents only a case study, and there is a wide variety of experimental media, each with their different usage and deployment of sound. In a preliminary way, however, I believe the use of sound as the primary conveyor of meaning in Tran’s work gestures toward an argument that sound as the primary conveyor is more likely in experimental media—as opposed to narrative feature films—since more of an equilibrium can be struck between the visual and the audio. It follows that in the study of such media, visual hegemony can be challenged and destabilized. By drawing attention to sound in The Blindness Series, an element often overlooked in the visually hegemonic field of media studies, I am focusing my discussion of Tran’s work on elements outside visual representation and ones that speak to its limitations, thus enacting my own strategy of using the negative to accentuate the positive.

The Uses of Sound in The Blindness Series

Tran utilizes a wide variety of audio elements in The Blindness Series, including voice-over, interviews, dialogue appropriated from Hollywood films, and recorded conversations and readings, as well as music ranging from Beethoven to the Stereo MCs. Her sound tactics also vary from video to video. The multi-track polyphony of Aletheia (1992) and Kow, in which the layering and cross-cutting between different audio tracks reflect a channel-surfing aesthetic, are in marked contrast to the stark minimalism of Operculum (1993), Ocularis (1997), and Ekleipsis, in which the voice-over is the primary sound track. Tran herself remarks that as the series progressed she used fewer and fewer appropriated sounds. Instead, in the later videos she shifted her focus to using narration written by herself and others. Whereas the first four videos in the series, Aletheia, Operculum, Kow, and Ocularis, seem to alternate between polyphonic and minimalist sound tactics, the three videos produced since 1998, Ekleipsis, Alexia, and Amaurosis (2002), feature minimal sound tracks that privilege the human voice-over music and other found sound. Amaurosis, in which Beethoven’s “Moonlight Sonata” emerges as the principal audio text, is the exception here.

In his books Audio-Vision and The Voice in Cinema, Michel Chion identifies the human voice as the sound that is almost always privileged in the cinema. He describes this primacy of speech as “vococentrism,” where the human voice “is isolated in the sound mix like a solo instrument—for which the other sounds (music and noise) are merely the accompaniment.” The human voice also is a central audio element in The Blindness Series, but unlike in the narrative films that inform Chion’s writings, Tran’s use of the voice is almost exclusively focused on voice-over narration. It is the primary vocal element in all but one of the videos.
in the series. *Anamnesis* (2002) is a video portrait of blind musician Nguyen Duc Dat organized around a series of interviews with Nguyen. The talking heads interview format is also used in *Kore*, in which Peou Lakhana, an AIDS worker and participant in the video, discusses the relationship between women, AIDS/HIV, and blindness. Although this sequence employs a documentary format, it is in fact staged, and Peou’s statements are scripted.13 *Aletheia, Kore*, and *Alexia* all include voice-over narration, whereas in *Oculum* the plastic surgeons unwittingly narrate most of the video.14 The sound tracks of *Ocularis* and *Ekleipsis* are entirely composed from voice-overs.

In *Kore*, *Ocularis*, *Ekleipsis*, and *Alexia*, voices are frequently altered through the use of analog technology and different vocal accents.15 The alteration of voices through technology and performance in *The Blindness Series* begins with *Aletheia*, but its usage becomes more prominent in the later works. In *Ocularis* this tactic is used to partly mask the vocal identities of participants who responded to an ad that Tran placed nationally to solicit fears and fantasies about video surveillance. Participants called a 1-800 toll-free phone number and recorded their fantasies on its voicemail. The video includes some of these messages as a part of its sound track, but the pitch of the participants’ voices is altered to mask their identities. In other videos from the series, voices are altered to lend different meanings to the narration. *Kore* includes a passage from Georges Bataille’s *Story of the Eye* narrated in a male voice with a raunchy southern accent, which destabilizes the national origin of the text with a sexual twist.16 Its counterpart in the video is an erotic female whisper that describes female masturbatory fantasies involving the eye. This voice is miked close to the body with no reverb, whereas reverb is added to the male voice in order to make the speaker sound like he is speaking from inside a tunnel or through a tube. In *Ocularis* a fictional account of a paranoid woman obsessed with surveillance is narrated by a high-pitched female voice that also sports a southern accent. In this case, however, her accent serves to locate her geographically and also to hint at her racial and class background.17 In his 1977 essay “The Grain of the Voice,” Roland Barthes borrows from Julia Kristeva’s use of *pheno-text* and *geno-text* in his effort to distinguish between the phenomena of a song and its materiality.18 In Barthes’s formulation the pheno-song “covers all the phenomena, all the features which belong to the structure of the language being sung, the rules of the genre, the coded form of the melisma, the composer’s idiolect, the style of the interpretation,” whereas the geno-song “is the volume of the singing and speaking voice, the space where significations germinate ‘from within language and in its very materiality.’”19 He further theorizes the latter’s mode of signification as in “not what it says, but the voluptuousness of its sound-signifiers, of its letters—where melody explores how the language works and identifies with that work. It is, in a very simple word but which must be taken seriously, the *dictum* of the language.” Barthes calls this signifier the “grain” of the voice.20 Through changing the pitch, reverb, and
accents of the voice in her videos, Tran uses its grain to alter the meaning of these passages. In Ocularis the diction of the voice-over, as well as its content, contributes equally to the meaning of the narration. In the two narrations from Kore, however, the audio processing and accents are emphasized to such a degree that a significant portion of the words in the voice-over becomes difficult to comprehend. So to transpose Barthes’s transposition of Kristeva, unlike traditional voice-over narrations, where the pheno-voice-over is usually the conveyer of meaning, the geno-voice-over in these two narrations overwhelms the pheno-voice-over and becomes the primary sound-signifier. Here, the diction of the language has overpowered its words.

Kore: Multivocality as Metaphor

In addition to working with the materiality of a voice, Tran’s juxtaposition of many voices within videos such as Aletheia, Kore, and Alexia engages with recent debates on subjectivity and authorship. The notion of a singular authorial voice has been complicated by theoretical practices such as poststructuralism and deconstruction, where subjectivity is attributed to the act of reading and looking as much as to the act of writing and creating, thereby constructing the meaning of a work through the intermingling of multiple subjects. This feminist critical theory, in particular which draws from Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, has also contributed to this complex notion of subjectivity, fragmenting the singular voice of the author into many voices speaking within a complex system of repressions and drives, a multitude that challenges the singularity of phallocentric domination in language and in visual culture. Tran’s multitrack sensibility and her inclusion of diverse source material in The Blindness Series certainly reflect an affinity toward a multivocal model of subjectivity. There also exists within the videos, however, an antithetical privileging of selected voices. These are voices that speak about the experiences of women (Aletheia, Operculum, Kore, Ocularis, and Ekleipsis), people of color (Aletheia, Operculum, Kore, Ocularis, Ekleipsis, and Amatusosis), and queers (Aletheia and Kore), as well as similarly marginalized voices that are under- or misrepresented in dominant media. In this sense The Blindness Series shares with other works drawing from marginalized experiences a commitment to create visibility for these groups and to challenge their misrepresentation in the dominant media. These struggles in representation are often described as “finding a voice” or “claiming a voice,” in which previously suppressed voices are affirmed and celebrated.

Kore is a good example of how these seemingly contradictory sensibilities can coexist within a singular work. Kore incorporates many different voices—in the form of voice-over, text, music, interview, and found sound. In this video that investigates “the conjunction of sexuality with: the eye as purveyor of desire; the sexual fear and fantasy of blindness, with a focus on the blindfold; and women
and AIDS,” Tran has drawn from texts by Bataille and Luce Irigaray, as well as Sexual Behavior in the Human Female, Eros Denied, and AIDS and Vision Loss, music by Loop Guru and A Thousand Points of Light, and film clips from Zombie, Flesh Gordon, The Dark Half, Gothic, Swelter in Vogue, One Eye Leads, Damage, and Tokyo Decadence. Tran weaves these many and different voices together into a flow of images, sound, and text, often juxtaposing different voices in a single sequence. The opening sequence of the video pairs the techno song “Read My Lips” by A Thousand Points of Light with rescanned images of a woman masturbating. The irony of this juxtaposition recalls the Situationist’s method of détournement, where “the reuse of preexisting artistic elements in a new ensemble” can be deployed as a critique of the source material. In this sequence the source material is former U.S. president George H. W. Bush’s catchphrase “read my lips”—already decontextualized by the musicians of A Thousand Points of Light, who sampled it in an electronic techno beat. Tran further destabilizes its meaning by pairing the song with a close-up image of a vagina, shot in a circular pan off a video monitor lying flat on the floor. The camera, acting as a surrogate for the viewer’s eye, circles the image while zooming in. What is initially perceived to be an abstract, strobing light is revealed to be an image of female masturbation sped up to match the frenetic beat of the song. Though this sequence can certainly be seen as an ironic feminist rebuttal to Bush’s conservative politics, it can also be read as a direct reference to Luce Irigaray’s essay “When Our Lips Speak Together” in This Sex which is Not One. The “lips” in the title of this essay refer to both the lips on a woman’s mouth as well as her vulval lips. Indeed, Irigaray’s vision of female sexuality is an important reference for Tran in this video, and Irigaray’s theories of a multivocal, nonhierarchical, and corporeal feminine discourse also correspond to the polyphonic, channel-surfing sensibility in Kore.

Between our lips, yours and mine, several voices, several ways of speaking resound endlessly, back and forth. One is never separable from the other. You/I: we are always several at once. And how could one dominate the other? Impose her voice, her tone, her meaning? One cannot be distinguished from the other; which does not mean that they are indistinct. You don’t understand a thing! No more than they understand you.

Speak, all the same. It’s our good fortune that your language isn’t formed of a single thread, a single strand or pattern. It comes from everywhere at once. You touch me all over at the same time. In all senses.

Feminine discourse (écriture féminine) is a practice of writing and speaking proposed by a group of French feminists as a discourse that “will always exceed the discourse governing the phallicentric system; it takes place and will take place somewhere other than in the territories subordinated to philosophical-theoretical domination.” Hélène Cixous further describes feminine discourse
as “a text that divides itself, pulls itself to pieces, dismembers itself, regroups, [and] remembers itself.” Although Tran is working in video, Kore’s nonlinear structure and its blending of heterogeneous elements work surprisingly well with Cixous’s description of a text-based practice. And Tran’s juxtaposition of source material, ranging from horror films to AIDS activist literature to techno music, certainly befits Cixous’s pronouncement of letting “the other tongue of a thousand tongues speak.” The emphasis on the close relationship between voice, language, and desire in feminine discourse is also evident in Kore, where the narration is often modulated with whispers, groans, and other nonverbal sounds of the body. Furthermore, Tran’s use of analog audio effects and performance to create particular articulations in the voice-over, such as in the passage from Bataille’s Story of the Eye performed by the male voice with a southern accent, is very much a realization of Cixous’s vision of interweaving writing and voice so that meaning is engendered through the process of writing and speaking the text. Kore operates, however, only up to a point within the paradigm of feminine discourse. Though Tran’s efforts to reclaim the blindfold and her exploration into a touch-based eroticism in the video echo Irigaray’s notion of a fluid, all-over female sexuality, her inclusion of male voices in Kore, as well as her foregrounding of race, challenges Irigaray’s utopian fantasy of “constantly touching herself” and “speaking resound endlessly.” Besides quotations from Bataille, Kore also includes video segments from two male collaborators. One, by artist Tyler Stallings, features a model spaceship crash landing into a flaccid penis, and the other, contributed by myself, is an excerpt from my video Slanted Vision (1995), which was created in collaboration with writer Han Ong. In this segment Super 8 footage of Asian men shot in the streets of Hong Kong and San Francisco is projected onto my face and body and reshoot on video. The film and video footage are then edited together with a voice-over, written and performed by Ong, who speaks about reclaiming our subjectivity as queer Asian men through the act of looking. Though feminine discourse is certainly not theorized as being restricted to female practitioners only, and Irigaray repeatedly speaks of being “several at once,” it is undeniable that the multivocality within feminine discourse is very much theorized through the sexual plurality attributed to an essentialized female body.

In her book The Acoustic Mirror, Kaja Silverman critiques Irigaray’s heavy reliance on the binary opposition of male and female, and she cites Ann Rosalind Jones’s enumeration of the psychic, physical, social, economic, and political differences among women, which Irigaray tends to ignore in her utopian discourse. Though Tran seems to depart from the essentialist paradigm of feminine discourse through her inclusion of male voices in Kore, it is also significant to note that the men in Kore can hardly be considered as normative within the phallocentric system. Bataille’s vision of sexuality is perverse, excessive, and...
equally transgressive across all genders. Tyler Stallings’s image of the penis, a symbol of phallic power, is flaccid and crash landed upon. The narrator in my projection sequence articulates his desire for other Asian men. It is also significant to note that the most joyous and pleasurable sequence in Kore is one that shows two blindfolded Asian women making love to the Loop Guru’s “Hymn,” a song that pairs electronic drum beats with South Asian instrumentation and the ecstatic ululation of a female vocalist. In this sequence, at the culmination of the video, the images of the Asian women explode in saturated reds and oranges. The swooning camera is placed very close to the women, giving the viewers a sense of being in the middle of the lovemaking. The footage conveys a sense of haptic tactility through its strobes and blurs—a result from being shot at a low shutter speed. With its imagery of women loving women and its celebration of touch-based pleasure, this climactic sequence in Kore can again be read within the paradigm of feminine discourse. Another passage from Cixous seems an apt description here:

The Voice sings from a time before law, before the Symbolic took one's breath away and reappropriated it into language under its authority of separation. The deepest, the oldest, the loveliest Visitation. Within each woman the first, nameless love is singing.40

The key signifiers in this sequence—the blindfold, the Asian features and bodies of the women, the South Asian instrumentation and female vocalist—locate this sequence, however, outside European and American cultural contexts. The pleasure represented here, blinded, nonverbal, and touch based, is apart from European and American paradigms of vision and language. Thus, this sequence and what it represents are also situated outside the discourse of the Lacanian Symbolic. In addition, since one of the Asian women here is Peou Lakhana, whom we have seen speaking as an AIDS worker in other parts of the video, the presumed primitivism of non-Western bodies and the preverbal pleasure of the sequence are disrupted by Peou’s other representation as articulate, knowledgeable, rational, and very much within the Western context of an AIDS activist. When the credits roll at the end of the video, we hear Peou’s voice reflecting upon her experience performing in this scene. Her self-reflexive voice further complicates any essentialist readings of the lovemaking sequence while it also situates it among the many other voices in the video.

Trauma and Vocal Embodiment in Ekleipsis

While Tran’s Kore incorporates many voices and different modes of articulation, the sound track of another video in The Blindness Series, Ekleipsis, is by contrast
starkly minimal. In *Ekleipsis* the soundtrack is composed entirely from voice-over narration. All of the voices in the video are women’s voices, which parallel the video’s focus on a group of Cambodian women refugees living in Long Beach, California. They are known as the largest group of hysterically blind people in the world. All of the voices in the video have been altered, resulting in different degrees of audibility. These voices fill up most of the soundtrack and are interrupted only twice in the video by text quotes that are silent. The images from the video are similarly restrained, consisting of shots of the textual history of Cambodia in close-up pans, newsreel photographs of Cambodians during the reign of the Khmer Rouge, and a series of images, separated by black space, that repeats throughout the video, with the clips becoming longer as the video progresses. These sequences are composed from media images of Cambodia appropriated from TV news, documentaries, and fictional film sources, as well as symbolic images that include close-up shots of jewelry, glasses, a pineapple, and rice. The video opens and closes with a low-pitch and distorted voice that speaks in the first person. This is the fictionalized voice of the Cambodian women and the most difficult to comprehend in the video. Other voices in the video include what I call the academic/psychoanalyst voice and the journalistic voice. There are several variations of the academic/psychoanalyst voice. All are high pitched and performed with a haughty accent. The journalistic voice sounds the least altered and is the most clearly audible in the video. While the voice of the Cambodian women frames the video, most of its body consists of exchanges between the two other voices in which the journalistic voice, speaking in the second person, recounts the horrific experiences of the Cambodian women under the Khmer Rouge. The academic/psychoanalyst voice, speaking in the third person, discusses the history of hysteria, trauma, and psychoanalysis in a European and American context. This voice is the most theoretically dense and emotionally detached in the work. There is, about halfway through the video, a brief interlude from these two voices when a young girl recounts, in first person, her experience in the Khmer Rouge labor camps. Tran’s sister, Namolisa Slommons, performs this narration, and Tran performs the other voices.

The French term for voice-over is *voix-off*. According to Michel Chion, voix-off designates any bodiless voice in a film that tells stories, provides commentary, or evokes the past. Chion’s book *The Voice in Cinema* is very much concerned with disembodied voices in cinema. In the book he focuses on the concept of the *acousmêtre*—the magical, all-knowing, and all-powerful voice that is not attached to a body and one whose power is lost when its source becomes visible. Chion traces the origins of the *acousmêtre* to the voice of the *montreur d’images*, the picture presenter who narrated the lantern slide shows that toured through the French countryside in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These shows were one of the precursors to modern cinema, and the voice of the *montreur*
d'images, who read from texts designed to accompany these shows, sometimes called "talking journals," became integrated into the cinematic device of the voice-over. Although Chion bases his observations primarily on narrative cinema, his concept of the acousmêtre is very similar to the voice-of-god narrator used in documentaries. Like the acousmêtre, the voice-of-god narrator is all knowing and often disembodied. Like the montreur d'images, the disembodied narrator in documentaries often dictates meaning to the images that the viewers are watching. Though none of the voices in Ekleipsis are synchronized to a body (or "nailed," to use Marguerite Duras's term), the journalistic voice and the academic/psychoanalyst voice both exhibit characteristics of an acousmatic voice. The journalistic voice provides the viewers with information about the experiences of the Cambodian women. It is not quite a voice-of-god narration in that it does not directly comment on the images seen. It connects to the images in video by virtue of its subject matter and at specific moments when objects it mentions appear on the screen. Even though it is often narrating horrific experiences, it remains objective, neutral, and emotionless, very much within the realm of rationality by virtue of its audibility and inflection. The academic/psychoanalyst voice is denser in that it speaks in a theoretical language, and its accent serves to add to this sense of detachment. It provides metacommentary on the predicament of the women but never connects to their experiences. It intellectualizes their suffering in the abstract language of theories and symptoms.

The third voice in the video, the one that represents the Cambodian women, is the most difficult to hear and to understand. Its pitch is lowered so much that it hardly sounds like a woman's voice. The reverb is distorted to the degree that it sounds like the narrator is swallowing her words or that the words are struggling to burst out of her throat. These effects, along with an exaggerated intonation, make her words virtually incomprehensible. In The Voice in Cinema, Chion traces a particular kind of acousmatic voice that he calls the "I-voice." He writes:

The cinematic I-voice is not just the voice that says "I," as in a novel. To solicit the spectator's identification, that is, for the spectator to appropriate it to any degree, it must be framed and recorded in a certain manner. Only then can it function as a pivot of identification, resonating in us as if it were our own voice, like a voice in first person.

For Chion the I-voice is characterized by two qualities: close miking and dryness, or an absence of reverb. These qualities create in us, the viewers, "an intimacy with the voice, such that we sense no distance between it and our ear," and a lack of "concrete and identifiable space" with which to situate and distance the voice from ourselves. The voice representing the Cambodian women in Ekleipsis shares some of the characteristics of Chion's I-voice. It is closely miked
and situated very close to our bodies. In fact, I would venture that its sonorous qualities place it inside our bodies. When we hear it, this voice becomes lodged deep inside our throats, struggling to get out, to be formed into comprehensible words. This effect is similar to a concept Chion calls “corporeal implication,” “when the voice makes us feel in our body the vibration of the body of the other.” Chion also notes that extreme cases of corporeal implication occur “when there is no dialogue or words, but only closely present breathing or groans or sighs.”

It is significant to note that although the Cambodian women’s voice is speaking a comprehensible and powerful text, its articulation of this text renders the meaning of its words virtually incomprehensible, resembling the bodily sounds mentioned. Therefore, the meaning of these passages is conferred not so much in the text of the voice-over but in its sonority. More so than in the two narrations from Kore, here the geno-voice-over takes precedence over the pheno-voice-over as the conveyer of meaning. Tran is able to create a voice in which its grain, corporeally implicated deep inside our bodies, can both give us a sense of the horrors these women experienced and impinge upon us the impossible struggle of articulating their experiences in rational speech and language.

Chion also discusses the relationship between vocal embodiment and horror in The Voice in Cinema, in which he cites the correlation between the French terms for embodiment (mise-en-corps), entombment (mise-en-hière), and interment (mise-en-terre), closely linking vocal embodiment to death and burial. In his book he uses the example of Alfred Hitchcock’s Psycho (1960) to elucidate his point. The three speeches delivered by the mother’s voice in the film progressively reveal Norman’s psychosis by bringing her voice closer and closer to his body. This is accomplished through the progressive elimination of reverb in her voice on the film’s sound track, so that by the time Norman is revealed as the murderer, captured, and put in a holding cell at the police station, the mother’s voice is completely nailed to his body. We see Norman’s face in a close-up, his mouth unmoving, yet we hear the mother’s last monologue as if she is speaking from within his body. His gestures and facial expression correspond to her speech. Her voice is dry, and there is no reverb, creating an effect that Chion describes as “to suggest possession by spirits, or ventriloquism.” In this impossible embodiment, the dead mother has completely possessed Norman through her voice. For Chion the embodiment of another’s voice is almost always a horrific experience. He traces this association between horror and vocal embodiment back to the uterus, where he envisions a child being complete engulfed by the “sonorous envelope” of the mother’s voice. Kaja Silverman has critiqued Chion’s fantasy as a symptom of male paranoia and castration, and she argues that disembodying the female voice can be a challenge to “every conception by means of which we have previously known women within Hollywood film, since it is precisely as body that she is constructed there.”
through impossible embodiment is not the horror of the phallic mother but the horrors of war and atrocities. The voice of the Cambodian women is not the voice of a dead woman. It is a fictionalized voice that draws from the collective witnessing by these women survivors of the horrific acts committed by the Khmer Rouge—acts horrifying enough to disable their vision, rendering them hysterically blind. Yet this voice, like the voice of Norman’s dead mother, is out to possess bodies. It lodges itself in our throats, struggling to burst out. We feel its vibrations buried deep within us. We experience the women’s trauma through its grain. We are corporeally implicated by how we often distance ourselves, very much in the manner of the other voices in the video, from atrocities that happen in other countries and other cultures. Instead of being engendered within the sound design of the filmic text, the embodiment facilitated by Ekleipsis happens outside the video’s textual body and inside the bodies of its viewers.

Whether an incomprehensible voice that speaks of the horrors of hunger, torture, and execution or a scene of touch-based pleasure represented in audio-visual imagery, there is a consistent endeavor within Tran’s The Blindness Series to speak the unspeakable and to show that which cannot be seen. To understand these seeming paradoxes, we return to the beginning of this essay and to the strategy of using the negative to emphasize the positive. Just as the empty spaces in a Chinese landscape painting by thirteenth-century painter Mu-ch’I defines its pictorial elements, blindness—the lack of vision—structures our perception of what is visible in this video series. In a similar way, the many voices within The Blindness Series, both metaphorical and material, speak to the limitations of visuality. Speaking in many tongues and sometimes in the nonverbal diction of whispers, groans, and cries, these voices speak about what is outside visual representation. What they collectively say is that both pleasure and horror maybe unrepresentable or that our current visually hegemonic system of representation is inadequate to portray these experiences. In her videos, Tran presents us with glimpses of possible alternatives: voice, music, touch, multisensory experiences, and multiple subjectivities. In a project that is so concerned with visuality, it is these nonvisual elements that make full what we do see in the videos.

NOTES

1. I draw this position in part from a history of media practitioners who have engaged as actively in theoretical debates as they have in the actual production of media, ranging from Sergei Eisenstein to Claude Rocha to Trinh T. Minh-ha. Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien also articulate a similar position of speaking from, as opposed to speaking for, a community in the production of art and media that articulate marginalized experiences. See Kobena Mercer, “Skin Head Sex Thing: Racial Difference and the Homoerotic Imaginary,” in How Do I Look?

2. I first met Tran in 1995 when we were both graduate art students at the California Institute of the Arts. We are now both media studies professors at the Claremont Colleges, Tran at Scripps College and myself at Pitzer College. I am a collaborator in _Aletheia_ and _Koro_—contributing segments in both videos—and I shot footage for both _Koro_ and _Operulum_. I have screened almost all of the videos in the series as rough cuts and gave Tran feedback before she finalized them.

3. Here, I am paraphrasing Jo, the main character in Wayne Wang’s film _Chan Is Missing_ (1981). Jo is referring to the fact that the missing Chan was never found in the film, but in the process of looking for him, a vibrant portrait of San Francisco’s Chinatown and its colorful residents emerges. One could argue that it is not so much the absent Chan but the community into which he has disappeared that becomes the focus of the film. Besides the reference to Wang’s film, the strategy of using negative space in a composition to accentuate positively rendered elements is a central device in Chinese landscape painting and garden design and an aesthetic feature in many East and Southeast Asian cultures.


5. Semiotics, psychoanalysis, and the ongoing debates on representations of race, gender, and sexuality are some obvious examples. There are some media scholars who are moving away from this visually centered approach and are choosing to focus on how other senses affect the production and reception of media. See, for example, Laura U. Marks’s work on touch-based cinema, discussed in her books _The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses_ (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999); and _Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensorial Media_ (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

6. Other than a body of historical scholarship focused on the transition from silent to sound film and one on musical film scores, media studies scholarship on sound is few and far between. Michel Chion and Kaja Silverman’s work, already mentioned, are notable exceptions, as are Lascura, _Sound Technology and the American Cinema_; and Amy Lawrence, _Echo and Narcissus: Women’s Voices in Classical Hollywood Cinema_ (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991). Rick Altman has done groundbreaking work on sound and early cinema, as well as the musical, in _Silent Film Sound_ (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); _The American Film Musical_ (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989); _Sound Theory, Sound Practice_ (New York: Routledge, 1992); and _The Sounds of Early Cinema_, eds. Richard Abel and Rick Altman (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001). Elisabeth Weis and John Belton coedited one of the earlier anthologies on the subject, _Film Sound: Theory and Practice_ (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

8. Ibid., 40.
10. I cataloged the following musical sources from Tran’s seven videos: the Angry Samoans, Ludwig van Beethoven, the Eagles, the Kronos Quartet, Loop Guru, Roy Orbison, Santana, Andres Segovia, the Stereo MCs, and A Thousand Points of Light, as well as traditional Vietnamese music performed by Luu Thuy and Kim Tien, Xuan Que Huong, and Phan Van.
13. The constructed nature of this sequence is apparent to me because I was the cameraperson who shot it, but I think other viewers are given hints to its fictitiousness through the mannered quality of her speech and the use of preplanned close-up shots.
14. For *Operculum* Tran posed as a woman considering cosmetic eyelid surgery to obtain video and audio recordings of the consultations. She told the doctors that her parents in Hong Kong would view the videotapes, recorded by her cousin (played by myself, doubling as camera operator), and decide which doctor to hire. The plastic surgeons were unaware that their recorded voices would be included in an experimental video.
15. Tran explained that she used analog devices such as pitch changes on audio cassette decks, guitar pedals, and the delivery choices of the performer (often herself) to alter the voices. E-mail interview with author, June 6, 2004.
16. *The Story of the Eye* by Georges Bataille was written in French, and the story takes place in France and Spain. Narrating the story in a male voice with a southern accent adds to the text both class and national associations not present in the text itself, which then further alters its sexualized content.
17. Although the identity of the speaker is never revealed in the video, she reads as white and lower middle class, in a similar way to the male narrator for the Bataille text. The content and construction (phrases, word choice, inflection) of her narration provide some clues, which are visually reinforced by surveillance footage of Latino youth questioned by the police in the video, shot from the point of view of the speaker/camera.
19. Ibid., 205.
20. Ibid., 204–95.
22. See the work of French feminists, including Hélène Cixous, Catherine Clement, Luce Irigaray, and Monique Wittig. The work of two of these writers, Cixous and Irigaray, are discussed in this essay.
23. Examples include the voices of refugees in *Ekripis*, people with AIDS/HIV in *Kore*, and the differently abled in *Amastrosis*.
24. The voice frequently appears in the context of struggles for representation by women, people of color, and queers, as well as other marginalized groups. There are numerous anthologies within the fields of cultural studies and ethnic studies that incorporate “voice” in their titles, as in “the voice of the marginalized” or “voices from the margins.” This practice extends into exhibitions, performances, testimonials, oral histories, etc. For example, a docu-
mentary by Arthur Dong on the oldest Asian American media arts center, Visual Communications, is titled **Claiming a Voice** (1990).

25. From the synopsis on the video box of *Knots*.


27. The use of **detournement** in this sequence can be read as commentary on Bush’s atrocious record on reproductive rights and AIDS/HIV policies during his term in office, not to mention his role in the 1991 Gulf War.

28. The multiple meaning of the “lips” in this essay can be read into the phrase “two lips kissing two lips,” as well as from other parts of the essay of the same title; see Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), 210. See also Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 24, for discussion of female autoeroticism.

29. Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 209.


31. Ibid., 84.

32. The French word **écriture feminine** has been translated variously as “text,” “discourse,” and other English words to expand its meaning beyond simply writing and into acts of production.


34. Cixous writes, “First I sense femininity in writing by: a privilege of voice: writing and voice are entwined and interwoven and writing’s continuity/ voice’s rhythm take each other’s breath away through interchanging, making the text gasp or form it out of suspenses and silences, make it lose its voice or rend it with cries.” Cixous and Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, 92.

35. Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 29, 209.

36. The full text of the voice-over is included here without indications of breaks in Ong’s phrasing: “The sea / of likeness. / A Sea of likeness. / The eye, much like a camera, betrays its owner’s conscience / seeking out its own reflecting in a crowd / seeking affirmation of self despite Mass Media’s instruction to do otherwise / despite Mass Media’s recurrent catechism to obliterate the ’I’ / and the me / and their various counterparts / If the ’I’ and the me / happen to be non-white / That is to say if the ’I’ and the me / happen to be me. / Looking, judging, adjusting, affirming . . . / The soul’s tongue is the eye / and everyday, by looking, judging, adjusting, / and affirming its mirror image anywhere, everywhere / It reclaim its ’I’ness back from those who attempt to render it / invisible.”


38. Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 209.


41. From the synopsis on the video box of *Ekleipsis*.

42. One of the two quotes recounts an old Buddhist prophecy in which an era of misfortune in Cambodia is foretold. The other is by Sigmund Freud. Two other text quotes appear in the video: one, by David Sanders, is silent and precedes the first voice-over, and the other, by Jean-David Nasio, is located at the end of the video. The last voice-over is spoken over this quote and runs into the end credits.

43. Image sources listed in the end credits of *Ekleipsis* are **ABC 20/20**, *EyeWitness*, *The Killing Fields*, and *Raise the Bamboo Curtain*. 
Tran, who wrote the narration, identifies this voice as that of the women’s and that it is intentionally difficult to hear. E-mail interview with author, June 6, 2004.


Ibid., 49.

This is especially evident in more traditional documentaries, such as ethnographic films, and does not apply as much to newer genres, such as cinema verité, which sometimes forego narration altogether.

Chion, The Voice in Cinema, 130.

Some of the objects mentioned in the journalistic narration also appear in the cycle of images. For example, the narration mentions that the Khmer Rouge would single out and kill individuals wearing glasses because it was thought that only intellectuals wore glasses and that women refugees often hid jewelry and other precious objects in their vaginas. The close-up images of a pineapple in the cycle of images also correspond to the explanation in the narration that the pineapple is a visual metaphor for the “all-seeing eyes” of the Khmer Rouge.

Chion, The Voice in Cinema, 50–51.

Ibid., 51.

Ibid., 53.

The scripts of the Cambodian women’s voice-overs is as follows: “I believe in the sacredness of the head. It’s considered the seat of the soul and provides exits from one’s life essence. This is a commonly held belief amongst Southeast Asians, and maybe that’s why I and the other women like myself am experiencing such troubles with our eyes. Touching the head is considered highly personal and is not allowed except by close intimates. The head is part of the body most frequently abused during our life under the Khmer Rouge. In addition, touching of an older person by a younger person is unacceptable behavior in Cambodian culture, thus the beatings we suffered at the hands of the young boys of Angka were especially traumatic. We believe that the beatings and wartime trauma that we suffered caused much more damage to our vision than reasons due to our age or accidents.

“We are not especially ‘suggestible,’ an explanation that has been used by some psychiatrists to explain functional visual loss. The fact that we are alive and in the U.S. attests to our will to survive. All but one of us had normal pre-war levels of psychological and social functioning, and all of us would like to be so again. The suggestibility theory seems to ignore our desperate and very real attempts to escape from Cambodia by implying the usefulness and ease of ‘escape’ through observing and mimicking visual loss. It insults our strengths, and underestimates the extent of the trauma and the horrors of our situation. Any person who underwent the kind of horror we had been subjected to might well be disabled by it.

‘It is strength of the inner will, the innermost essence of the self, which distinguishes ascendant personalities. As both a conscious exercise or more unconscious reaction, ascendant personalities engage in a consistent effort to build the strength of will to survive. In contrast to the body of thought which suggests that traumatic experiences must always be indelibly etched on the human soul in a way which leaves scars on life, ascendant personalities provide ample evidence that there is the equal potential for using the experience to reflect on our lives in a more positive way.” Tran T. Kim-Trang, script of Ekliptis.

Chion, The Voice in Cinema, 140.

Ibid., 149.

Ibid., 61.

Silverman, The Acoustic Mirror, 73, 164.